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The Spectrum of Inclusive Practice for Pupils with Autism

Attending Mainstream Primary Schools

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This thesis is dedicated to Linda and our beautiful children

Cáit, Síofra and Fiachra

In memory of my parents Michael and Kathleen McElroy

Declaration and Online Access

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Summary

The current national and international trend of inclusive schooling has resulted in the proliferation of pupils with autism attending mainstream primary schools. Inclusion is a process concerned with the identification and removal of barriers to education. Many countries advocate a rights based approach to education, based upon the principles of equality, inclusion and access to free, quality education in terms of content and processes. Despite many policy developments and subsequent legislation, inclusive practices have failed to become firmly embedded in Irish schools. The belief that pupils with autism will benefit—both academically and socially—from their inclusion in mainstream schools has been challenged further, as evidenced in the literature and supported by findings in this study.

Methods used in this research included questionnaires, interviews, documentation and visual stimuli. A case study database was devised for all participants to provide a systematic way of recording and collating all data collected in this research. The database was regularly updated and incorporated the use of case study notes, documents, tabular materials and narratives. Triangulation was used in this research in to enhance the credibility of research findings. The experiences of inclusion for pupils with autism across eight mainstream primary schools in Leinster and relevant stakeholders were elicited through: seventy-two self-administered questionnaires; forty interviews; three focus groups and eighty-one visual documents. Questionnaires were adapted to suit the needs of pupils participating in this study. The layout and design of the questionnaires incorporated the use of colour, pictures and graphics to make it more attractive for pupils to complete. All of the questionnaires were coded to generate themes and to preserve the anonymity of research participants.

The major themes in this research related to policy, provision, experiences and outcomes. It was evident in this study that many schools have stipulated exclusionary clauses within their enrolment policies that made it increasingly difficult for parents to access a school in their locality. Parents want choices when it comes to school placement. The majority of parents and professionals would like to see the EPSEN Act (2004) enacted in full. There was an apparent disconnect between policy and practice, with inadequate access to clinical supports being reported in each school.

Positive practices were identified across each school. It was evident that all professionals were committed to accommodating

the diverse needs of pupils with autism. The importance of home-school relations was identified as an important influence on the outcomes for pupils with autism. Most teachers in special classes reported they would not be able to carry out their teaching roles without the provision of special needs assistants (SNA). The minimum qualifications required to become an SNA was raised as an issue by some parents. Training was identified as inadequate by most professionals. Inclusive school supports included buddy systems, reverse inclusion, and positive peer support systems. Most pupils enjoyed having access to therapeutic rooms. Excellent examples were reported of schools using their locality to provide positive opportunities for pupils with autism to improve their social skills in local amenities.

Many pupils were enrolled in schools outside of their community. School inclusion was resulting in some pupils experiencing a form of social isolation in their locality, as many pupils travelled long distances to school each day. Disability dependent attitudes were reported by most parents, as they believe there is a lack of awareness regarding autism in the community. Most parents stated that they are treated differently when compared to other categories of disability.

Inclusion was viewed by the majority of adults in terms of the social experiences for pupils with autism. There was an overwhelming consensus among parents and professionals that mixed ability special classes are unviable in its present form. Many teachers outlined many challenging behaviours exhibited by some pupils with autism and it was apparent that certain schools did not have the capacity to accommodate the needs of children on the autism spectrum with more complex needs. Training was highlighted as inadequate and increased opportunities could address these issues above. The issue of mental health emerged as a challenge for parents, pupils and teachers alike.

The child centred methodologies employed in this study highlight the important contribution that pupils with autism can make on all matters that affect them. It was evident from the feedback received from pupils that they enjoy playing, having fun, being active and happy. The evidence from this study shows that inclusive school practices remain varied across each school environment. The implementation of national policies and the targeted provision of funding is required to advance the learning and social experiences for all pupils on the autism spectrum. It is proposed that this will go some way to ensuring that inclusive practices will become firmly embedded in schools in the future.

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Carpe Diem!

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Questionnaire for Teachers (Phase 3)

Interview Guide for Parents (Phase 4)

Interview Guide for Teachers (Phase 4)

Interview Guide for Special Needs Assistants (Phase 4)

Interview Guide for Pupils (Phase 6)

Focus Group Interview Guide for Parents (Phase 7)

Appendix B Coding Framework

Appendix C Ethics

Appendix D Letters of Correspondence

List of Abbreviations

ABA	Applied Behaviour Analysis
ABC	Antecedent-Behaviour-Consequence
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ALN	Additional Learning Needs
APA	American Psychological Association
AS	Asperger Syndrome
ASC	Autism Spectrum Conditions
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
ASPIRE	Asperger Syndrome Association of Ireland
BERA	British Education Research Association
BOM	Board of Management
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CDCP	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CSIE	Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families (UK)
DCU	Dublin City University
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DfES	Department for Education & Skills (UK)
DoE	Department of Education
DoH	Department of Health
DPER	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
DS	Down syndrome
DSM-IV	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition
DSM-5	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition
EADSNE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
ECB	European Central Bank
EI	Early intervention
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EU	European Union
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
GAD	General Anxiety Disorder
GAP	Good Autism Practice
HSE	Health Service Executive
IAA	Irish Autism Action
ICD-10	International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th Revision
ICD-11	International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 11th Revision
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IEP	Individual Education Plan
IGEES	Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service
IMF	International Monetary Fund

INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
IRIS	Inclusive Research in Irish Schools
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
MCA	Middletown Centre for Autism
NAC	National Autism Center
NAS	National Autistic Society
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDA	National Disability Authority
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NIASA	National Initiative for Autism: Screening and Assessment
NRC	National Research Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
OT	Occupational Therapy
OUP	Open University Press
PDD-NOS	Pervasive Developmental Disorder not otherwise specified
PECS	Picture exchange communication system
PPCT	Process, Person, Context, Time
PT	Play therapist
RTH	Resource teaching hours
SAD	Seasonal Affective Disorder
SEBD	Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties
SEC	Synergies Economic Consulting
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENO	Special Educational Needs Organiser
SERC	Report of the Special Education Review Committee
SESS	Special Education Support Service
SIGN	Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network
SLD	Speech and Language Disorder
SLT	Speech and Language Therapy
SNA	Special Needs Assistants
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
TEACCH	Treatment and education of autistic and related communication handicapped children
TLRP	Teaching and Learning Research Programme
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USA	United States of America
WHO	World Health Organization
WSE	Whole School Evaluation

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an outline of the educational context, legislative basis and rationale for this research. An overview of the research aims, questions and terminology adopted for this research will be discussed. The concluding section will describe the overall structure for each chapter of this research.

1.2 Educational Context for Research

The current national and international trend of inclusive schooling has resulted in the proliferation of pupils with autism attending mainstream schools (Frederickson, Jones & Lang, 2010; Humphrey & Symes, 2011; Lynch & Irvine, 2009; NCSE, 2015; Ravet, 2017; Segall & Campbell, 2014). Irish educational policies have incorporated inclusive principles that are consistent with international trends (Government of Ireland, 1998; Government of Ireland, 2000a, 2000b; Government of Ireland, 2004). These developments have placed increased challenges on educational systems, with continued debates regarding the "uncertainty about the definition of inclusion and about how to implement the policy" (Farrell, 2004, p.5). Lindsay, Proulx, Scott and Thomson (2014) identify the challenges presently faced by teachers:

As the rates of diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) increase and more pupils with autism are enrolled in mainstream schools, educators face many challenges in teaching and managing social and behavioural development while ensuring academic success for all pupils. (p.101)

Eliciting the opinions of teachers to ascertain how they ensure academic and social progression for their pupils with autism provided a key rationale for this research. A worrying trend has shown that pupils on the autism spectrum "often cannot access reliable mainstream inclusive practice that maximises their progress over time" (McDonald & Lopes, 2014, p.1). The belief that pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) will benefit from their inclusion in mainstream schools has been challenged, as "concerns have been raised about the academic and social implications of inclusive policies on school engagement and successful learning and, in particular, the ways in which friendships are formed" (McCoy & Banks, 2012, p.83).

The first comprehensive review on the education and support for persons with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Ireland was outlined in The Report of the Task Force on Autism (DES, 2001) which promoted the view that pupils with autism should be educated in the "least restrictive setting" and recommended "a range of differentiated service provision models must be available to meet the wide range of needs of children with autistic spectrum disorders" (p.159). Despite these recommendations to provide an array of service provision, there has been a rapid expansion in recent years of pupils with autism attending mainstream primary schools with special classes (Banks & McCoy, 2011).

1.3 Rationale

From 2006-2009, the number of pupils with autism attending mainstream schools in Ireland increased from 1,675 to 2,571 (Parsons et

al., 2009a). In the UK, comparable increases were also reported (Frederickson, Jones & Lang, 2010) at this time as "the policy of inclusion has become a central plank of government reform since 1997" (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2010, p.6). Current figures in Ireland have established that 86% of pupils are enrolled in mainstream schools and of these 63% attend mainstream classes, 23% attend special classes in mainstream schools and the remaining 14% attend special schools (NCSE, 2016d). This has placed increased challenges and pressures on educational systems, with mainstream schools trying to link policy and practice to ensure that positive outcomes are achieved for all pupils with autism. According to Ferguson (2008) "the newest challenge is to make inclusive practices available to *everybody, everywhere and all the time*" (p.109).

The significant increase in the provision of special classes in mainstream primary schools provided the rationale for this research as "there is very little independent research in Ireland, the UK or beyond, on how special classes for pupils with autism operate and their influence on individual pupil outcomes" (Parsons et al., 2009a, p.3). Winter and O'Raw (2010) highlight the importance of gathering "an evidence base for the effectiveness of inclusive education" (p.21). This has gained widespread support in the literature (Ainscow & Kaplan, 2004; Parsons et al., 2009a; Warnock, 2005). This research supports the call for empirical evidence in determining the appropriate provision of supports for pupils with autism "since evidence concerning the benefits of

inclusion is not nearly as clear-cut as earlier research promised " (Winter & O'Raw, 2010, p.22).

There has been a dearth of empirical evidence in an Irish context that examines the views of stakeholders on the process of inclusion for pupils with autism (Parsons et al., 2009a). Rimland (1993) wants his child with autism "to be educated in ways that will assure best outcome, as learned from scientific studies, not in ways that accord with someone's theory, or ideology, or the educational fad of the year" (p.291). The central tenet of this thesis is to present a new and current understanding of the variables that facilitate and inhibit inclusive practices for pupils with autism attending mainstream primary schools in an Irish context. The triangulated viewpoints of stakeholders will add to the richness of data and the dependability of the research findings.

McCoy and Banks (2012) found "limited evidence of an inclusive education system" in their analysis of the progress made by pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) attending mainstream schools (p.94). Despite a legislative commitment advanced in recent years, Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley (2008) emphasised that "many barriers remain in the development of inclusive learning environments" (p.141). The development of inclusive, collaborative practices can be inhibited by teacher attitudes, insufficient time allocated for planning, lack of opportunities for teachers to train and systemic shortcomings (Travers, 2006). Inclusive policies and practices incorporate much broader, complex issues and processes that require ongoing evaluation and review (Hegarty, 1993). Research has a significant role to play

within this process. Whilst initially about the integration of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to mainstream schools, the policy of inclusion now aims to reduce experiences of exclusion and isolation among those traditionally found on the margins in our schools.

The concept of inclusion itself has been recently challenged as "its meaning in theory and policy is ambiguous and in practice its implementation has been limited" (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2010, p.3). The varied educational experiences of pupils with autism has questioned the effectiveness of inclusive education in achieving positive academic and social outcomes for pupils with autism. A worrying trend was highlighted as Humphrey (2008) reported that "pupils with autism are more than 20 times more likely to be excluded from school than those without special educational needs" (p.41). Lindsay (2003) believes there should be a greater focus on the experiences and outcomes of inclusive practice. The concerns outlined here provide the timely context for assessing the views of key stakeholders regarding inclusive practices for pupils with autism attending mainstream primary schools in Leinster.

1.4 Defining Autism

Autism is defined today as a pervasive developmental disorder that incorporates many conditions running along the autistic spectrum (East and Evans, 2006). Lindsay et al. (2014) explain that "autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is now recognised as the most common childhood neurological disorder" (p.101). According to Frith (1991):

Autism is due to a specific brain abnormality. The origin of the abnormality can be any one of three general causes: genetic fault,

brain insult or brain disease. Autism is a developmental disorder, and therefore its behavioural manifestations vary with age and ability. Its core features, present in different forms, at all stages of development and at all levels of ability, are impairments in socialisation, communication and imagination. (p.2)

This supports the view that “there is a spectrum of autistic conditions and that they are disorders of development, not ‘psychoses’” (Wing, 1996, p.23). As a predominantly male syndrome, current figures indicate that autism is approximately five times more common among boys than girls (CDCP, 2014; SIGN, 2007). Individuals on the autism spectrum have impairments of social interaction, communication and development of imagination. These are commonly known as the ‘triad of impairments’ (DES, 2001, 2006; East & Evans, 2006; Wing, 1996; Wing & Gould, 1979). Young and Rodi (2014) establish that "the previous triad symptomology will be condensed into a dyad: social and communication deficits and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities" (p.758). This is consistent with recent changes to the diagnostic criteria for ASD (APA, 2013a).

The definition and understanding of autism have evolved in recent years (APA, 1994, 2013c; DES, 2001; Parsons et al., 2009a; WHO, 1993a). The National Autism Standards (Jones et al., 2012) establish that the "short-hand term of autism is being used to refer to all individuals on the autism spectrum" (p.13). The challenges of defining autism were described by Wing (1996) as "attempts to delineate specific sub-groups of autistic spectrum disorders are confounded by considerable overlap among the suggested syndromes" (p.31). In the

United Kingdom (UK), Kenny et al. (2016) reported "there is no single way of describing autism that is universally accepted and preferred by the UK's autism community and that some disagreements appear deeply entrenched" (p.442). Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman (2013) reported similar findings regarding inconsistent terminology on autism in the UK.

Some commentators have used the term autistic spectrum conditions (ASC) (Bölte & Hallmayer, 2011; Dann 2011; Roncaglia, 2013; Scott, Baron-Cohen, Bolton & Brayne, 2002). A myriad of published articles, national reports and documents have used the term autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) (APA, 2013b; DES, 2001, 2006; NCSE, 2011a; Parsons et al., 2009a; WHO, 2011b; Wing & Potter; 2002). It has been highlighted that some adults do not like the term 'disorder' or the use of medical terms (Jones et al., 2012; Wing, 1996). More recent literature refers to individuals with autism, autistic person, or children and adults on the autism spectrum (Falkmer, Anderson, Joosten & Falkmer, 2015; Jones et al., 2012; Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman, 2013). The term ASD is the term used in the educational system of Ireland (Bond et al., 2016a; DES, 2006; NCSE, 2015; Parsons et al., 2009a).

This research supports people first language. As a result, the terms pupils on the autism spectrum and pupils with autism will be used interchangeably throughout this research. Irrespective of the terminology used, as long as "their needs are recognised and appropriate support is given, a significant number of pupils on the autism spectrum will

experience relatively few difficulties in their school lives and into adulthood" (Jones et al, 2012, p.13).

1.5 Defining Inclusion

Definitional inconsistencies and varied outcomes have led to inclusion becoming a highly contested and complex concept (Allan, 2010a; Ferguson, 2008; Florian, 2005; Graham & Slee, 2007). Lindsay (2003) suggests that inclusion is "championed as a means to remove barriers, improve outcomes and remove discrimination" (p.3). According to UNESCO (2005), there are four key elements which assist our understandings and conceptualisation of inclusion:

1. Inclusion is a process.
2. Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers.
3. Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all pupils.
4. Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion or underachievement. (p.15-16)

Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) outline three broad areas that should feature as part of inclusion in schools and these include:

- The processes of increasing the participation of pupils in, and reducing their exclusion from, the curricula, cultures and communities of local schools.
- Restructuring the cultures, policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of pupils in their locality.
- The presence, participation and achievement of all pupils vulnerable to exclusionary pressures, not only those with

impairments or those who are categorised as 'having special educational needs'. (p.25)

Achieving successful outcomes in schools has been difficult to achieve as "people have different views about inclusion and different visions of the inclusive school" (Rouse & Florian, 1996, p.255). It has been acknowledged that "in the absence of stipulative language of inclusive education, inclusive schooling represents a default language for assimilation" (Slee, 2001, p.114). Despite many publications and the passing of legislation based on inclusive principles, "a single definition is still elusive, which may reflect the complex nature of inclusion locally, nationally, and internationally" (Winter & O'Raw, 2010, p.3). The legislated basis for inclusive schooling in Ireland is enshrined under the terms of the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004). Within this context, Winter and O'Raw (2010) define inclusion as a process of:

- addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and
- removing barriers to education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements, to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance at school. (p.39)

This interpretation and understanding of inclusion will be consistently applied throughout this research.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

The parsimonious Bronfenbrenner Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) provides a suitable theoretical framework to investigate the

processes of teaching, learning and transitions in various school contexts. Moreover, it also enables the researcher to provide a descriptive analysis of the various levels of participation and achievement experienced by pupils with autism at different phases of their schooling. These processes will be analysed within the context of each school, community and home environment. Figure 1.1 provides an overview of the contexts that will be analysed as part of this research.

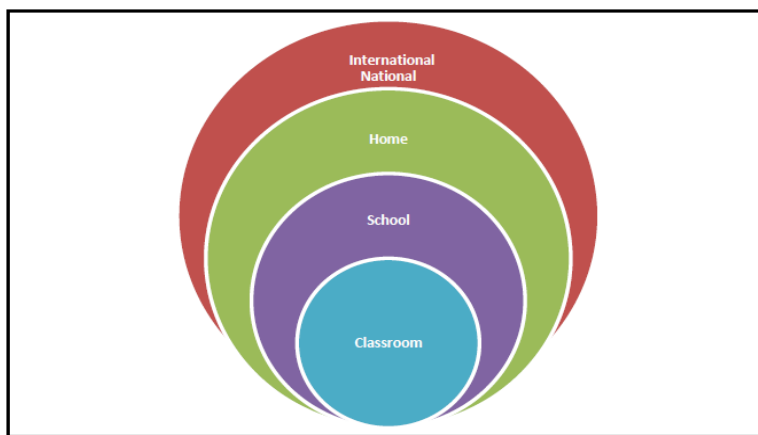


Figure 1.1. Theoretical Framework. Adapted from the Bronfenbrenner Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994).

Additional variables such as communication, attitudes and relationships between stakeholders will be examined to provide an in-depth analysis of inclusive practices in schools. It is important to recognise that "policy at the national, local and school level also plays an important role in the creation of a climate conducive to learning" (Rouse & Florian, 1996, p.262). The Bronfenbrenner Model (1994) provides a mechanism to describe how national policy can impact on the outcomes of pupils with autism in any school context.

Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools) (Rose et al., 2015) was commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) over a three year period to investigate "the development of

special and inclusive education in the Republic of Ireland" (Rose et al., 2010, p.359). This research presented unique case studies of schools and "an in-depth analysis of the current provision and practice experienced by pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in both mainstream and special schools throughout the country" (Rose et al., 2010, p.360). Figure 1.2 provides a new and different research framework—that has been adapted from Project IRIS (Rose et al., 2015)—for the purposes of this research.

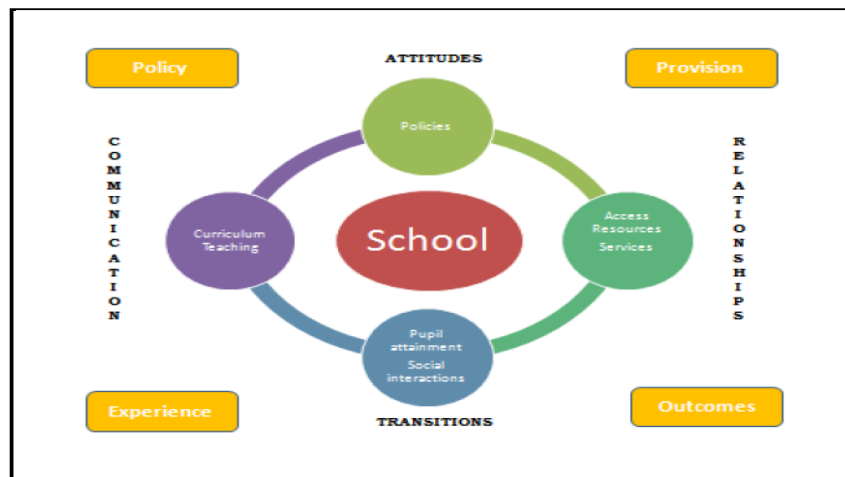


Figure 1.2. Research Framework
Adapted from Project IRIS (Rose et al., 2015).

1.7 Research Aims and Questions

The scope of this study will be centred around the following aims:

1. To describe the views and experiences of inclusion of pupils with autism, their parents, their teachers and support staff in mainstream primary schools that have access to special classes for pupils with autism in Leinster;
2. To ascertain how schools are accommodating the learning and social needs of pupils with autism in their respective mainstream settings;

3. To examine potential factors which may facilitate or inhibit inclusive practices in schools;
4. To analyse the experiences of transition within primary schools and the experiences of transfer between different schools;
5. To establish stakeholders' perspectives on the 'ideal school' for pupils with autism.

Within this context, the following research questions were suitably considered for this study:

1. What are the experiences of inclusive practices for pupils with autism attending mainstream primary schools and relevant stakeholders?
2. What facilitates inclusive practices in schools?
3. What are the barriers to inclusive practices in schools?
4. What are the experiences of transition within schools and transfer between schools for pupils with autism?
5. How would you describe your ideal school for pupils with autism?

This research will focus on the processes of teaching and learning in mainstream schools for pupils with autism. Similar studies have been undertaken previously on these processes (James & Pollard, 2006; Pollard, 2008). The Inspectorate Guidelines (DES, 2012) on School Self-Evaluation (SSE) focus on teaching, learning and assessment in schools to enhance the quality of educational provision in Irish schools. In the UK, Pollard (2008) reveals the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) received over £40million in funds and "it is the biggest initiative of coordinated research that UK education has ever known" (p.5).

Jones et al., (2008) define inclusion as "a process of identifying, understanding and breaking down the barriers to participation and belonging" and clarify that "simply placing a child on the autistic spectrum in a school is locational integration and not inclusion" (p.20). Research has provided evidence of a continued mismatch between policy and practice relating to policies underpinned by inclusive principles. (Hodkinson, 2010; Lynch & Irvine, 2009; Slee, 2001). Ainscow (2014) argues that "the way we think about the task of developing inclusive schools has to extend beyond what happens within individual schools" and this has serious "implications for school organization and leadership" (p.172). This research aims to make a contribution to improving educational experiences for pupils with autism by listening to the voice of the stakeholders in each school context.

1.8 Structure of Research

This thesis is presented in six chapters. The first chapter described the educational context, legislative basis and rationale for this research. The second chapter presents an overview of germane literature regarding autism and inclusion that guided this thesis. The third chapter describes the methodology and theoretical framework of this research. The findings of this research will be presented in chapter four. The fifth chapter provides a discussion of the research findings in relation to extant literature. Chapter six is the concluding chapter of this research. The research questions are answered in this chapter, alongside possible areas identified for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of prescient themes and key issues regarding autism, inclusion and disability. Key national and international developments that have impacted on the educational provision for pupils with autism will also be discussed.

2.2 Overview of Autism

The term asperger syndrome (AS) was first used by Lorna Wing (1981) after she observed a group of adults and children who had similar traits and characteristics to those profiled by Hans Asperger, an Austrian paediatrician in 1944. Asperger (1944) published his findings in German and developed the term 'autistic psychopathy' to describe the people he observed in his work, who had a personality and social disorder now known as AS. Asperger (1944) found that this syndrome "colours affect, intellect, will and action" and is more prevalent amongst boys than girls (p.39).

Leo Kanner (1943, 1944) an Austrian physician, was carrying out research with children on the autism spectrum describing their unusual behaviour as 'early infantile autism'. Specific features of their behaviour were crucial for diagnosis including an inability to communicate, showing a lack of affective contact with other people and having severe language impairments. This classical view of autism, of the silent aloof child with an intellectual disability, dominated professional and public opinion of autism and subsequently formed the basis for the diagnosis

and research interests in English speaking countries for the next forty years (Attwood, 2007). Kanner's more popularised view of autism has dominated research and policy up until recent years (Baron-Cohen, 2000).

2.2.1 Autism Spectrum

Asperger and Kanner shared similar opinions on many issues as they "both described (these) children with a poverty of social interaction, failure of communication and the development of special interests" (Attwood, 1998, p.15). Both authors used the term 'autistic' to describe the disturbances observed during their research (Frith, 1991). There has been much debate surrounding the similarities between Kanner's and Asperger's view of autism and the "debate continues as to whether they are varieties of the same underlying abnormality or are separate entities" (Wing, 1981, p.115). However, many differences of opinions existed between Kanner and Asperger, with varying viewpoints on "language abilities, motor skills, learning abilities and the onset of the condition" (Lyons & Fitzgerald, 2005, p.3). Gillberg (1991) provides an outline of the range of disorders on the continuum of autism:

The disorders range from severe specific social impairment in conjunction with severe mental handicap, through Kanner's syndrome (autistic disorder), with moderate mental retardation and Asperger syndrome, in cases with low to normal or normal intelligence, to even more subtle social deficits seen in children with so-called DAMP (deficits in attention, motor-control and perception)-often referred to as 'MBD-type problems' (minimal brain dysfunction). (p.145)

2.2.2 Asperger Syndrome

It has been suggested that individuals with asperger syndrome (AS) operate at the high functioning end of the autism spectrum (Ehlers, Gillberg & Wing, 1999; Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). Frith (1989) outlines similarities and differences between AS and autism, as “people with Asperger syndrome are at the same time different from, and similar to, people with autism” (p.11). Although the current diagnostic criteria does not recognise AS as a discrete disability (APA, 2013a), this is contrary to evidence produced by Asperger (1944) which suggests AS is a lifelong condition. The National Autism Standards (Jones et al., 2012) outlines "four areas of difference" that schools must recognise as pupils with autism require various supports regarding:

1. Understanding the social interactive style and emotional expression of staff and peers;
2. Understanding and using communication language—both verbal and non-verbal;
3. Differences in how information is processed;
4. Differences in the way sensory information is processed. (Jones et al., 2012, p.10)

Savant skills and abilities provide evidence that some individuals with autism do possess strengths and special talents in the arts, music and poetry (Fitzgerald, 2005; Frith, 1989). The ‘Theory of Weak Central Coherence’ explains why these talents and peaks in performance occur and “proposes that individuals with autism have a preference for a style of information processing that is focused on detail” (Frith, 1989, p.207). Many more positive traits include loyalty, honesty and reliability and

these could provide some benefit to employers in later years. (Asperger, 1944; Attwood, 2007; Winter, 2003).

2.2.3 Increasing Prevalence of Autism

There is much debate regarding the prevalence rates of individuals with autism (Banks and McCoy, 2011). It has been suggested that the increases in autism diagnoses is due to the widening of diagnostic criteria, improved identification procedures and a greater awareness and understanding of autism amongst professionals (Baird et al., 2006; Matson & Kozlowski, 2011; Parsons et al., 2009a). From their study on the prevalence of disorders on the autism spectrum in the UK, Baird et al. (2006) found that 1% of the child population had some form of autism. The National Autistic Society (2010) indicate that 1.1% of the entire population in the UK have autism, which accounts for c.700,000 people. In South Korea, Kim et al. (2011) found that 2.64% of children aged between 7-12 were diagnosed with autism. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP, 2014) published a study—based on data supplied from 2010—that identified 1 in 68 children aged eight-years-old as having autism.

In Ireland, current estimates indicate the prevalence of pupils with autism is now approximately one in one hundred and this is in-keeping with international trends (Banks and McCoy, 2011; Parsons et al., 2009a). Preliminary findings from a report carried out by researchers from Dublin City University and Irish Autism Action (DCU & IAA, 2013) identified autism prevalence at one per cent and highlighted that c.50,000 people in Ireland are on the autism spectrum. Educational

planning in Ireland is now "based on an ASD prevalence rate of 1.55 per cent" (NCSE, 2015, p.3).

In Ireland, there has been a major increase in the number of pupils with autism attending a wide range of educational settings that included mainstream schools, special schools and specialised ABA centres. The significant growth in the autism specific provision for pupils with autism in recent years is presented in Figure 2.1.

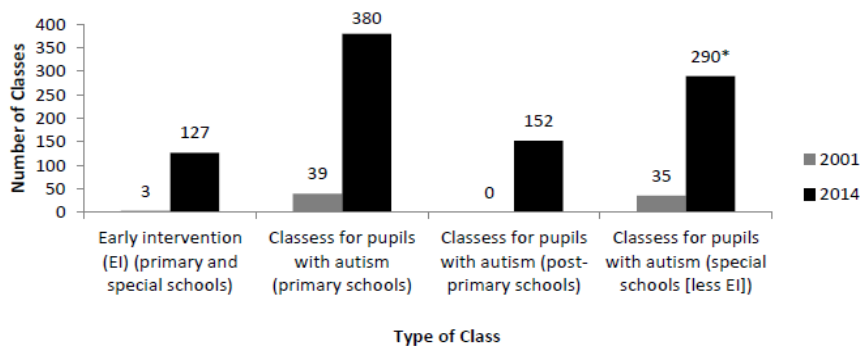


Figure 2.1. Estimated growth in autism-specific provision from 2001-2014 (NCSE, 2015, p.22).
* = estimated figure

There was a notable rise the provision of mainstream primary schools with special classes, which increased from 39 in 2001 to 380 in 2014. Another area where expansion occurred was in mainstream post-primary schools with special classes, with numbers rising from 0 to 152 in the same time period. It should be noted that these figures do not account for pupils attending mainstream schools who are not in receipt of additional resources from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the number of pupils who receive their education in non-mainstream settings.

Recent figures reported c.53,000 pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) were in receipt of additional teaching support provided by the NCSE (NCSE, 2017). Of these, 28,714 were attending primary

schools and 24,217 were attending post-primary schools (NCSE, 2017). The numbers of pupils with autism in 2014 with access to resource teaching hours (RTH) in primary and post primary schools were 5,784 and 2,941 respectively (NCSE, 2015). Further increases were reported in 2016 (NCSE, 2017) with 6,487 and 3,341 in both primary and post-primary schools respectively. McCoy et al. (2014a) confirmed a total 659 special classes were in operation in Ireland, with 357 operating in primary schools and 302 in post-primary schools. Although sixty per cent of special classes in primary schools are allocated for pupils with autism, only twenty per cent of these classes are accessible at post-primary level (McCoy et al., 2014a). It can be inferred from these statistics that there is a potential risk that some primary pupils may not have access to a mainstream post-primary school with the provision of a special class, due to the reduced number of schools available.

The increase in the number of pupils with autism attending mainstream schools in recent years has posed many challenges for policymakers and practitioners alike (Frederickson, Jones & Lang, 2010; Humphrey, 2008). Every effort should be made to ensure continuity of educational provision is guaranteed and appropriate to pupils' needs (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). An eclectic range of supports should be accessible to all pupils with autism, comprising of a "choice/combination of home based, mainstream or specialist settings and the various core therapies of speech and language, occupational and behavioural therapy, and physiotherapy when specified" (DES, 2001, p.354).

2.2.4 Educational Best Practice

There have been many national and international publications on best practice guidelines and the myriad of therapies, educational interventions and programmes for individuals with autism (Autism Working Group, 2003; Charman et al., 2011; DfES, 2002; Jones, 2006; Lovass, 1987; NAC, 2009a, 2009b; NRC, 2001; Parsons et al., 2009a; Reed, Osborne & Corness, 2007). Parsons et al. (2011) establish that "more research is needed on other types of educational interventions currently used by parents and in schools" (p.47). A range of intervention approaches is presented by Humphrey and Parkinson (2006).

Aromatherapy	art therapy	behaviour modification	computer assisted learning	Daily Life Therapy
drama therapy	Early Bird	Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)	facilitated communication	floor time (the Greenspan approach)
Geoffrey Walden approach	Hanen programme	holding therapy	Makaton signing & symbols	massage
The Miller method	music therapy	musical interaction therapy	Option method	picture exchange communication system (PECS)
sensory integration	Sherborne movement	social stories	speech & language therapy	treatment & education of autistic & communication handicapped children (TEACCH)

Figure 2.2. The range of intervention approaches for children with autism (adapted from Humphrey & Parkinson, 2006, p.77).

Recent research suggests that no single intervention or programme is neither suitable nor appropriate to meet the learning and social needs of pupils with autism (Autism Working Group, 2003; DfES, 2002; Humphrey & Parkinson, 2006; Jones et al., 2008, Parsons et al., 2009a). Parsons et al. (2011) recommended that "a range of educational provision should be maintained in order to cater appropriately for a wide diversity of needs" (p.47). Pupils with autism attend a range of educational settings and have been previously identified as the largest

disability grouping in receipt of SNA support in primary schools (Banks & McCoy, 2011).

The NCSE report on best practice provision for individuals with autism identified that "more empirical research is needed on what constitutes an inclusive education for children and young people with ASD" (Parsons et al., 2009a, p.123). This provided a key rationale for the present study. Additional findings from this report acknowledged the importance of early intervention, listening to the voice of the child, the key role of parents and continuous professional development opportunities for teachers were essential in successfully meeting the diverse needs of children with autism. However, findings were less conclusive regarding specific interventions for pupils with autism.

A special class in a mainstream primary or post-primary school has a "lower pupil-teacher ratio specified according to category of disability" and in the context of this research "a special class for children with autistic spectrum disorder has one teacher for every six pupils" (NCSE, 2014b, p.13). Rieser (2000) states that the best resource we have are the pupils we teach in our schools. All of the previously discussed national reports on autism recognise that listening to the voice of the child is central to gaining a better understanding of their lived experiences and specific needs.

Current thinking on interventions and models of education for pupils on the autism spectrum have changed in recent years. Lovass (1987) claims that young people with autism "will continue to manifest similar severe psychological handicaps later in life unless subjected to

intensive behavioral treatment that can indeed significantly alter that outcome" (p.9). Wing (1996) cautions such advocates of "curative treatments" by emphasising "that educational methods that have proved their worth in practice do not cure children of their autistic disorders" (p.199). This research supports the findings from Parsons et al. (2009a) as they recommend "a range of interventions (eclectic provision) should continue to be funded and provided for families" (p.4).

Wing (1996) suggests that the movement towards the placement of children with autism in mainstream schools has been "based on ideals of political correctness" and suggesting that these pupils "are particularly likely to have problems in mainstream schools" (p.210). Wittemeyer et al. (2011) also found that these pupils are at an increased risk of social exclusion and "unless adequate help is provided, children with autism in mainstream schools might experience isolation, rejection and bullying" (p.12). The future direction of research highlights the importance of focusing on best practice provision for best outcomes for pupils with autism (Parsons et al., 2009a; Wittemeyer et al., 2011). If the understanding of "'good practice' in autism education is practice that is informed by strong empirical evidence", Charman et al. (2011) recommend that future research should "address the considerable gaps in knowledge about effective practice" (p.7).

Wing (1996) acknowledged that "together with parents, carers in residential establishments and teachers have the most demanding roles of any who are involved with people with autistic disorders" (p.195). The

important role and position of the teacher was previously recognised by Asperger (1944) when he reported:

These children often show a surprising sensitivity to the personality of the teacher...they can be guided and taught, but only by those who give them true understanding and genuine affection....the management and guidance of such children essentially requires a proper knowledge of their peculiarities as well as genuine pedagogic talent and experience. (p.48)

Policy advice in supporting pupils with autism in schools listed 34 interventions that have been identified as effective across a number of reviews (NCSE, 2015, p.142). If teachers are to broaden their "specialised knowledge and understanding of ASD", policymakers should provide appropriate initial and continuous training opportunities for teachers so that they can "work in partnership with families and the young people themselves to plan how to meet needs" (Parsons et al., 2009a, p.119).

When conducting research in special education, Rose and Grosvenor (2001) highlight the importance of teachers becoming more involved in this process:

Unless teachers of pupils with SENs become more actively engaged with a culture of research, policy will continue to be developed upon the basis of ill-formed theory and be implemented by those who have inadequate understanding of the specific needs of pupils. (p.167)

This type of collaborative research "involves the researcher taking the voice of disabled people seriously, listening to them, exploring their lived experience in particular contexts" (Barton &

Clough, 1995, p.142). The important role of the teacher is also recognised as a key principle in the promotion of inclusive policies across Europe, as Meijer (EADSNE, 2011) outlines:

We can discuss inclusion on many levels, conceptual level, policy level, normative or research level, but in the end it is the teacher in the classroom who has to cope with a variety of pupils in the classroom. It is the teacher who implements the principles of inclusive education. (p.19)

Previous studies have analysed the learning and social experiences of inclusion from relevant stakeholders within the classroom, the school and the wider community (Hegarty, 2002; Kinsella & Senior, 2008; Travers et al, 2010). Within this context, a rationale and justification for the undertaking of this research is provided, as there is little consensus emanating from the literature regarding the most suitable interventions to support children on the autism spectrum (Bond et al., 2016b; NRC, 2001; Parsons et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2014).

2.2.5 Outcomes

Rose, Shevlin, Winter and O'Raw (2010) revealed that "little research has been conducted into the outcomes of SEN interventions or inclusive school provision in Ireland" (p.368). This gap in the literature provided further rationale to undertake research in this area. Florian (1998) claims that "inclusive education can be applied in mainstream schools and classrooms" and this is supported by research which "demonstrated that under the right conditions, positive outcomes, though difficult to achieve, are possible for all pupils" (p.32). However, challenges remain with many commentators now questioning the true

merits of the policy of inclusion, in terms of improving the outcomes for pupils with ALN (Connor & Ferri, 2007; Ferguson, 2008; McCoy & Banks, 2012).

Shevlin, Winter and Flynn (2013) acknowledge that the educational provision for pupils with ALN is undergoing a "transition phase as inclusion policy and practice has yet to become firmly embedded in Irish schools" (p.1120). The pursuance of a policy with limited empirical evidence in terms of outcomes and results "is a further indictment of our apparently weak resolve to educate all our citizens" (Ferguson, 2008, p.117).

The Task Force for Autism (DES, 2001) defined good outcomes for individuals with autism "in terms of reaching full potential, and an appropriate level of independence and social competence through acceptance with society" (p.24). In the UK, Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004) is a national framework that aims "to build services around the needs of children and young people so that we maximise opportunity and minimise risk" (p.2). This framework identified five main outcomes for children and young people and guidance as to how these could be achieved. The listed outcomes are: be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution; and achieve economic well-being (DfES, 2004, p.9). Beresford, Tozer, Rabiee and Sloper (2007) elicited the opinions of children with autism and their parents regarding their key desires and aspirations (Figure 2.3).

Fundamental	Skills & Abilities	'Life-world'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical health • Communication • Mental health • Protection/safety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-care • Social skills • Life skills • Academic Attainment • Emotional / behavioural maturity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendships • Interests and activities • Part of the local community • Experiences of success and achievement

Figure 2.3. Key desires & aspirations for Children with autism (Beresford, Tozer, Rabiee & Sloper, 2007, p.8).

This evidence reveals the richness of information that children with autism can bring to the research process when given age-appropriate opportunities to voice their opinions.

2.3 Diagnostic Criteria

2.3.1 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th Edition (DSM-5)

There are two key classification systems presently used for diagnostic purposes. The first classification system is the DSM-5 (APA, 2013c) which "will be used by clinicians and researchers to diagnose and classify mental disorders" (p.9). The DSM-5 has undergone a fourteen year revision process under the auspices of the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013c), with the latest revision being overshadowed by controversy and much debate (Huerta et al., 2012; Maenner et al., 2014; Welch et al., 2013). The DSM criteria is widely used internationally, being referred to as 'the bible' in the field of diagnostic tests in psychiatry (Frances, 2013; Insel, 2013; Kupfer, Regier & Kuhl, 2008; Matson et al., 2012). Cosgrave and Wheeler (2013) claim that the DSM criteria of today "is integral in sustaining the multibillion-dollar psycho-pharmacology market" (p.644). APA (2014) reported the production costs of developing the DSM-5 was between \$20-25million.

Prior to the publication of the DSM-5 (APA, 2013b), McPartland, Reichow and Volkmar (2012) found that the "proposed DSM-5 criteria could substantially alter the composition of the autism spectrum" (p.368). The intended "'paradigm shift' in psychiatry" was not achieved, as Whooley and Horwitz (2013) claim the DSM-5 has preserved the status quo by maintaining "the rigid categorical taxonomy of previous DSMs" (p.75). Frances and Nardo (2013) claim the new criteria "has included many controversial suggestions that have weak scientific support and insufficient risk-benefit analysis" (p.1).

There has been further opposition to the changing diagnostic criteria. Dr. Allen Frances—Chair of the DSM-IV Task Force—has consistently opposed the new DSM-5 criteria (Frances, 2009, 2010). It has been suggested that this new criteria has the potential "to turn existing diagnostic inflation in psychiatry into reckless hyperinflation" (Frances & Nardo, 2013, p.1). Horwitz (2007) believes that the DSM criteria "has come to treat both the natural results of the stress process and individual pathology as mental disorders" (p.211). The lack of transparency in the development processes was also highlighted as "the DSM-5 decisions were based on a secretive and closed process that minimised risks while overvaluing hypothetical benefits" (Frances & Nardo, 2013, p.2).

2.3.2 International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th Revision (ICD-10)

The ICD-10 was presented by the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva in 1993 (WHO, 1993a). In 2010, the tenth revision of

this manual was adopted and is currently in use in many jurisdictions across the world (WHO, 2011a) including the UK (NAS, 2018; SIGN, 2007). In Ireland, pupils can access early intervention (EI) education schemes with a diagnosis of autism under the DSM-5 or ICD-10 criteria (NCSE, 2015).

In the ICD-10, the various disorders on the autism spectrum are also categorised as pervasive developmental disorders (WHO, 1993a). The revision process for ICD-11 is due for completion in 2018. In 1989, Gillberg (1991) devised a separate diagnostic criteria for individuals with asperger syndrome which were outlined in the Task Force for Autism (DES, 2001). Kopra et al. (2008) establish that the DSM-IV criteria was used more widely in the United States and Canada, while the criteria set down by Gillberg (1991) is more commonly used in Northern Europe for the purposes of clinical practice.

2.3.3 Diagnostic Debates

There has been much debate in the literature regarding the diagnostic criteria set down for autism (Kim et al., 2014; Kopra et al., 2008; Kulage, Smaldone & Cohn, 2014; Welch et al., 2013; Young & Rodi, 2014). Some commentators have voiced their concerns of having a single category of ASD (Tsai & Ghaziuddin, 2014; Wing, 2011). The Challenging DSM-5 International Autism Conference (ASPIRE & Trinity College Dublin, 2013) provided a platform for many stakeholders to voice their concerns on the diagnostic criteria and also at the omission of asperger syndrome as a separate disorder. Professor Michael Fitzgerald—a Child and Adult Psychiatrist and eminent writer on

autism—stated in his opening address that the current "DSM-5 is a disaster" (Fitzgerald, 2013). In addition, Dr. Carmel O'Sullivan—Associate Professor and Head of School of Education in Trinity College Dublin—presented findings from on-going research that identify 12 subtypes of Asperger Syndrome (O'Sullivan, 2013). Many years before the DSM-5 was published, Gillberg (1991) defended the separate diagnosis of asperger syndrome suggesting "it cannot be dismissed at the drop of a hat as 'mild autism' and thereby relegated to the status of eccentricities in a textbook on child psychiatry" (p.122). Tsai (2013) believes "it is plausible to predict that the field of ASD would run full circle during the next decade or two" suggesting that asperger syndrome "will be back in the next edition of DSM" (p.2914).

The evidence emanating from the literature analysing how the DSM-IV and DSM-5 criteria will effect autism diagnoses in the future is inconclusive. Kim et al. (2014) present findings that suggest the new DSM-5 criteria will not impact negatively on autism diagnoses. Huerta et al. (2012) also communicate findings that indicate "the majority of children with DSM-IV PDD diagnoses would continue to be eligible for an ASD diagnosis under DSM-5" (p.1063). Comparing both the DSM-IV and DSM-5 criteria, Mazefsky et al. (2013) found that 93% of participants met the DSM-5 criteria. However, McPartland, Reichow and Volkmar (2012) found that 60.6% of participants met the revised criteria and may "exclude a substantial portion of cognitively able individuals and those with ASDs other than autistic disorder" (p.368). Other studies have predicted lower prevalence of autism due to a reduction in the

numbers diagnosed under the new DSM-5 criteria (Kulage, Smaldone & Cohn, 2014; Maenner et al., 2014; Matson et al, 2012). Young and Rodi (2014) present data indicating "that a large portion of individuals currently recognised as having a PDD will no longer be recognised as having an ASD using DSM-5" (p.764).

The change in diagnostic criteria could have serious implications for individuals in terms of healthcare access, resources and financial supports (Matson et al., 2012). In this regard, Young and Rodi (2014) suggest that future research should incorporate those who fail to meet the new DSM-5 criteria in order "to evaluate whether they require ongoing services and support similar to that advocated for an ASD or whether alternate treatment is more appropriate" (p.766). NIASA (2003) recommend that "resources should not be contingent on diagnosis but on an identification of need" (p.22). Further studies could also analyse any prospective changes to the prevalence of adults with autism using both the DSM-IV and DSM-5 criteria (Matson et al., 2012).

During 2007-11, limited funding was provided in the United States and United Kingdom for research on autism which focused on issues pertaining to lifespan and societal issues, with the majority of expenditure and awards going to projects which focused on biology, brain and cognition (Pellicano, Dinsman & Charman, 2013). This is a worrying trend within the current diagnostic climate of change. It is unclear at this juncture if future access to clinical care, health support services, and insurance eligibility will be effected by the changing criteria (Kulage, Smaldone & Cohn, 2014).

2.4 Policy and Provision for Children with Autism and Additional Learning Needs (ALN)

2.4.1 International Developments

The policy of inclusion emerged in the United States of America and Europe in the early 1980s "as a special education initiative on behalf of pupils with disabilities" (Ferguson, 2008, p.109). In his seminal paper, Dunn (1968) described the practice of segregating pupils in special classes as "obsolete and unjustifiable from the point of view of the pupils so placed" (p.6). Pupils with ALN were no longer to be taught in isolated, segregated settings. Special educational policy and practice are now viewed within a broader educational strategy that promotes the learning and achievement of all pupils, within a reformed mainstream system of education (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; James & Pollard, 2006; UNESCO, 1994). The enactment of legislation in the US and UK enshrined into law the rights of pupils with ALN (Government of the United States of America, 1975; United Kingdom, 1981). These developments shaped the course educational policy in Ireland and other countries across Europe in the intervening years (McGee, 2004).

UNESCO (2005) advocate a rights based approach to education. Rouse and Florian (1996) agree "that inclusion is about values and human rights" (p.255). The view of education as an accessible human right is enshrined under Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948). A number of key documents and frameworks have significantly impacted on the direction of educational policies across many jurisdictions in the intervening years (Figure 2.4).

Framework for Inclusion	
1948	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
1960	Convention against Discrimination in Education
1965	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
1979	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
1989	Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries
1990	World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien Declaration) International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families
1993	UN Standard Rules on Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities Rule 6
1994	Salamanca Statement & Framework for Action on Special Needs Education
1999	Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour
2000	World Education Forum Framework for Action, Dakar (EFA Goals) & Millennium Development Goals
2001	EFA Flagship on the Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities: Towards Inclusion
2005	Convention on Protection and Promotion of Diversity in Cultural Expressions UN Disability Convention
2006	Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities
2007	United Nations Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Figure 2.4. International Framework for Inclusion (Adapted from UNESCO, 2005, 2009).

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) emphasised the rights of the child to an inclusive education and that "those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs" (p.viii). Thus, the new concept of inclusive education was to greatly influence the direction of educational policy in subsequent years (Berhanu, 2011; Lindsay, 2003; MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007; Sebba & Ainscow, 1996).

The Warnock Report (DES, 1978) had a significant impact in changing people's attitudes towards disability as it "affected the development of special education policy and provision, initially in the United Kingdom, and later in Ireland" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p.92). After this publication, a shift occurred in the understanding, language and thinking surrounding disability in Ireland (Kinsella & Senior, 2008). The main principle of inclusive education now places the onus on the system

to change and provide greater flexibility in order to meet the individual needs of every child (NCSE, 2014b; Winter & O'Raw, 2010).

Although the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) espoused inclusive principles, the defined term adopted for special educational needs paradoxically excluded those children who spoke a foreign language (DES, 1978). For this reason, Hansen (2012) infers that "we cannot investigate inclusion without investigating exclusion" (p.89). Furthermore, the 1988 Education Act (House of Commons, 2006) "established the National Curriculum and a system of league tables where schools competed based on academic attainment" (p.11). Many commentators have challenged the effectiveness of pursuing this twin-track approach to the educational provision for pupils with ALN, as the introduction of league tables and competition between schools based upon academic success fundamentally negates philosophical principles enshrined within inclusive policy and practice (Ainscow, Howes & Tweddle, 2006; Farrell, 2004; Slee and Allan, 2001). Hornby (1999) rejects the policy of inclusion based on a "one size fits all" approach, suggesting "instead, the level of inclusion, either locational, social, or functional, should be decided on the needs of each individual child and the exigencies of each situation" (p.157). This is consistent with international developments that the best interests of the child should be the driving force in the decision-making process (UN, 1989). Despite much progress being made internationally, Ainscow (2005a) suggests "the issue of inclusion is the big challenge facing school systems throughout the world" (p.1).

2.4.2 Supporting Pupils with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) in Ireland

The provision of supports for pupils with ALN in Ireland has undergone many changes in recent years. Many of these changes have been influenced by international developments, alongside domestic legal challenges, legislative advances and parental advocacy (Shevlin, Kenny & Loxley, 2008). Due to this changing landscape, "researchers during this period have endeavoured to understand how responses to the demand for greater inclusion have impacted upon the perceived need for change" (Rose et al., 2010, p.359). An historical timeline that reviews the major developments regarding the provision of supports for individuals with disabilities in Ireland is provided in Figure 2.5 and an overview of the key developments will follow.

Government Reports
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap (1965)• 'Free' secondary education (1967)-Investment in Education Report (DoE & OECD, 1966)• Green Paper on Services for Disabled People (1984)• Needs and Abilities: A policy for the Intellectually Disabled (1991)• Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993)• Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (1996)• The Report of the Task Force on Autism (2001)• Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia (2002)• An Evaluation on the Educational Provision for Children with ASD (2006)• International Best Practice Review in the Education of Persons with ASD (2009)• Supporting Students with ASD in Schools (2015)• Educating Persons with ASD- A Systematic Literature Review (2016)• An Evaluation of Education Provision for Children with ASD in Ireland (2016)
Litigation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The O'Donoghue Case (1993)• The Sinnott Case (2000)
Policy Documents
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The National Education Convention (1994)• Government White Paper on Educational Development (1980)• Government White Paper on Education: Charting Our Education Future (1995)• Primary School Curriculum (1999)
Circulars
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>Circular 9/99 (DES, 1999)</u><ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Establishing special classes for children with certain disabilities• <u>Circular SP ED 08/02 (2002)</u><ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Applications for Resource Teachers to address children's SEN• <u>Circular SP ED 09/04 (2004)</u><ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Allocation of Resources for Pupils with SEN in Primary Schools• <u>Circular SP ED 02-05 (2005)</u><ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Allocation of resources under the General Allocation Model• <u>Circular 0013/2017</u><ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Revised allocations for Special Education Teachers to primary schools
Legislation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Education Act (1998)• The Education (Welfare) Act (2000a)• The Equal Status Act (2000b)• The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004)• The Disability Act (2005)

Figure 2.5. Key developments in the provision of supports for individuals with disabilities in Ireland (adapted from Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p.50).

Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap (1965)

The provision of education for pupils with ALN in Ireland emerged in the 19th century with services provided by religious orders for pupils with hearing and visual impairments (NCSE, 2006a). However, "in terms of a dedicated and established service", Griffin and Shevlin (2007) confirm that "special education in Ireland dates only from the 1960s, when a Department of Health Commission was established to examine 'the problem of mental handicap'" (p.29). This report favoured the provision of special schools and special classes within mainstream schools for pupils with SEN (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007; Ware et al., 2009). McGee (2004) emphasised further the importance of this report "as it largely shaped policy up to the 1990s" (p.69). The NCCA (1999) acknowledge that after the publication of this report, "separate special schools and special classes have been provided for pupils functioning at these three levels of intellectual ability" (p.5). It is noteworthy that this report was carried out by the Department of Health and not the Department of Education.

Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report (1993)

In Ireland, special classes were the dominant form of provision for pupils with ALN prior to the publication of the SERC Report (Shevlin, Kenny & Loxley, 2008). From the early 1970's, there "was a significant expansion of special classes in ordinary schools (DES, 1993, p.49). This report outlined seven principles, promoting the view that "all children, including those with special educational needs, have a right to

an appropriate education” (DES, 1993, p.19). Griffin and Shevlin (2007) suggest the "report represented the first comprehensive review of special educational provision and was a credible attempt to improve system capacity in relation to special educational provision" (p.53). Many deficiencies were identified in the system for pupils with ALN including deficient legislation, gaps in provision and curriculum development, the lack of contact between mainstream and special schools, integration constraints at primary level, drop-out at post-primary level, an uneven allocation of resources and insufficient specialist training for teachers (DES, 1993, p.55-56). The future direction of educational policy in Ireland was influenced greatly by the publication of this report (MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007; McGee, 2004; Meegan & MacPhail, 2006).

Despite this timely and welcomed analysis, some commentators highlighted certain weaknesses of the report. Colgan (1998) found that the infrastructural and systemic support services were not conducive to the implementation of a truly inclusive educational system. According to Colgan (1998), the education system required the development of new infrastructures and support services "which will facilitate and support inclusion, and the development of a real continuum of educational opportunity, to enable each child to secure an education matched to their emerging and developing needs over their school lifetime" (p.47). McGee (2004) supported the view that it was "the structural elements which appeared to impede the development of effective and comprehensive special education services in Ireland (p.74-75). Many of the complexities and challenges highlighted within this report are still

evident today, as Allan (2010b) claims we are still "no closer to an understanding of how to achieve inclusive education" (p.609).

Additional difficulties were experienced as "disability groups pointed out that the SERC membership did not contain people with disabilities and as a result reflected the dominant viewpoints of service providers" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p.52). The SERC Committee (DES, 1993) considered it appropriate that some children with autism "should continue to be enrolled in special schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural disorders" (p.142). Parental concerns with these recommendations were noted by Griffin and Shevlin (2007) as individuals with autism "continued to be treated within a frame of emotional and behavioural disturbance, a designation challenged by parents and an issue that resulted in a massive increase in litigation throughout the 1990s to secure appropriate provision" (p.53).

Recent Developments

During 1998-2005, a series of laws were enacted by the Irish Government which emphasise the government's commitment to enacting legislation in the area of education, disability and equality (Government of Ireland 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2004, 2005). Research and government reports have highlighted a lack of legislation in the Irish education system and the status quo remained the same until the enactment of the 1998 Education Act (DES, 1993; Kinsella & Senior, 2008; Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). This act (Government of Ireland, 1998) provides a statutory commitment by government "to make provision in the interests of the common good for the education of every person in the state,

including any person with a disability or who has other special educational needs" (p.5). Under the terms of this act, special educational needs refer to the needs of pupils who are exceptionally able and this is in line with the adopted definition in the SERC Report (DES, 1993). The significance of this legislation was highlighted by Meegan and MacPhail (2006) as it represented "a singular landmark in Irish life as it formalised, for the first time in the history of the State, a national legislative mandate in education" (p.59).

Some commentators were critical of the restrictive terminology used within the act, as the adopted language is espoused within the medical model understanding of disability (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). MacGiolla Phádraig (2007) identifies "no individual provision within the Act guarantees a right of access to mainstream schools for children with special educational needs" (p.294). Inclusion was still not an automatic entitlement for pupils with autism and for this reason "most commentators felt the Act fell short of the recommendations of both reports" (Kinsella & Senior, 2008, p.653).

The changing direction towards the implementation of more inclusive policies was now apparent. Circular 08/02 (DES, 2002) outlined the procedures for schools to apply for the provision of resource teaching supports. The movement towards the inclusion of pupils with ALN in mainstream schools significantly impacted "on the provision of resources for special education needs, to the extent that by 2004 there were more than 2,600 resource teachers, 1,500 learning support teachers and 5,250 special needs assistants in mainstream primary schools"

(MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007, p.293). During the school year 2012-13, the number of support teachers had risen to a combined total of 9,950 at an approximate cost of €600m annually (NCSE, 2013a). The NCSE reported that 5,265 resource teachers were allocated to schools alongside 10,420 SNAs by the end of 2012 (NCSE, 2012). Latest figures suggest there are 13,015 SNAs currently employed (DPER, 2017). Although the provision of extra teaching supports and special needs assistants was a much welcomed development, MacGiolla Phádraig (2007) acknowledges that "their provision, in the absence of policy guidelines, does not guarantee an inclusive environment for the children" (p.293).

The NCSE (2013a) reported "that the lack of health services, alongside limited access to educational psychological assessments, means some children with special educational needs are unable to access the professional assessments on which resources for low incidence disabilities are based" (p.5). As a result, the NCSE has proposed that a new model for the provision of additional teaching resources to schools "should be based on the profiled need of each school, without the need for a diagnosis of disability" (NCSE, 2013a, p.6). Ongoing evaluations of the new model for supporting pupils with ALN (DES, 2017a) will be required to ensure that it is achieving its intended aims and objectives.

2.4.3 National Reports Supporting Individuals with Autism

In Ireland, a number of reports and policy documents were carried out regarding educational provision and support for children with autism (Bond et al., 2016a; Daly et al., 2016; DES, 2001, 2006; NCSE, 2015; Parsons et al., 2009a). It was reported that "for the greater part of

the twentieth century no distinct or separate provision was made in the Irish education system for children with ASDs” (DES, 2006, p.7).

Current policy guidelines differentiate between high and low incidence of disabilities. High incidence categories occur more frequently while low incidence categories of SEN occur less frequently (NCSE, 2011). The classification of autism as a low incidence disability "attracts discrete funding and individual support" (Parsons et al., 2009a, p.10). Representatives from the management authorities of secondary schools and disability support groups have criticised Government cut backs in education which have resulted in larger class sizes in schools and people having difficulty accessing additional supports (Irish Autism Action, Inclusion Ireland & Down Syndrome Ireland, 2014; Kinsella, 2012). Resource teaching hours have been cut in recent years to 85%, down from five hours to four hours and fifteen minutes each week for pupils with autism.

The Report of the Task Force on Autism (DES, 2001)

The Report of the Taskforce on Autism (DES, 2001) was the first comprehensive report on autism in Ireland. It recognised the individual rights of the child and that this should form the basis for the appropriate course of an individual's education. Nine principles guided the philosophy of this report, one of which included (DES, 2001):

Every child is educable. All children including those with autistic spectrum disorders have a right to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. Appropriate education for all children with autistic spectrum disorders should be provided in mainstream schools, except where it is clear that the child involved

will not benefit through being placed in a mainstream environment, or that other children would be unduly and unfairly disadvantaged. (p.10)

The report's recommendations were based mainly upon four principles (DES, 2001):

1. school placements, supports and educational interventions should be based upon the needs of the child;
2. educational interventions should be empirically defensible, flexible, and in line with international good practice;
3. special education is a service, not a place;
4. parents should be fully involved in any educational intervention. (p.13)

Various concerns were raised in the report including some confusion surrounding the language of autism and this gave rise to a lack of clarity regarding diagnosis amongst professionals. It acknowledged that "many high functioning children with AS are not diagnosed until early adolescence or later" (DES, 2001, p.32). Early diagnosis and intervention are essential in providing an appropriate education to improve the outcomes for pupils with autism (DES, 2001, 2006; NCSE, 2015). The importance of parents as partners in the educational process was also recognised in this report.

The report recommended future research should focus on inclusive practices and how these can be implemented successfully (DES, 2001). The debate has shifted in focus to improve our understanding on the implementation of best practices in education for pupils with autism (Guldberg, 2010). Research should identify "good practice and investigate problems in such a way that obstacles can be

recognised and overcome" (Thomas, Walker & Webb, 1998, p.20). Parsons et al. (2011) suggest that increased collaboration between researchers and teachers is necessary "to establish what works best for children and young people on the autistic spectrum" (p.47).

An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) (DES, 2006)

The Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with ASD (DES, 2006) recognised the importance of staff training, professional qualifications and development in this area. Additional findings from this report revealed that, in general, primary schools with access to special classes for pupils with autism employed "an eclectic range of teaching approaches to meeting the learning and teaching needs of children with ASDs" (DES, 2006, p.58). The report (DES, 2006) recommended that pupils with autism should now have access to a "broad and relevant curriculum that addresses the triad of impairments" (p.82)

An Evaluation of Education Provision for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) (Daly et al., 2016)

Wide ranging practices were reported by Daly et al. (2016) relating to: teaching and learning; school culture; school management; and staff development that significantly impact on the learning and social experiences for pupils with autism attending primary, post-primary and special schools in Ireland. An evaluation framework was developed to provide more consistency and coherence to the evaluation process. Positive practices were identified in schools that provided broad curriculum experiences to pupils and incorporated appropriate methods

of assessment and individualised planning strategies. The importance of strong leadership, positive school environment, the professional development of staff and planning for transitions were also recognised as they impact greatly on the learning and social outcomes for pupils with autism. Difficulties were also raised on many issues inter alia, school transitions, inadequate training and professional development for professionals, and the burdening pressures on staff in schools with increased requirements for paperwork to document the development of pupils with autism. The majority of parents reported inadequate access to clinical assessment services that negatively impacted on pupils' experiences of transition.

Despite the advances and the improved school practices in Ireland in recent years, the NCSE reported "confusion in the system about the purpose and role of special classes for students with ASD" with the potential for some pupils to be inappropriately placed in settings unsuitable for their needs (NCSE, 2015, p.6). Parsons et al. (2009a) recommend that "children and families should receive a 'seamless service' where all those involved work effectively together and families are not abandoned when a service ends" (p.6). There have been many publications that have signified the importance of having a coordinated multi-agency approach to the provision of supports to individuals with autism and their families (Charman et al., 2011; NCSE, 2015; NIASA, 2003; Parsons et al., 2011; SIGN, 2007).

2.4.4 Legislation

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004)

The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) provides the legislative basis for inclusive education in Ireland that aims to:

- make further provision...for the education of people with special educational needs;
- provide that education...wherever possible...in an inclusive environment with those who do not have those needs.

As a result of these developments, Griffin and Shevlin (2007) suggest this act "marks a significant milestone in education legislation provision for pupils with special educational needs" (p.59). It is noteworthy that the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) has not been fully implemented due national economic and fiscal constraints (NCSE, 2014a). The main elements of the act that have been passed place the responsibility of providing inclusive environments on designated schools. The main sections of the act that have not come into force yet "include those which give statutory rights to children with special educational needs in relation to assessment, individual education plans and the right to make appeals" (NCSE, 2014b, p.12).

While there is no explicit definition of inclusion within the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004), inclusive education means a child can be "educated in an inclusive environment" as long as it is in the child's best interests and does not negatively impact on the education of others (p.7). An examination of this definition has raised questions about the future role and purpose of special classes and special schools

respectively (NCSE, 2011c; O'Keeffe, 2004). Vaughan (2002b) previously predicted "no long term future for special schools whether we look at the UK, Asia, North America or elsewhere" (p.153). However, Ireland—along with many other European countries—is pursuing a multi-track approach to the implementation of inclusive education policies which combines supports from both mainstream and special school systems (Meijer, Soriano & Watkins, 2003). Within this approach, the education for pupils with ALN can be provided in a mainstream class, a special class or special school, and will be determined by the needs and abilities of the individual child. There is evidence to suggest that special schools still play an important role in providing greater educational access and opportunities for pupils with ALN (O'Keeffe, 2004; Rose et al., 2015; Ware et al., 2009). Despite this, McGee (2004) indicates that that a number of special schools still "consider themselves the forgotten element in the system and, in the absence of affirmation, feel uncertain about their future" (p.78).

This act provides for the greater involvement of parents in all matters relating to the education of their child. Moreover, this act also makes provision for the establishment of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (Government of Ireland, 2004) "to co-ordinate the provision of education and support services to children with special education needs" (p.21). Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) are appointed by the NCSE to allocate additional resources to schools including teachers and special needs assistants (Government of Ireland, 2004). Paradoxically, the legislative advances on inclusion in

recent years have failed to produce a one-track, mainstream inclusive educational system, with labelling, categorisation of special needs and segregated provision still evident across many European countries today (Meijer, Soriano & Watkins, 2003; McCoy et al., 2014a).

2.4.5 The Impact of Litigation

In Ireland, parents are recognised as the primary educators of their children and this is enshrined under Article 42 of the Irish Constitution (Government of Ireland, 1937). The Irish State "guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children" (Government of Ireland, 1937, Article 42:1). The important role, right and duty of parents in the education of their child have been firmly enshrined in Irish law for some time.

Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley (2008) argued that litigation has guided the development of policies in the provision of education and supports for pupils with ALN in Ireland. In the O'Donoghue Case, the state had argued that Paul O'Donoghue—an eight year old boy—was 'ineducable' resulting from his profound disabilities (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). The Irish State maintained the position "that the constitutional entitlement to 'free primary education' referred to traditional primary schooling, and did not include the type of education/training appropriate for children with severe/profound general learning disabilities" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p.55). International developments and research provided evidence to the contrary (DES, 1978; Government of the United States of America, 1975; UN, 1989). At the time, Hegarty (1993)

expressed the belief that "all children have a right to be educated" (p.13). As a result of these developments, Justice O'Hanlon (1993) ruled in favour of Paul O'Donoghue. Under Article 42.4 of the Constitution (Government of Ireland, 1937) he established that the Irish State was constitutionally obliged to provide "for free primary education" for this group of children that is consistent with the provision for all children. McGee (2004) claims that similar cases were presented to personnel within the Department of Education and they "had to seek resolutions to these cases against a background in which the structural dysfunctionalities which had given rise to the case in the first instance were still present" (p.75). Meegan and MacPhail (2006) emphasise that the judgement in this case had "far-reaching implications, which left the state in no doubt as to its clear legal obligation to provide appropriate education for all children" (p.58). The ensuing political maelstrom emphasised the importance of the educational provision for pupils with ALN, as this issue entered swiftly into the realm of politics (MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007).

Another significant development was the legal action taken against the state by James Sinnott (2000)—an adult with autism—in an effort to uphold his constitutional rights to an appropriate education (NDA, 2004b). Despite the State's assurances given to his mother—who was also his primary carer—it was ruled that the state once again failed within their constitutional remit to provide an appropriate education to meet the needs of Mr. Sinnot. Summing up at the end of this case,

Justice Barr's appraisal of Mr. Sinnott's experiences presented a damning indictment on the State's continued neglect (Sinnott, 2000):

The first plaintiff (*Mr. Sinnott*) has had less than three years of meaningful education and training so far in 23 years of existence. He has suffered grievously through the failure of the State to meet its constitutional obligation to provide him with such services and its negligence in that regard.

The Annual Report of the Ombudsman (Government of Ireland, 2003) stated that in general "the option of seeking redress through the courts is not a viable one for the marginalised in our society" (p.9). The same report indicated that many people feel "intimidated by the prospect of having to engage with public bodies in order to get a satisfactory service or full and ready access to benefits and entitlements" (Government of Ireland, 2003, p.9).

2.5 Overview of Inclusion

2.5.1 Concept of Inclusion

Loreman's (2007) seven pillars of support for inclusive education is interesting as it "evokes images of different contextual factors working together to support a larger idea" while recognising that "pillars are interdependent and support little in isolation from one another" (p.24). These themes must be promoted and recognised for the successful implementation of inclusive educational policies. Included in these themes are "the development of positive attitudes; supportive policy and leadership; school and classroom processes grounded in research-based practice; flexible curriculum and pedagogy; community involvement; meaningful reflection, and; necessary training and resources" (Loreman,

2007, p.24). These themes can be viewed through the Bronfenbrenner Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994) which suggests the child's development is influenced by a range of variables on a micro and macro level, whilst also recognising the importance of context, culture and time.

According to Lipsky and Gartner (1996, p.780-781), seven key areas that must be addressed for the successful implementation of inclusive education and these include: visionary leadership; collaboration; refocused use of assessments; supports for staff and pupils; funding; effective parental involvement; curricula adaptation and adopting effective instructional practices. Lipsky and Gartner (1996) propose their inclusionary model as a mechanism for opening the debate of restructuring how schooling is provided. The authors believe that all children should receive their education in the same environment based upon the principles of equity and social justice. Sebba and Ainscow (1996) agree that all pupils should have the same opportunity to learn in the one school in the community.

Debates surrounding the meaning of inclusion and the limited evidence-base on the positive academic and social outcomes of inclusion "perhaps conveniently blurs the edges of social policy with a feel-good rhetoric that no one could be opposed to" (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2010, p.4). Successful inclusion is based upon the presence, acceptance, participation and achievement of all pupils with varied needs (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; Farrell, 2004; Humphrey, 2008; UNESCO, 2005). In order for a school to be considered truly inclusive,

"all four conditions should apply to all children in schools regardless of their abilities and disabilities, and of their ethnic origin, social class or gender" (Farrell, 2004, p.8). According to Ofsted (2000) "an educationally inclusive school is one in which the teaching and learning, achievements, attitudes and well-being of every young person matter" (p.7). Male (2007) highlights the importance of relationships and the creation of environments conducive to building solid friendships. The importance of friendships was also acknowledged by Winter and O'Raw (2010, p.49) as they presented the main themes of inclusion.

Inclusion Themes	Examples of inclusive practice
1. Provision of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing information leaflets to parents and schools outlining what inclusive education means • publishing admission policies on the school's website • ensuring the school's policy on inclusion is disseminated to parents and the wider community
2. Physical features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • constructing a school whose physical layout facilitates inclusion
3. Inclusive school policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing inclusive policies and plans in consultation with all stakeholders, including parents • developing an access and admission policy that is open to all pupils without discrimination
4. The IEP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • involving parents in the development of IEPs • managing the IEP supports so that the child does not feel separate or different • ensuring the pupils are achieving their desired goals
5. Student interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring there are mixed abilities in every class • ensuring that pupils with SEN are included in school social events
6. Staffing and personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring that support staff are fully integrated into the cohort of school staff • ensuring that teachers are equipped to respond to diverse needs among children with a variety of SEN • ensuring that teaching occurs in a team format
7. External links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring that external services are liaised with very closely
8. Assessment of achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring that the achievements of all pupils are recognised • involving children in their own assessment, allowing them achieve against personal goals
9. Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring there is a mixed ability teaching approach • ensuring that all pupils are able to access the curriculum • ensuring there is differentiation of the curriculum
10. Teaching strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using a variety of teaching styles to cater for different student abilities

Figure 2.6. Themes of inclusion & corresponding inclusive practice (Winter & O'Raw, 2010, p.49).

Despite the large volume of literature on educational inclusion, "there is a noticeable absence of information and guidance on how the

theories and principles underlying inclusion translate into effective teaching practices" (Winter & O'Raw, 2010, p.47). In addition, there has been some concern about the application and usage of the term inclusion. It has been suggested that the "international buzz-word" of inclusion has become nothing more than "a cliché - obligatory in the discourse of all right thinking people" (Skidmore, 2004, p.ix).

2.5.2 Inclusion and Exclusion

Slee (2011) posits that inclusion and exclusion are inextricable linked and the main objective of research on inclusion should incorporate a broader discussion:

Hence the point of research on inclusive education should be to build robust and comprehensive analyses of exclusion in order that we might challenge social and cultural relations as mediated through education in order to dismantle oppression and promote inclusion. (p.83)

The Guidelines for Inclusion (UNESCO, 2005) illustrate that "exclusion from meaningful participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of communities is one of the greatest problems facing individuals in our society today. Such societies are neither efficient nor desirable" (p.11). Hegarty (1993) supports the notion that all children have a right to be educated but is damning in his analysis when he declares that "the failure to provide education for all children ranks alongside famine and war as a major indictment of the current political order" (p.13). Recent research suggests that despite the adopted policies on inclusive education, all countries struggle with the

management and implementation of an education system that truly caters for diversity (Vayrynen, 2000).

Recent research has challenged current thinking surrounding inclusive practices and questioned the effectiveness inclusive policies (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2011; Ferguson, 2008; Lynch & Irvine, 2009). In addition, some studies highlighted that many barriers to inclusive school practices still prevail (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2003; Rose et al., 2015; Shevlin, Kenny & Loxley, 2008; Slee, 2001; Travers et al., 2010). Communication between stakeholders, relationships and attitudes can significantly impact on pupils' experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Booth and Ainscow (2011) support this view by suggesting that "all forms of inclusion and exclusion are social, arising in interactions between people and environments" (p.20).

Although it has been suggested that inclusion is no longer an issue relating to the location and placement of pupils with ALN, Jones (2006) indicated that "very little research has been conducted on the impact of setting in ASD" (p.544). The continued role of special schools has also been recognised, as Head and Pirrie (2007) stated there is "clearly a role for special schools as providers of advice, support and training to staff in mainstream schools who are facing new challenges in meeting the needs of increasingly diverse school populations" (p.96). It is for this reason that Ainscow (2014) "argues that the way we think about the task of developing inclusive schools has to extend beyond what happens within individual schools" (p.172).

The promotion of inclusive educational policies should only be advanced as long as it is consistent with the child's best interests (Government of Ireland, 2004; UN, 1989). Warnock (2005) now views inclusion as the "most disastrous legacy of the 1978 (*Warnock*) Report" (p.19). Warnock further acknowledged that "children are the casualties" of that policy (Warnock, 2005, p.13). Although admitting to being an advocate of inclusion many years ago, Ferguson (2008) now questions the outcomes and results of inclusive policies as "our efforts to achieve such results through the development of inclusive educational systems have been uneven at best" (p.117).

In the UK, pupils with ALN "are over nine times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than the rest of the school population" (DCSF, 2008, p.3). In America, the provision of education for pupils with ALN has been historically characterised by numerous examples of exclusion and segregation (Osgood, 2005). It has also been reported that pupils with autism are at increased risk of bullying (Barnard, Prior & Potter, 2000; Hebron, Humphrey & Oldfield, 2015) and are twenty times more likely to be excluded from school than those without ALN (Humphrey, 2008). Schools and teachers are facing increased pressures and demands which emphasise the disconnection between inclusive school policies and practices (Farrell, 2004). Slee and Allan (2001) highlight the anomaly with the current system of education that prevails in the UK and Australia:

There is a tendency to speak in one breadth about inclusive education, but fail to acknowledge the policy context that presses us relentlessly towards educational exclusion on the other. Here

we refer to the marketisation of schooling; the national curriculum, based upon a notion of curriculum as museum; standardised testing; published league tables; a pernicious regime of inspection; and the incorporation of pupil referral special classes as an accepted part of the educational landscape. (p.179)

The marketisation of education has impacted negatively the direction of education policy in recent years (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2010; Ferguson, 2008). Florian, Black-Hawkins and Rouse (2017) emphasised that "policies to promote inclusion exist alongside a broader set of educational reforms that have a different policy intent and may be seen as contradictory" (p.111). The emergence of an audit culture within schools has led to distrust amongst professionals, who find themselves working within a tyranny of transparency (Strathern, 2000). The focus and direction of these policies "have helped to create a negative philosophy of selecting the brightest and isolating the weakest" (Vaughan, 2002b, p.160). Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley (2008) claim "the impetus towards inclusion in mainstream settings has gathered momentum, though the capacity of schools to respond appropriately remains open to question" (p.149).

It is very difficult for governments to implement truly inclusive systems whilst concurrently attempting to raise standards (Ainscow, Howes & Tweddle, 2006). Difficulties may also be encountered in adulthood, as Meegan and MacPhail (2006) cited "the ways in which individuals with disabilities can contribute to the world may be less apparent, often falling outside of the goods- and service-oriented, success-driven society" (p.57). It is therefore important for current

research on inclusive practices to ascertain how schools successfully respond to diversity, providing a solid evidence-base to inform future policy and practice in this area. It is envisaged that this research can contribute to this evidence-base and the advancement of policies to improve the experiences of pupils with autism.

2.5.3 Rhetoric of Inclusion

Much has been written in the literature commenting on the rhetoric of inclusion (Allan, 2010a; Berhanu, 2011; Brantlinger, 1997; Kauffman, 1999; Slee; 2011; Wedell, 2008; Winter & O'Raw, 2010). Inclusion for pupils with ALN in mainstream schools has been criticised with various commentators disillusioned with a one size fits all approach to educational provision (Hornby, 1999; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995). Vaughn and Schumm (1995) contrast the various conditions that are required for responsible and irresponsible inclusion. Gains (2008) maintained that inclusion is a politically motivated construct that has evolved alongside an "expansive and over-blown rhetoric but short on rigorous thought, debate, or evidence" (Gains 2008, as cited in Winter & O'Raw, 2010, p.17).

Inclusion is a term that can have many meanings and different interpretations in various parts of the world. While the term inclusion is frequently used within disability discourses, Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2010) remind us of the different interpretations of inclusion around the world and "we should not forget that for many millions of children in the world there are no accessible educational services at all" (p.viii).

The call for responsible, authentic and full inclusion highlight concerns regarding the placement of some pupils with ALN in mainstream schools (Ferguson, 1995; Lynch & Irvine, 2009; Slee, 2011; Winter & O'Raw, 2010). In the UK, Farrell (2004) identifies the disconnect between policy and practice, observing that "schools are required to raise academic standards at the same time as being asked to develop more inclusive policies and practices" (p.9). Kauffman (1999) claims that the term "inclusion has become virtually meaningless, a catch- word used to give a patina of legitimacy to whatever program people are trying to sell or defend" (p.246). According to Thomas and Loxley (2007), such failure to implement inclusive policies will render inclusion as "merely a headline, a slogan contradicted by other policy and unsupported by structural, financial and legislative superstructure" (p.127). Kinsella and Senior (2008) present findings which illuminate the mismatch between policy objectives and current practices in schools:

There is still a separateness, a specialness and a dualism (Norwich, 1996) inherent in the organizational culture underpinning provision for pupils with additional needs in Irish schools, which is contrary to the inclusive processes which should operate in schools, in the wider education system and in the interactions between the two systems. (p.657)

Within this context, this research supports the implementation of the Autism Bill (Government of Ireland, 2017) that will ensure the long term needs of individuals and families are met by service providers during childhood and adulthood. The enactment of this Bill will make the provision of these supports more accessible and ease the anxieties of

pupils transitioning to life after school. Despite these statutory commitments and legislative advances "it appears that many fundamental exclusionary attitudes and practices remain within many schools (Downs, 2001), with Ireland lagging behind its European and international counterparts in respect of implemented inclusive practices" (Meegan & MacPhail, 2006, p.53). Without a clear commitment from government, "the question thus arises as to how inclusive and how coordinated are the support systems offered by the macro-education system to support schools in their efforts to become more inclusive and more coordinated" (Kinsella & Senior, 2008, p.657). Unless this situation is addressed at a macro-national level, schools working at a micro-level will find it increasingly difficult to fully develop inclusive learning environments.

2.6 Understanding Disability

Disability is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that is very much contested and ever-changing (WHO, 2011b). This makes disability very hard to define "as no common definition exists across health, education and social welfare" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p.17).

The Disability Act (Government of Ireland, 2005) defines disability as:

a substantial restriction in the capacity of the person to carry on a profession, business or occupation in the State or to participate in social or cultural life in the State by reason of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment. (p.6)

Recent figures establish that in excess of one billion people live with some form of disability with approximately 200 million

experiencing various difficulties related to functioning (WHO, 2011b). In future years, disability will become an even bigger issue due to the increasing numbers being diagnosed (WHO, 2011b). In many countries "people with disabilities have poorer health outcomes, lower education achievements, less economic participation and higher rates of poverty than people without disability" (WHO, 2011b, p.xi). Within such a climate, one must question the effectiveness of inclusive educational policies in successfully achieving its aims of meeting the long term needs of pupils with disabilities.

Terzi (2005) considers that "conceptualising differences among children, and in particular differences related to disability and special needs, is a complex educational problem" (p.444). According to Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2010) "the concept of special educational needs is embedded in the trinity of social class, gender and race" (p.5). In Ireland, The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) defines special educational needs as:

a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition.

Key stakeholders in the community must "understand that a child can have a disability but not have any special educational needs arising from that disability which require additional supports in school" (NCSE, 2014b, p.10).

According to Hick and Thomas (2008), the Index for Inclusion provides "a tool for school development and self-evaluation, offering an operational definition of inclusion in relation to not only policies and practices within schools, but also school cultures" (p.xli). The Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) replaced the term special educational needs (SEN) with 'barriers to learning and participation'. These barriers can occur as children interact and engage with others in the environment of their class, school and wider community. Booth and Ainscow (2011) propose that school development should incorporate collaborative discussions with relevant stakeholders based on three principles which include "barriers to learning and participation, resources to support learning and participation, and support for diversity" (p.40). Figure 2.7 outlines critical questions in identifying the barriers to learning and participation in schools.

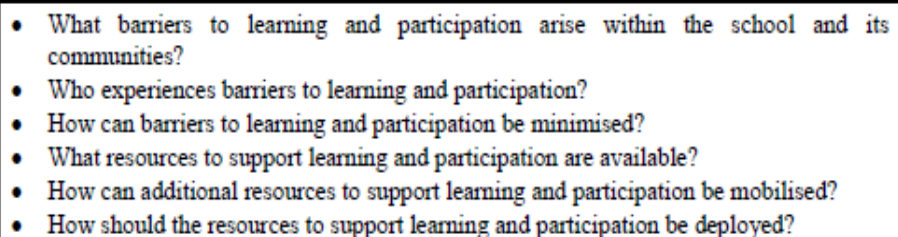
- 
- What barriers to learning and participation arise within the school and its communities?
 - Who experiences barriers to learning and participation?
 - How can barriers to learning and participation be minimised?
 - What resources to support learning and participation are available?
 - How can additional resources to support learning and participation be mobilised?
 - How should the resources to support learning and participation be deployed?

Figure 2.7. Questions identifying barriers, resources & supports in schools (Booth & Ainscow, 2011, p.40).

Within this context, inclusion is viewed as a collaborative process that encourages the participation from stakeholders to ensure greater access to education for all pupils in the community. The questions presented in Figure 2.7 guided the formulation of research questions posed in this study.

2.6.1 Models of Disability

Disability has been historically conceptualised by two competing models called the Medical and Social Model (WHO, 2011b). These concepts have been very difficult to define as "they have a variety or continuum of meanings" (Lindsay, 2003, p.5). Oliver (1992) suggests that "disability is socially produced" (p.101). The Medical Model focuses on the deficits of the individual including many forms of physical and mental impairment. It is incumbent upon the individual themselves to adapt to their local environment. This view of disability "has been largely influential in shaping the direction of thinking, policy and services for people with disabilities (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p.18).

The social model of disability "sees disability as a socially created problem and not at all an attribute of an individual" (WHO, 2002, p.9). In addition, this model presents the view that disability "is created by unaccommodating physical environment brought about by attitudes and other features of the social environment" (WHO, 2002, p.9). This model encourages listening to the voice of those on the margins of society and "advocates a power shift from service organisations and professional expertise towards the empowerment of people with disabilities and their organisations" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p.20). The change in the conceptual understanding and differences between both models of disability was succinctly summarised in the Summary of the Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (Government of Ireland, 1996b):

Rather than being seen as a 'personal' or 'medical' problem which was the result an individual's physiological, anatomical or

psychological impairment and caused by disease, accidents or other 'personal tragedies', it is now seen as a 'social' problem whereby disability is caused by society's failure to adapt itself to the different ways in which those with disabilities accomplish activities. (p.10)

It has been acknowledged that neither the social nor the medical model adequately defines disability as "both medical and social responses are appropriate to the problems associated with disability; we cannot reject either kind of intervention" (WHO, 2002 p.9). The bio-psycho-social model outlined in Figure 2.8 incorporates aspects from both the medical and social models.

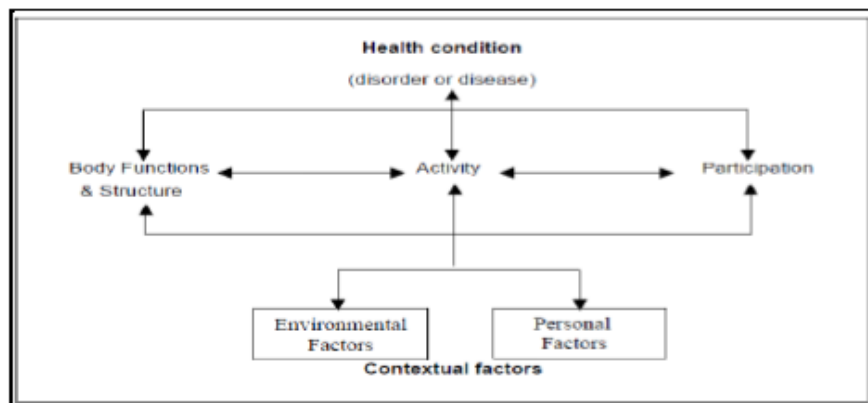


Figure 2.8. Bio-psycho-social model of disability (WHO, 2002, 2011).

The contextual factors consist of environmental and personal factors. Environmental factors describe "the world in which people with different levels of functioning must live and act" (WHO, 2011b, p.5). These factors can facilitate or act as barriers to an individual's level of functioning and independence. Environmental factors include social attitudes, the physical environment, supports, systems and policies (WHO, 2011b). This is consistent with the definition of disability adopted within SERC Report (DES, 1993). Previous classifications

failed to recognise "the role of social and physical environment in the process of handicap, and that it might be construed as encouraging 'the medicalization of disablement'" (WHO, 1980, p.1). Overcoming the difficulties faced by people with disabilities—and particularly young children with autism—require interventions to remove the personal, social and environmental barriers related to an individual's disability.

2.6.2 Human Rights

Disability research in Ireland has highlighted the "paucity of studies emanating from the social model of disability" (Whyte, 2006, p.6). The same study found that many studies on research in Ireland between 1996-2001 were based upon medical model approach to disability and identified the lack of research that incorporated the voices and views of individuals with disabilities (Whyte, 2006). In the last century, disability research has been dominated by positivist paradigms with disability being viewed as a predominantly medical problem only to be cured with medical intervention (Oliver, 1992). Oliver (1992) added:

Disability research should not be seen as a set of technical, objective procedures carried out by experts but part of the struggle by disabled people to challenge the oppression they currently experience in their daily lives. (p.102)

Historically, individuals with disabilities were not consulted in the research process. It led to individuals with disabilities viewing "research as a violation of their experiences, as irrelevant to their needs, and as failing to improve their material circumstances and quality of life" (Oliver, 1992, p.105). This highlights the gap between research aims,

policy direction and practice. It has been acknowledged that "all disability research is political and interested, and contributes to the construction of 'disability' within society" (Swain & French, 1998, p.42). To protect against further alienation, it is important for individuals with disabilities to have a voice which can inform the future direction of policies pertaining to disability in Ireland.

2.6.3 Pupil Voice

Research has shown that "since the 1980s there has been an increasing interest in listening to children's experiences and viewpoints, as separate to, and different from adults" (O'Kane, 2008, p.125). In the UK, the publication of Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004a) presented a shared national vision for change in terms of children's rights. This report highlighted the importance of listening to the voice of the child—that is consistent with international conventions (UN, 1989)—as young people communicated their desired outcomes in childhood and in later life. Beresford et al. (2007) acknowledge the importance of conducting research with young people with autism. Listening to the voice of young children is particularly pertinent in light of the passing of the Children's Referendum in 2012 (Government of Ireland, 2012). The principle of listening to the voice of the child was henceforth enshrined into Irish law. Despite these positive developments on inclusion in the UK and Ireland, Shevlin and Rose (2008) found that within each country "there are difficulties in translating this commitment into practice at school level" (p.427).

Recent research has highlighted the experiences of pupils with autism (Alderson & Goodey, 1999; Beresford et al., 2007; Connor, 2000; Dann, 2011; Sciutto et al., 2012; Tobias, 2009); their parents and carers (Barnard, Prior & Potter, 2000; Jones et al, 2008; McDonald & Lopes, 2014; Parsons, Lewis & Ellins, 2009; Whitaker, 2007); their teachers (Humphrey & Symes, 2011; Lindsay, Proulx, Scott & Thomson, 2014; MacKay, Grieve & Glashan, 2003; Nilholm & Alm, 2010; Park & Chitiyo, 2011); and principals (Horrocks, White & Roberts, 2008). The challenge for future research projects is to incorporate methods that enable researchers to produce scholarly research that provides an accurate portrayal of stakeholders' experiences. In addition, Alderson (2008) posits the greater involvement of "all children more directly in research can therefore rescue them from silence and exclusion" (p.278). Shier (2001) presents The Ladder of Participation as a mechanism to increase pupil involvement in research (Figure 2.9).

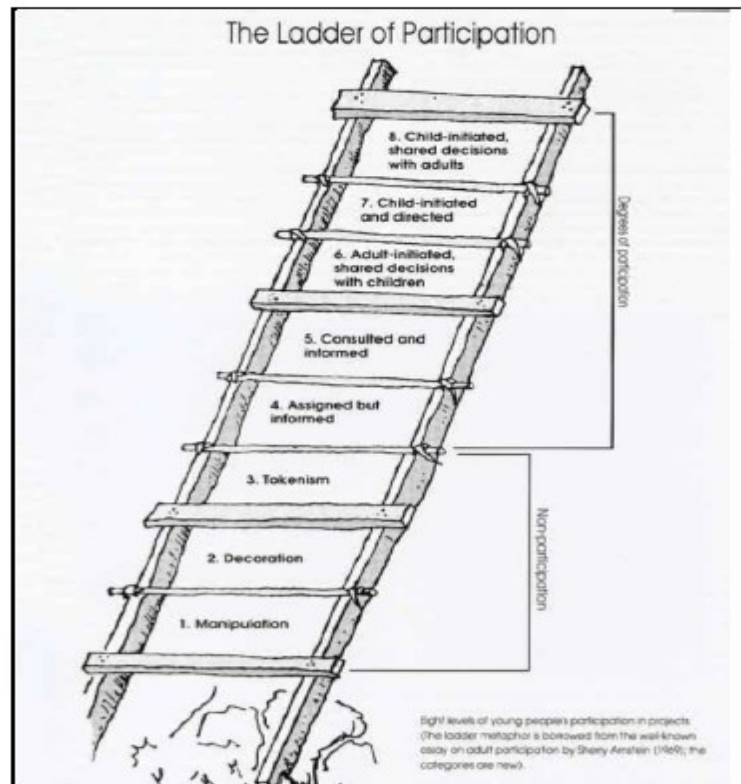


Figure 2.9. The Ladder of Participation (Shier, 1992, p.8).

Hart (1992) describes this framework "as a beginning typology for thinking about children's participation in projects" (p.9). Children become more empowered as they move up the ladder resulting from their greater involvement, engagement and participation in projects. This framework informed and guided the direction of this research by outlining the experiences of pupils with autism and relevant stakeholders. These developments signify the importance of research projects to incorporate methods that enable the voice of child and key stakeholders to be heard (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; MacBeath et al., 2003; Messiou, 2013; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Shevlin & Rose, 2008). Whilst legislative advances are important, Shevlin and Rose (2008) underline the importance "to adopt a similarly assertive approach to researching approaches which will increase pupil autonomy" (p.429).

MacArthur et al. (2007) described how children with disabilities “were made to feel different through an array of structural barriers such as separate provision for disabled pupils, and peer and teacher attitudes to diversity” (p.2). Further studies have identified the potential challenges and barriers to inclusion being achieved (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995; Travers et al., 2010; Winter & O’Raw, 2010). According to Barton (1998), research is “crucially about relationships and involves establishing and maintaining powers of definition and decision-making between different participants” (p.31). Within this context, it is important to ascertain the experiences of key stakeholders to assess how schools are meeting the needs of pupils with autism.

2.6.4 Evolving Attitudes

Attitudes and perspectives towards disability have changed over recent times, as Oliver (1992) outlines:

In the past 100 years or so, industrial societies have produced disability first as a medical problem requiring medical intervention and second as a social problem requiring social provision. Research, on the whole, has operated within these frameworks and sought to classify, clarify, map, and measure their dimensions. (p.101)

The National Disability Authority (NDA, 2011a) carried out two studies in 2001 and 2006 which highlighted an improvement in attitudes towards disability in Ireland. Attitudes have since deteriorated with more recent findings reporting “a hardening of attitudes across all types of impairments, and of particular concern are the less positive attitudes towards children with disabilities in mainstream education” (NDA,

2011b, p.4). This negative attitude towards disability has also emerged in schools as "Irish children with special educational needs like school less than their peers without SEN in mainstream settings" (McCoy & Banks, 2012, p.81). It would appear that very little has changed since the Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (Government of Ireland, 1996a) declared that "people with disabilities are the neglected citizens of Ireland" (p.5)

2.7 Economics of Autism

Many high profile court cases placed the provision of services for individuals with disabilities firmly into the political arena and wider public discourse. Moreover, the state of the public finances will impact greatly on the government's ability to implement change in this regard. Gurdgiev et al. (2011) report that "a series of expenditure cuts and tax increases were enacted through a number of budgets from 2007-2010" (p.24). The public finances contracted further in subsequent years caused by, inter alia, a property bubble and banking crisis, which resulted in the Irish economy experiencing an unprecedented decline in the levels of growth, consumption and investment, alongside rising unemployment and national debt (Honohan, 2009; Kelly, 2009; Kinsella, 2012).

Although "education is a key policy choice for a government", Drudy (2011) suggests that the policy of austerity pursued and implemented by the Irish Government will impact on education as "the total expenditure by government is severely constrained by the IMF/ECB/EU Troika" (p.176). The negative impact of austerity policies on the provision of educational supports was highlighted, when the

Minister for Education and Skills Ruairí Quinn, stated "we cannot deliver on a rights-based approach because we do not have the money to do it" (Minister for Education & Skills, 2011).

In Ireland, government expenditure on the provision of supports for pupils with ALN has risen from €468million in 2004 to €1.3billion in 2011 with an increasing focus on outcomes (NCSE, 2013a, 2013b; Rose, Shevlin, Winter & O'Raw, 2010). Further increases continued in recent years, with recent expenditure figures reportedly c.€1.7billion (DPER, 2017). Drudy (2011) argued that even during recessionary times, the government must ensure that "support for pupils with disabilities (physical, sensory, learning) and for those with any special educational needs, must remain a core part of the education agenda" (p.180).

Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman (2013) outline the allocation of funding for research on autism in the UK and US. As a percentage of total expenditure, the majority of funding opportunities relate to biological aspects of autism. It is noteworthy the limited funding opportunities for research projects investigating the societal effects of autism. Various studies have provided estimates on the economic costs of autism to individuals and society (Ganz, 2007; Järbrink & Knapp, 2001; Knapp, Romeo & Beecham, 2007; Mendoza, 2010). In Australia, the annual economic costs of autism ranges between \$4.5billion to \$7.2billion which "include general and mental healthcare; social services; education; employment; informal care and the impact on well-being (referred to as the 'burden of disease')" (Synergies Economic Consulting [SEC], 2007, p.5). In the UK, Knapp, Romeo and Beecham

(2009) found that "the annual costs of supporting children with ASDs were estimated to be £2.7billion each year" (p.317). The same study estimates the annual costs of supporting adults with autism at £25billion per annum. Lifetime costs for an individual with autism and intellectual disability is c.£1.23million and for an individual without intellectual disability is c.£0.8million (Knapp, Romeo & Beecham, 2009).

The economic, social and personal consequences of living with autism can present many challenges to individuals and their families throughout their lives (Cusack et al., 2016; Ganz, 2007). Despite the limited opportunities for funding, it is important that future research provides an opportunity for stakeholders to voice their experiences of autism, on issues relating to the accessibility of services and supports. This is especially true in austere times and at a time when the full impact of changing diagnostic criteria, as previously discussed, on accessing supports is presently unknown.

2.8 Transition and Transfer

Transition and transfer have gained increased coverage in the literature in recent years both nationally (Barnes-Holmes, Scanlon, Desmond, Shevlin & Vahey, 2013; Government of the UK, 1981; INTO, 2008; McCoy, Smyth, Watson & Darmody, 2014; McElroy, 2010; Smyth, 2017) and internationally (DCSF, 2008; Galton & McLellan, 2018; Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; le Métais, 2003; Pietarinen, Pyhältö & Soini, 2010). It is recognised that a pupil's ability to cope with the myriad of personal, developmental, systemic and social changes that occur during the early stages of childhood can impact on their sense of

well-being, self-identity and future long-term prospects (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000; OECD, 2017b; Vogler, Crivello & Woodhead, 2008). In the UK, it has been suggested that future research should focus on ways that will improve the daily lives of individuals with autism (Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman, 2014). Many studies have highlighted the significance of planning and supporting individuals on the autism spectrum at critical stages of transition in their lives, as they move into and from compulsory education, into adult services, higher education and employment (Deegan & Murphy, 2015; NCSE, 2015; NIASA, 2003; Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman, 2014).

A number of studies have focused specifically on the experiences of transition and transfer for individuals with autism from early childhood education to primary school (OECD, 2017b; Smyth, 2018), from primary to post-primary school (Hannah & Topping, 2013; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Makin, Hill & Pellicano, 2017; McElroy, 2010), and from post-primary school to further education (Bell, Devecchi, McGuckin & Shevlin, 2017) and adulthood in general (Roux, Shattuck, Rast, Rava & Anderson, 2015; Taylor, Adams & Bishop, 2017). These experiences can present a number of challenges and opportunities for all young people at various stages of their development, in particular for individuals on the autism spectrum and their families (Dillon & Underwood, 2012; Jones et al., 2008; Nuske et al., 2018; Stoner, Angell, House & Bock, 2007). Maras and Aveling (2006) acknowledged the challenges some individuals experience during transition "since difficulties adapting to change or unusual situations are a particular

feature of autism" (p.198). The publication of national parental guidelines on transitions (NCSE, 2016c) and on the transfer to post-primary school (NCSE, 2016e) acknowledge the importance of planning and preparing for change for all pupils on the autism spectrum.

For the purposes of this research, transfer is the term used to denote the entrance and exit years of schooling that involves the movement of pupils between different educational settings (Demetriou, Goalen & Rudduck, 2000; Galton, Gray & Rudduck, 2003; Galton, Morrison & Pell, 2000). The theme of transfer will outline stakeholders' experiences, as pupils move from pre-school to primary school and then onto post-primary school.

Transition is used to describe pupils' experiences of change on a daily, monthly or annual basis that occur within the same school (Demetriou, Goalen & Rudduck, 2000; Galton, Gray & Rudduck, 2003; Galton, Morrison & Pell, 2000). Transition is now viewed as an event and an evolving process that can occur over the short, medium and long term within the home, school and community environments (Deegan & Murphy, 2015; Vogler, Crivello & Woodhead, 2008). Kagan and Neuman (1998) defined transitions "as the continuity of experiences that children have between periods and between spheres of their lives" (p.366). These can be divided into vertical and horizontal transitions (Kagan & Neuman, 1998; OECD, 2017b; Pietarinen, Pyhältö & Soini, 2010; Stoner et al., 2007; Vogler, Crivello & Woodhead, 2008). Vertical transitions refer to significant milestones experienced by children in their lives, one of which includes the movement between different educational

settings. Horizontal transitions describe the changes regularly experienced by children in their daily lives as they navigate the environments of their own home, school and community. Anderson et al. (2000) suggested that "school transitions interrupt the continuity of life" (p.326). As a result, this presents additional challenges for pupils on the autism spectrum to cope with, at a time of immense change in their young lives.

The transfer from primary to post-primary school is a challenging time for all pupils (Mellor & Delamont, 2011; Smyth, 2017; Zeedyk et al., 2003), especially for those on the autism spectrum (Dann, 2011; Makin, Hill & Pellicano, 2017; NCSE, 2015; Tobin et al., 2012). A literature review carried out in New Zealand (McGee, Ward, Gibbons & Harlow, 2003) reported eight major themes associated with transfer and these included academic attainment, social adjustment, linkages between schools, organisational issues, pupil perceptions, cultural factors, socio-economic factors and gender differences. In the UK, the long established five bridges of transfer were identified as key areas within the transfer process (Galton, Gray & Rudduck, 1999; Galton & McLellan, 2018). The main areas identified for successful transfer to post-primary school related to school administration and bureaucracy, social and personal issues, curriculum continuity, pedagogy and managing learning. In Finland, the idea of managing learning and assisting pupils to become more professional learners has been recognised as important during the overall process of transfer (Lahelma & Gordon, 1997). In New South Wales, Australia, the transfer experiences of sixteen pupils were

documented and analysed based on their first ten weeks in high school (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). Seven themes impacting on pupils' transfer experiences were identified and revolved around school supports, the role of the peer group, the challenges of new procedures, different types of learning activities, pupils' levels of self-confidence, homework, and the role of teachers. In the United States of America, the transfer experiences of pupils can be improved by supporting pupils before, during and after the transfer has taken place (Anderson et al., 2000). Based on these findings, O'Brien (2004) aptly asserted that the "transfer from first to second-level schooling is a multi-faceted and complex process" (p.10).

Deficits in the knowledge of policies regarding the development, implementation and evaluation of transitions have emerged across the OECD in recent years (OECD, 2017b). Well-structured and organised transition programmes can greatly improve pupils' educational and social outcomes as they progress through school and beyond (OECD, 2017b). The collaboration of trained staff and multidisciplinary teams across health and education are essential to enhance pupils' experiences of transition and transfer (Jones et al., 2008; NCSE, 2015). The importance of planning for transitions at important stages in the lives of individuals with autism—covering all aspects of education, health and access to supports—has been acknowledged in the national (Deegan & Murphy, 2015; NCSE, 2015) and international literature (Hatfield, Ciccarelli, Falkmer & Falkmer, 2018; Jones et al., 2008; NIASA, 2003; Roux et al., 2015). In their evaluation of education for pupils with autism

across Irish schools, Daly et al. (2016) reported that experiences were mixed in participating schools on the issue of transition, calling for transition protocols to be introduced with roles and responsibilities of stakeholders being more clearly defined.

Based on the evidence presented, transition and transfer are key themes of this research, focusing on pupils' experiences at various stages within primary and post-primary school. Findings from this research could inform the planning for services and supports for individuals transitioning from compulsory schooling, to further education, adult services and employment (McGuckin, Shevlin, Bell & Devecchi, 2013).

2.9 Chapter Summary

An overview of germane literature regarding autism and the policy of inclusion was presented and discussed. Many national and international policy developments in recent years have altered the landscape of inclusive practices in Irish schools for pupils with autism. The next chapter will present an overview of the chosen methodologies for this research.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Providing relevant stakeholders a platform to voice their experiences was a central tenet of this thesis. In order to carry out the research aims, the experiences of pupils with autism and relevant stakeholders were elicited through questionnaires, interviews, document analysis and visual methodology. This chapter presents the chosen methodologies employed in this study. In addition, a rationale for choosing a multiple case study approach will be discussed. An overview of the theoretical propositions that guided the methodologies in this research will also be discussed.

3.2 Research Design

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011a) the "research design describes a flexible set of guidelines that connect theoretical paradigms, first, to strategies of inquiry and, second, to methods for collecting empirical material" (p14). Yin (2009) describes the research design as a logical framework that guides the researcher in drawing some conclusions to questions posed at the outset of the study. The descriptive focus of this research project aims to identify key issues that influence the learning and social experiences of young people with autism. Erten and Savage (2012) suggest that "research on inclusion should be conducted both at school and classroom levels in order to gain an in-depth understanding of changing processes and their impact on student outcomes" (p.228). Within this context, this research will describe how

schools are meeting the academic and social needs of pupils with autism and highlight any barriers to inclusive practices being achieved. The research design is flexible in nature, generating both quantitative and quantitative data (Robson, 2002). Due to the limited empirical base available in the area of autism and inclusion, Rose, Shevlin, Winter and O'Raw (2010) identified four common themes that research should address. These are policy, provision, experiences and outcomes. In addition, communication, attitudes, transitions and relationships between stakeholders were analysed as part of this research.

3.3 Case Study Research Approach

Robson (2002) describes a case study as "the development of detailed, intensive knowledge about a single 'case', or of a small number of related cases" (p.89). The intensive nature of this case study research aims to provide a more in-depth understanding and knowledge of the lived experiences for pupils on the autism spectrum and relevant stakeholders (Flyvbjerg, 2011). According to Yin (2009) a case study can be defined as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly evident" (p.18). The bounded nature of the case study research approach provides the identifiable parameters that enables to researcher to maintain focus on the research aims and objectives (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Stake, 1978; Yin, 2012).

Miles and Huberman (1994) argued that social research cannot be conducted without taking into consideration the context of each case

setting. Yin (2012) supports the view that "case study research assumes that examining the context and other complex conditions related to the case(s) being studied are integral to understanding the case(s)" (p.4). Corbin and Strauss (2008) acknowledge the active roles played by individuals in each context, and highlight how attitudes to and perceptions of events can vary considerably within. Events can produce varied levels of meaning for individuals, highlighting "that a case typically evolves in time, often as a string of concrete and interrelated events that occur 'at such a time, in such a place' and that constitute the case when seen as a whole" (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p.301). Based on the evidence presented, it was decided that a case study was best suited to achieve the aims and objectives of this research presented in this chapter.

3.3.1 Case Design

Stake (2008) describes three different types of case study called intrinsic, instrumental and multiple or collective case study. Multiple case studies involve numerous cases in an effort to increase our understanding of a particular phenomenon within a specific context. Single case studies were not considered appropriate for this research, as they are open to criticisms regarding the "uniqueness or artifactual conditions" that can emerge within one setting (Yin, 2009, p.61). Yin (1994, 2009) states that carrying out multiple case studies is comparable to carrying out multiple experiments. Multiple case studies aim to produce key findings in one setting that could be replicated in other settings (Yin, 2003). Within multiple case designs, the potential replication of findings suggests that the "analytic conclusions

independently arising from two cases, as with two experiments, will be more powerful than those coming from a single case (or single experiment) alone" (Yin, 2009, p.61). Within this context, a multiple embedded case study was chosen as the appropriate approach to ascertain the experiences of pupils with autism and relevant stakeholders within each school setting.

According to Stake (2008) five key elements must be addressed within every case study research and these include "issue choice, triangulation, experiential knowledge, contexts and activities" (p.120). The multiple case study adopted in this research incorporates the five key components of case study design, and places the pupil at the centre of the analysis within each school environment (Yin, 2009). An illustration of the research focus is outlined in Figure 3.1.

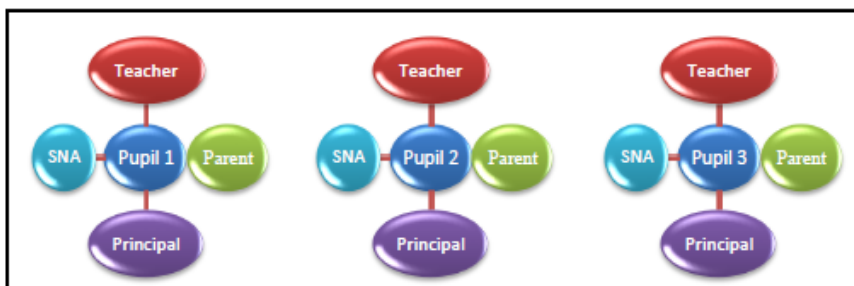


Figure 3.1. Research focus within each case study school (adapted from Rose et al., 2010).

The triangulation of new data emanating from all stakeholders will add to the depth and richness of the data collected. This will also give greater insights into the experiences and knowledge of inclusive practices across a number of school contexts in an Irish context.

3.3.2 Reflecting on Case Study Research

Case study research presents a number of opportunities for conducting a robust piece academic work. Timmons and Cairns (2010)

defend case study research on inclusive education stating that "case study research is not only an ideal approach to researching inclusive education, but it can also capture the richness of data necessary to understand the multifaceted aspects of the inclusive classroom environment" (p.102). As a result, the triangulation of multiple sources of evidence was used to enhance the integrity of the research findings.

According to Thomas (2011), "case study research is one of the principal means by which inquiry is conducted in the social sciences" (p.511). Despite this, certain studies have highlighted negative attitudes towards case study research, as it has not been widely accepted as a methodological approach (Flyvbjerg 2006, 2011; Gerring, 2004; Stake, 2008; Yin, 1994, 2003, 2009, 2012). Despite the proliferation of case study research, "the case study method is held in low regard or is simply ignored" (Gerring, 2004, p.341). However, there are still many examples of case study research in education over a number of years (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2003; Florian, Black-Hawkins & Rouse, 2017; Kinsella, 2009; Rose et al., 2015).

3.4 Preparing for Data Collection

A case study protocol was used throughout this research to keep the researcher focussed on the issues pertaining to the case study research. Yin (2012) explains that a protocol "itemises questions to be addressed by you as the case study investigator. The protocol also can describe the field procedures that you are to follow. In other words, a case study protocol serves as your own field agenda" (p.52). The protocol provides the researcher with an overview of the study, the field

procedures employed, the case study questions and a guide for the case study report (Yin, 2009, p.81).

3.4.1 Research Aims and Objectives

This research aims to describe the learning and social experiences of pupils with autism attending mainstream primary schools in Leinster. Each participating school has access to a special class for pupils with autism. This interpretive study will generate both quantitative and qualitative data that will contribute to the knowledge base on inclusive practices in Irish primary schools. The aims and objectives of this research are:

1. To describe the views and experiences of inclusion of pupils with autism, their parents, their teachers and support staff in mainstream primary schools that have access to special classes for pupils with autism in Leinster;
2. To ascertain how schools are accommodating the learning and social needs of pupils with autism in their respective mainstream settings;
3. To examine potential factors that may facilitate or inhibit inclusive practices in schools;
4. To analyse the experiences of transition within primary schools and the experiences of transfer between different schools;
5. To establish stakeholders' perspectives on the 'ideal school' for pupils with autism.

3.4.2 Research Questions

Yin (2009) stated that the formulation of "the research questions is probably the most important step to be taken a research study" (p.10). Much consideration and attention was given to refining the research questions after the pilot study and ongoing reviews of emergent themes

in the literature. This thesis was designed around the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of inclusive practices for pupils with autism attending mainstream primary schools and relevant stakeholders?
2. What facilitates inclusive practices in schools?
3. What are the barriers to inclusive practices in schools?
4. What are the experiences of transition within schools and transfer between schools for pupils with autism?
5. How would you describe your ideal school for pupils with autism?

3.4.3 Theoretical Propositions

This research is underpinned by constructivist principles that guide the research design, the chosen methods of data collection, data analysis procedures and presentation of the research findings. A constructivist paradigm was considered appropriate for this research project as disability is viewed as a socially constructed phenomenon that can have different meanings to many people (Mertens, 2009). The collection of qualitative data generated detailed insights regarding the learning and social experiences of pupils with autism and key stakeholders in mainstream primary schools. By virtue of the multiple realities that can be experienced by various pupils with autism in their respective environments, it must be acknowledged that "there is no single interpretive truth" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011a, p.15). We all view things differently through different lenses and this shapes our interpretations, viewpoints and understandings of the world we live in.

The child-centred focus of this research uses the Bronfenbrenner

Model (1979, 1994) to highlight "the importance of considering the multifaceted and multilayered nature of the influences on development over the life course" (McCoy & Banks, 2012, p.85). This model promotes the view that the child "is an active agent influencing their own outcomes through their interaction with their environment" (Greene et al., 2010b, p.11). McGuckin and Minton (2013) outline the advantages of using such a model as it "can provide school professionals with a parsimonious approach to organising, synthesising and understanding all the information that needs to be considered in relation to a child within a particular environment" (p.4). The same study described the elements of the Bildung Model that was considered for this research. After much consideration, the Bronfenbrenner (1994) Model was considered most suitable for the purposes of this research, as the comprehension of human development is achieved by "incorporating an evolving body of theory and research concerned with the processes and conditions that govern the lifelong course of human development in the actual environments in which human beings live" (p.37).

The epistemological position of this study promotes the idea that knowledge about the lives of children "is something that researchers and children create together through interaction" (Tisdall, Davis, & Gallagher, 2009, p.68). Despite having their own views, the child is a product of their lived environment, where values and attitudes are created (Greig, Taylor, & MacKay, 2007).

For the purposes of this study, it is proposed that the inclusion of pupils with autism in mainstream schools can be conceptualised as a

network of interconnected "nested systems ranging from micro to macro" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p.796). There are many factors that can impact on the development of pupils with autism during their schooling. The influential nature of these interactions can vary, being largely determined by the individual traits of the developing child, the context, time and environments where these processes occur. It is posited that the experiences of inclusion for pupils with autism is determined by the nature of these interactions on all levels of the school ecosystem (Odom et al., 2004).

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological of model has four defining properties including process, person, context and time (PPCT) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). It is suggested that the central essence of human development consists of various interactions between the individual, his/her environment, and individuals from that environment called proximal processes. By exploring the nature of proximal processes from stakeholders' triangulated viewpoints, this study aims to gain a better understanding of the learning and social experiences for pupils with autism. This paper is underpinned by the principles espoused by Bronfenbrenner, as it recognises that "the child develops not in isolation but through relationships within the family, neighbourhood, community, and society" (French, 2007, p.21).

The ontological position of this study supports the notion that "children are competent agents who actively contribute to shaping the social world through everyday activities" (Tisdall, Davis, & Gallagher, 2009, p.67). Children are now viewed as "active participants in the

construction and determination of their experiences, other people's lives and the societies in which they live" (O'Kane, 2008, p.125). The Bronfenbrenner Model has gained significant coverage in the literature as it has been applied extensively to research on young children and individuals with disabilities (Greene, 1994; Greene et al., 2010a; McTernan & Godfrey, 2006; Odom et al, 2004). Within this context, the rationale for constructivist paradigm adopted for this research has been outlined, as multiple realities of inclusion are constructed through the individual's interactions on various levels in each school environment.

3.4.4 Pilot Case Study

The pilot-study was undertaken during September-December 2012. The pilot case study was beneficial as it enables the researcher "to refine your data collection plans with respect to both the content of the data and the procedures to be followed" (Yin, 2009, p.92). Two male pupils with autism agreed to participate in the pilot study after parental permission was sought and granted. Pupil A was in junior infants in a school in Leinster and Pupil B attended second class in the researcher's own school.

Questionnaires were circulated to both pupils, their parents, teachers and SNAs. The mother of Pupil B withdrew from the process halfway through the pilot phase. The pupil was experiencing difficulties in school and the mother felt this was not the appropriate time to be involved in a research project. Interviews were then arranged with Pupil A and his mother on separate occasions and both interviews took place in their home. Questionnaires were circulated to teaching colleagues of

the researcher. Four questionnaires were returned by teachers out of five that were circulated. The teacher of Pupil B and principal were interviewed to elicit their views on inclusion and suggestions were sought on ways the interview process could be improved. Upon prior agreement, questionnaires were circulated in the researcher's school to two SNAs who had worked with Pupil B. Despite repeated reminders and requests, both SNAs failed to return completed questionnaires.

Subsequent feedback was received through meetings with the remaining pilot case study participants in relation to the layout and design of questionnaires and the proposed format for interviews. Questions were refined based on the feedback received to avoid duplication and reduce the potential for ambiguity. It was the initial intention to circulate the questionnaires to pupils attending junior primary schools. However, the feedback received from the mother of Pupil A suggested that the questionnaire was difficult to complete independently for her son. As a result, no questionnaires were circulated to pupils with autism attending junior primary schools in this research.

3.5 Overview of Case Studies

A list comprising of special classes for pupils with autism was received from the NCSE in April 2012. A list of suitable schools in Leinster were identified and drawn up. The following criteria for school selection were adopted:

- The mainstream primary school had pupils with autism attending mainstream classes;

- The mainstream primary school had access to a special class for pupils with autism;
- The schools were geographically accessible for the researcher to complete the research aims and objectives.

A formal letter was sent to the principal of each school during September to October 2012 to thirty-five schools in Leinster, requesting their participation in this research. This letter outlined the main aims and objectives of the research, the methodologies involved and issues relating to confidentiality and consent. All potential schools were subsequently contacted to confirm letters were received and to register their potential interest or not. As soon as interest was received from school principals, a formal letter requesting the school's participation was sent immediately to the school manager, the Chairperson of the Board of Management. Soon after this was approved, the next stage was to register parental interest and their consent to participate in this research. The principals circulated a letter to parents that was drafted to seek their participation in this study. This letter outlined the aims of the study, the research methodologies and required their consent to be signed and returned to the school before the research could commence. A sample list of the consent letters devised for this research is presented in Appendix D. An overview of the data set across eight primary schools is presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Data Set for Current Research

Primary School (PS)	PS1	PS2	PS3	PS4	PS5	PS6	PS7	PS8	Total=
Questionnaires	10	7	20	7	5	6	9	8	72
Interviews	10	10	12				8		40
Focus Groups									3
Documentation	19	21	18				11		69
Websites	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Photographs	23*	20	20				18*		81
Pictures/Drawings	1	3	6	1	3	2	5	2	23
Total Data Set=									296

Note. * 6 pictures deducted from the total collected from PS1, to accommodate Dermot's transfer from Scoil Allen to Scoil Mask.

3.5.1 Phases of Research

This research was divided into eight phases, with the first phase commencing in January 2012 and the final phase concluding in March 2016. Each phase guided and informed each subsequent phase of the research. Phase one incorporated feedback from online participants that were recruited to generate baseline data for this research. The pilot study was conducted in phase two. Phase three of this research provided feedback from questionnaires circulated to stakeholders across the eight case study schools participating in this research. Participants from four schools consented to their involvement during the subsequent in-depth phases of this research. An overview of the phases of data collection is presented in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Data Collection Phases Undertaken for Current Research

	Research Phase	Time period	Cohort / Sample	Aim / Purpose	Methodological processes
L I T E R A T U R E P R H E N D I E S W R I T I N G	Phase 1	Commenced January 2012	Online participants • Contacted by 39 Parents	Establishing the national terrain; overview of experiences of inclusion of parents and children with ASD; to provide baseline data	Website request for research participants nationally - ASPIRE, Autism Ireland, Aspergersadvice.org
	Phase 2- Pilot Study	September-December 2012	Discussed in Research	Inform subsequent research phases Contacting potential schools to participate in research during this period	Questionnaires Interviews Documentary Analysis Visual Methodology
	Phase 3	January-March 2013	<i>Stakeholder Voice</i> x8 schools • 13 pupils • 27 parents • 20 teachers (incl. 7 Principals) • 12 SNAs	Establishing the terrain / overview of experiences of inclusion of case study participants from x8 mainstream schools with access to ASD units	Questionnaires (x72)
	Phase 4	May-December 2013	<i>Stakeholder Voice</i> x4 schools • 12 Parents; • 4 principals; • 8 Teachers; • 5 SNAs	In-depth case study x4 mainstream schools; Follow-up on feedback received from previous phases; thick descriptive experiences, opinions of inclusion	Stakeholder Interviews (x28)
	Phase 5	April-June 2014	<i>Pupil voice</i> x4 schools • 12 pupils	Design 'My Ideal School'- Give pupils a 'voice' by using appropriate child centred research methodologies that will guide and inform interview process	Visual methodology (x81 photographs) (questionnaires; visual stimuli)
	Phase 6	September – December 2014	<i>Pupil Voice</i> x4 schools • 12 pupils	Listen to the pupils' views and experiences of school; Document their own version of an 'ideal school'.	Pupil Interviews (x12)
	Phase 7	April-December 2015	<i>Parent voice</i> x4 schools • 10 parents	To ascertain any changes to attitudes / experiences of inclusion; identify future hopes aspirations for their child; focus on emerging themes e.g. transfer, transitions	Parental Focus Groups (x3)
	Phase 8	January-March 2016	x4 schools	To investigate each school's special education policies and their stated commitment to inclusive practices	Documentary Analysis

Note. In-depth case study data collection took place during phases 4-8 across four primary schools.

3.5.2 Sampling

The sampling parameters of this study were guided by Miles and Huberman (1994) as "sampling involves decisions not only about which people to observe or interview, but also settings, events, and social process" (p.30). An overview of the total number of participants across eight primary schools is presented in Figure 3.2.

Primary Schools	PS1 [^]	PS2 [^]	PS3 [^]	PS4	PS5	PS6	PS7 [^]	PS8	Total=
Pupils	8	4	9	7	2	2	5	2	39
Parents	8	4	9	7	2	2	5	2	39
Teachers	4	1	4	2	2	2	3	2	20
Principals	1	1	2 [*]	1	1	1	1	2 [*]	10
SNA's	5	2	7	5	0	2	3	2	26
Total=	26	12	31	22	7	9	17	10	(134)

Figure 3.2 Breakdown of participants for current research.
^{*} = new principal appointed during this study [^] = x4 in-depth case study schools PS= Primary School

According to Stake (2006), many multiple case studies should have a minimum of four and a maximum of fifteen cases. Miles and Huberman (1994) concur that multiple case studies should not exceed fifteen as they can become too difficult to manage and make sense of vast amounts of collected data. Based on these assertions, purposive sampling was used to identify the participants in this research (Robson, 2002). Three data sets were purposively sampled for this research. The first data set consisted of 39 parents that contacted the researcher during phase one through an online posting on autism support websites, requesting suitable candidates to participate in this study. The second data set consisted of eight mainstream primary schools with access to special classes for pupils with autism. Stakeholders from these schools completed questionnaires in phase three. Four schools were then selected for in-depth analysis in the subsequent phases of the research and these made up the third data set of this research. A rationale for the selection of these data sets along with the process involved will be outlined in the next section. In advance, the profiles of parents and pupils who engaged in this research are presented in Table 3.3 and Table 3.4 respectively.

Table 3.3. Stakeholder Profiles based on questionnaires returned by pupils (n=13) during phase 3 January-March 2013

	Pseudonyms of Pupils	Pseudonyms of Parents	School	Gender	Age in Phase 3 (yrs)	Placement	Class Level	Current Status	Pupils' Research Involvement*	Parents' Research Involvement*
1.	Donald	Geraldine		M	13	ASD Class	Senior	Full-time	3	3
2.	John	Sarah	Scoil Derg	M	10	ASD Class	Senior	Full-time	3	3
3.	Emmet	Róisín	(Boys' Senior)	M	10	ASD Class	Senior	Full-time	3,5,6	3,4
4.	Tim	Kim		M	7	ASD Class	1st	Part-time	3	3
5.	Christopher	Aisling & Eddie	Scoil Erne	M	6.5	ASD Class	Senior	Full-time	3	3
6.	Jack	Mary	(Boys' Senior)	M	10	ASD Class	Senior	Full-time	3	3
7.	Eric	Bernadette	Scoil Gowna (Mixed)	M	11	ASD Class	5th	Part-time	3	3
8.	Lucy	Pauline & David	Scoil Leane (Mixed)	F	11	Mainstream	4th	Full-time	3	3
9.	Seán	Colm & Diana		M	9	ASD Class	Senior	Full-time	3,5,6	3,4,7
10.	Rose	Odette	Scoil Mask	F	10	Mainstream	4th	Full-time	3	3
11.	Noel	Aileen	(Mixed Senior)	M	11	Mainstream	5th	Full-time	3	3
12.	Paul	Megan	Scoil Ree	M	13	Mainstream	6th	Full-time	3	3
13.	Joseph	Linda & Jason	(Mixed)	M	10	Mainstream	4th	Full-time	3	3

Note. *Research Phases: 3=Questionnaires; 4=Adult Interviews; 5=Visual Methodology; 6=Pupil Interviews; 7=Focus Groups.

Table 3.4. Stakeholder profiles based on questionnaires returned by parents (n=14) during phase 3 January-March 2013

	Code	Pseudonyms of Pupils	Pseudonyms of Parents	School	Gender	Age in Phase 3 (yrs)	Placement	Class Level	Current Status	Pupils' Research Involvement*	Parents' Research Involvement*
1.	PS1PA1	Neil	Una		M	6	Mainstream	Junior Infants	Full-time	na	3,
2.	PS1PA2	Dermot	Sam & Paddy		M	9	Mainstream	2nd	Full-time	5,6	3,4,7
3.	PS1PA3	Larry	Molly	Scoil Allen	M	7	ASD Class	Junior	Full-time	5,6	3,4,7
4.	PS1PA4	Anthony	Laura & James	(Mixed Junior)	M	6.5	ASD Class	Junior	Full-time	na	3,
5.	PS1PA6	Kevin	Lorraine		M	4.5	ASD Class	Junior	Full-time	na	3,
6.	PS1PA7	Colin	Grace & Graham		M	7	ASD Class	Junior	Full-time	5,6	3,4,7
7.	PS1PA8	Kerry	Keeva & Rory		F	5	ASD Class	Junior	Full-time	5,6	3,4,7
8.	PS2PA1	Alex	Amy	Scoil Conn	M	7	ASD Class	Junior	Full-time	5,6	3,4,7
9.	PS2PA3	Ciarán	Olive	(Mixed Junior)	M	7	ASD Class	Junior	Full-time	5,6	3,4,7
10.	PS2PA4	Mark	Margaret & Bobby		M	7	ASD Class	Junior	Full-time	5,6	3,4,7
11.	PS3PA2	Jerry	Alison & Justin	Scoil Derg	M	9	ASD Class	Senior	Full-time	5,6	3,4,7
12.	PS3PA5	Dylan	Ciara	(Boys' Senior)	M	10	ASD Class	Senior	Full-time	na	3
13.	PS3PA8	Robert	Olivia		M	8	ASD Class	Senior	Full-time	5,6	3,4
14.	PS7PA4	Edgar	Phoebe	Scoil Mask (Mixed Senior)	M	12	Mainstream	5th	Full-time	5,6	3,4,7

Note. *Research Phases: 3=Questionnaires; 4=Adult Interviews; 5=Visual Methodology; 6=Pupil Interviews; 7=Focus Groups.

3.5.2.1 Online Participants

A request was made to ASPIRE (Asperger Syndrome Association of Ireland), Irish Autism Action (IAA) and www.aspergersadvice.org to seek their approval to upload information onto their websites regarding my research. These requests were made to encourage suitable people to participate in this research. Recruitment of participants through online sources has been used in similar studies focusing on the school experiences of pupils with asperger syndrome (Sciutto et al., 2012). Baseline data was generated during phase one of this research, which began in January 2012. Thirty-nine parents contacted the researcher from various parts of Ireland to register their interest to participate in this study, during the period January 2012-June 2013. Due to practical constraints of time and finances, it was outside the parameters of this study to incorporate this data set into the full in-depth multiple case study analysis. However, each parent contributed to the generation of baseline data that was invaluable to the guidance and direction of subsequent phases of this study. Further research could be extended to elicit stakeholders' experiences of autism and inclusive practices in schools nationally.

Each parent contacted the researcher by telephone or email. Telephone interviews were arranged as these are considered advantageous over other methods of data collection by virtue of their low administration costs and speed of access to the data collected (Oppenheim, 1992). Each interview lasted approximately one hour. At the outset, every participant was informed they could withdraw from this

process at any stage or decline answering any question directed to them. Each participant was reassured that their anonymity and privacy would be respected and protected throughout this process, in adherence to the ethical guidelines for this research. Parents were also informed that notes would be taken during the interviews for the purposes of writing up more detailed analysis after each interview, which were used to inform the following research phase. Questions were based on current themes emanating from the literature. Interview guides were used throughout this research (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). These contained a series of probes and prompts for the researcher to guide and maintain the flow of conversation during the interviews and focus groups conducted in this research (Robson, 2002).

3.5.2.2 Participants from Eight Case Study Schools

Eight mainstream primary schools—consisting of six co-educational and two all boys' schools—declared their interest to participate in this research. Communication of interest in this research was received from 134 stakeholders across all eight schools that were located in the region of Leinster. In Ireland, the majority of pupils start school at the age of four or five. Pupils attend junior primary school for four years, commencing in junior infants and concluding in second class. At the end of junior primary school, pupils transfer to senior primary school where they spend another four years before transferring to post-primary school. All participating schools were classified as senior primary, with the exception of Scoil Allen and Scoil Conn as the only two junior schools taking part in this research.

The average number of pupils attending each school was 296. Each of the eight primary schools had access to a special class for pupils on the autism spectrum. Access to the special classes varied within each primary school and was largely dependent on the pupil's cognitive ability and/or severity of autism. An overview of participants' profiles and their respective levels of participation in this research was previously outlined in Tables 3.3 and 3.4 respectively.

Each primary school was controlled by their respective Board of Management, who in turn appoint the school principal who has the responsibility for the daily management of the school. All schools operated under the Patronage of the Catholic Church. Questionnaires were circulated to each stakeholder across the participating eight schools during phase three, to provide a general overview of the experiences of inclusive school practices for young children with autism. Data collected and analysed during this phase was used to guide and inform the subsequent in-depth phases of the research. An overview of the four schools and a rationale for their involvement during phases four to eight will be outlined in the next section.

3.5.2.3 Participants from Four In-Depth Case Study Schools

Researchers must make decisions and choices throughout the research process as "there is a finite amount of time, with variable access to different actors and events, and an abundance of logistical problems" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.31). Stake (2006) agrees that the researcher faces certain constraints during the research process and as a result "only a small number of observations, interviews, and document reviews are

possible" (p.4). Guided by these assumptions, it was decided to reduce the focus of the in-depth multiple case study to four schools during phases four to eight. This decision was taken in consultation with my research supervisor in an attempt maintain the manageability and feasibility of this study. The decision to focus on four schools was taken to capture in greater detail the experiences of pupils with autism in primary schools. The profiles of pupils and parents participating in the in-depth phases of this research are provided in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5. Pupil-Parent Relationships from In-Depth Case-Study Schools during phases 4-8

	Parent (s)	Marital Status	Child (pupil)	Age in Phase 6	School in Phase 3	Child's Diagnosis	Comorbid Condition(s)	Placement	Current Status in Phase 6
1.	Sam & Paddy	Married	Dermot *	11		ASD	SLD; Anxiety	Mainstream	4 th class Scoil Mask
2.	Molly	Married	Larry *	9	Scoil Allen	Autism	na	ASD Class	3 rd Class Scoil Mask
3.	Grace & Graham	Married	Colin	8	(Mixed Junior)	Autism	Non-verbal Complex needs	ASD Class	2 nd class. Due to transfer Sept. 2015.
4.	Keeva & Rory	Married	Kerry	7		ASD-moderate	Pica	ASD Class	1 st class. Due to transfer Sept. 2016.
5.	Amy	Single Parent	Alex*	8	Scoil Conn	ASD	na	Mainstream	3rd Class. Transferred Sept. 2014.
6.	Olive	Cohabiting Couple	Ciarán*	9	(Mixed Junior)	ASD	Borderline clinical depression	Mainstream	3rd Class. Transferred Sept. 2014.
7.	Margaret & Bobby	Married	Mark*	8		ASD	SLD; Borderline ADHD	ASD Class	3rd Class. Transferred Sept. 2014.
8.	Alison & Justin	Married	Jerry	11	Scoil Derg	AS	ADHD	ASD Class	5th class. Due to transfer Sept. 2016.
9.	Róisín	Single Parent	Emmet	11	(Boys' Senior)	AS	Dyslexia; SEBD	ASD Class	6th class. Due to transfer Sept. 2015.
10.	Olivia	Married	Robert	10		ASD-2008 AS-2010	SAD; GAD; Aggression;	ASD Class	4th class. Due to transfer Sept. 2017.
11.	Colm & Diana	Married	Seán	11	Scoil Mask	HFA	SLD	ASD Class	5th Class. Due to transfer Sept. 2016.
12.	Phoebe	Single Parent	Edgar*	14	(Mixed Senior)	PDD-NOS	na	Mainstream	1st Year Secondary School
13.	Aileen	Unspecified	Noel **	12		ASD	na	Mainstream	1st Year Secondary School

Note. AS = Asperger syndrome; GAD = General anxiety disorder; HFA = High-functioning autism; LFA = Low-functioning autism; PDD-NOS = Pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified; SAD = Seasonal affective disorder; SEBD = Social emotional and behavioural difficulties; SLD = Speech and language disorder; * Noel's mother Aileen withdrew from this study during phase 5 (April-June 2014). * Pupils highlighted have transferred to a new mainstream school since their original school in phase 3.

Scoil Allen and Scoil Conn were chosen as they are co-educational, mainstream junior schools and had access to special classes for pupils with autism over many years. Scoil Allen is the main feeder school for Scoil Mask, with pupils transferring over to the senior school at the end of second class between the ages of eight and nine approximately. Scoil Mask was chosen as the researcher wanted to examine the experiences of inclusion and transfer between two schools that are adjacently located together. Scoil Derg was chosen as it is an all boys' school and is currently designated as a DEIS Urban Band 2 School. DEIS provides a national standard for identifying disadvantaged schools where the aim is to "ensure that the educational needs of children and young people in disadvantaged communities are prioritised and effectively addressed" (DES, 2005b, p.27).

Parental consent was central to the selection process of participants throughout this study, and particularly during the in-depth phases of data collection. In addition, the selection of pupils with autism was taken to try and capture the wide-ranging issues identified during the circulation of questionnaires in phase three that the researcher identified as worthy of further exploration. The issues raised included inadequate access to supports, difficulties with transition and transfer, varied abilities of pupils with autism, disability labels, mental health and medical needs.

3.6 Data Collection

Educational research aims to produce "empirical research that is characterized as building on existing knowledge about a phenomenon"

(Mertens, 2009, p.2). This interpretive study will outline stakeholders' experiences and provide an overview of key issues involved, as pupils with autism enter compulsory education for the first time, right through to the completion of their primary school education. This was achieved by employing a range of data collection instruments that were previously outlined in Table 3.1. For the purposes of brevity, examples of this study's data collection instruments are presented in Appendix A.

The main sources of evidence used in this research included questionnaires, interviews, documentation, pictures and photographs. A breakdown of stakeholders' contributions is presented in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6. Breakdown of Stakeholders' Research Contributions

	Pupils	Parents	Teachers	SNA's	Total
Questionnaires	13	27	20	12	72
Interviews	12	12	12	5 ^a	40
Focus Groups	na	10	na	na	3

Note. a = 2 SNA's took part in one joint interview.

Multiple sources of evidence were used because the findings of any case study "is likely to be more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of information" (Yin, 2009, p.116). A case study database was devised for all participants to provide a systematic way of recording and collating the data collected (Yin, 2009). The database was regularly updated throughout each phase of this research and incorporated the use of case study notes, documents, tabular materials and narratives (Yin, 2009). This assisted the researcher formulating conclusions about each participant of this research.

Miles and Huberman (1994) recognise the importance of effective data management strategies that provide the systematic

retrieval of and access to information provided by research participants. Throughout this research, all sources of evidence in the case study database were linked and cross referenced with the case study report, database, protocol and questions in this study (Yin, 2009). By carrying out this research in a consistent manner and by maintaining a chain of evidence, this enhances the reliability, quality and integrity of the research findings (Yin, 2009, 2012). An overview of the main sources of evidence employed in this research will now follow.

3.6.1 Interviews

Interviews were employed as the main method of data collection for this study. It has been acknowledged as a key methodology in generating vital data to enhance the overall quality of the case studies under examination (Yin, 2009). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) define the interview process as a "professional conversation...where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee" (p.2). If we want to find out about people's experiences today the best way is to ask them directly (Brenner, Brown & Canter, 1985; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002).

The interview process is linked to the principles within the constructivist paradigm that guides the direction of this research. Within this paradigm, knowledge is socially constructed between the researcher and researched (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Giving relevant stakeholders a voice on matters regarding their educational experiences provides a new and different analysis in an Irish context. The in-depth nature of interviewing enables the researcher to elicit important—and at

times personal—information that strives to broaden our understanding of stakeholders' experiences of autism and inclusion (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012).

Robson (2002) outlines three types of interviews that include fully structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Oppenheim (1992) presents two contrasting styles of interviews that can be either exploratory or standardised. The use of standardised, fully structured interviews did not suit the overall aims of this study. Due to the flexible nature of this case study research, it was decided that the semi-structured interview was the most appropriate interview method to be employed. Irrespective of the interview style employed in a study, a guiding principle for this research is the belief that interviews are viewed as "guided conversations rather than structured queries" (Yin, 2009, p.106). An interview guide was used that contained a list of question areas that needed to be discussed. The emphasis on guided conversation is highlighted as interviewees are encouraged to discuss more openly on topics at their own pace and on their own terms (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). This interview style facilitated more open ended responses from interviewees throughout this research. The advantage of this interview style over questionnaires is that more in-depth and peripheral information can be gleaned from participants through interaction and dialogue (Yin, 2012).

Similarities between open-ended and semi-structured interviews have been highlighted by Smith (as cited in Rapley, 2001) who recognised "that a successful interview will include questions and

answers at both general and specific levels and will move between the two fairly seamlessly" (p.315). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) outline the seven stages of an interview inquiry. These principles guided the overall data collection, analysis, recordings and presentation of the research findings and are summarised in Figure 3.3.

1. *Thematizing*- The main theme and purpose of this investigation is to elicit and analyse the experiences, beliefs and opinions of the research participants in relation to the policy of inclusion.
2. *Designing*- A constructivist worldview guides the overall direction of the multiple embedded case study approach adopted in this research
3. *Interviewing*- Interviews were conducted using an interview guide (Lofland and Lofland, 1995) that were supported by reflective fieldnotes recorded immediately after the interview took place. The importance of the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is acknowledged in an attempt to construct new knowledge regarding their world.
4. *Transcribing*- All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Research participants were emailed a transcribed copy of their interview to verify the content for the data analysis phase of the research. In addition, this was completed to reduce any potential bias and to acknowledge the important role the interviewee plays in the overall research process.
5. *Analyzing*- The analytical strategy is guided by theoretical propositions in this study. Also included thematic analysis; pattern matching; explanation building; rival explanations, cross-case analyses; coding framework (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Braun & Clark, 2006; Creswell, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Yin, 2009)
6. *Verifying*- Triangulation of theory, method data source and type increase the dependability and trustworthiness of the research findings. Member checking of transcribed interview documents enhanced the reliability and transferability of the research findings.
7. *Reporting*- The research findings and methods utilised in this study are communicated in an accessible readable format, in a manner that lives up to scientific criteria and academic scrutiny and takes ethical issues into account throughout the study.

Figure 3.3. Seven Stage of an Interview Inquiry (adapted from Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.102).

By listening to the voice of pupils with autism and relevant stakeholders, interviews enable the researcher to focus on new experiences and more specifically on different themes as they emerge from the analysis of case study data (Creswell, 2009; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Yin, 2009).

Interviews can also present a number challenges during any research project. Interviews can be very time consuming to conduct, analyse, record and present findings from within (Robson, 2002). From the outset, it must be acknowledged that "the research interview is not a conversation between equal partners, because the researcher defines and

controls the situation" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.3). This leaves this method open to numerous criticisms including the potential for biased questioning and biased responses between the interviewer and interviewee respectively (Brenner, Brown & Canter, 1985; Creswell, 2009; Yin, 2009). Data can also be misinterpreted in terms of meaning and understanding during the stages of analysis (Brenner, Brown & Canter, 1985). Further challenges can be encountered when interviewing young children. O'Kane (2008) observes that gaining access to children is the main challenge of researching with children "as their adult caretakers seek to protect them from intrusive or negative experiences" (p.129-130).

To address these issues, consent forms were sent to each participant during each phase in this research, with each participant given the option to withdraw from this process at any stage. Signed consent was required from each individual participant before the study could proceed. Regular discussions with parents and principals were required in advance to agree suitable times and locations for the interviews to take place. The researcher placed heavy emphasis on fostering of good relations and developing positive rapport with research participants that is crucial in research that employs face to face interviews (Robson, 2002). Open channels of communication were established from the outset of this research through various phone calls and emails that enabled the researcher to develop a positive relationship with each participant. Every participant was regularly informed as to how the research was progressing and feedback was circulated at various

stages throughout. This highlights the importance of researchers respectfully engaging with individuals who take the time to participate in research projects (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2011). All participants will be provided with a summary of the findings upon completion of this research. This is a matter of ethical importance and courtesy, to provide feedback to those who willingly participated in this research (Kenny, McNeela & Shevlin, 2003).

Design of Interview Guide

Johnson and Rowlands (2012) express the view that "planning and preparation are essential for successful in-depth interviews" (p.103). With this in mind, a significant period of time was devoted to developing the interview guide for this research. The interview guide was informed by the literature and the overall theoretical framework of this research under the overarching themes of policy, provision, experiences and outcomes (Rose et al., 2015). In addition, the constructive feedback received from research participants during phases one and two, enabled the researcher to update and refine the interview guides accordingly. Questions at the outset of the research were more open ended, trying to generate baseline data and to inform future phases of the research. As a result, the nature of questions asked "tend to become more focused and refined as the research moves along" into subsequent phases of data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p.72-73). This research exemplifies the importance of each phase of the research process informing the next phase, in a constantly evolving and self-reflective learning process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Johnson & Rowlands, 2012).

Throughout the interview process, a list of questions were compiled for telephone and face to face interviews. These contained a number of probes and prompts that could be used by the interviewer to stimulate ideas for discussion and to avoid any potential ambiguity during each interview (Brenner, Brown & Canter, 1985; Robson, 2002). An interviewer probes interviewees to elicit more information, by giving them the opportunity to discuss and respond in greater detail to questions asked (Oppenheim, 1992; Robson, 2002). Numerous questions were used throughout each interview. These included sensitizing, theoretical, practical and guided questions along with a variety of open and closed questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Robson, 2002).

3.6.2 Questionnaires

Fink (1995a) defines a survey as "a system for collecting information to describe, compare, or explain knowledge, attitudes, and behavior" (p.1). The descriptive survey design employed in the preliminary phase of this research is referred to as cross-sectional as it aims to generate descriptive data that is collected at one point in time (Creswell, 2009; Fink, 1995b). Self-administered questionnaires were used in this research to establish an overview of stakeholders' experiences. They informed and guided the subsequent phases of the overall case study research. For example, they were used to identify themes and topics that could be discussed in greater depth during the interview phase of research. Miles and Huberman (1994) support this process emphasising that "questionnaire findings can be further

deepened and tested systematically with the next round of qualitative data" (p.41-42).

The layout and design of the questionnaire is crucial in securing high response rates (Oppenheim, 1992; Robson, 2002). Explanations of key terms regarding this research were given on the opening page of the questionnaire to ensure clarity of meaning and understanding (Oppenheim, 1992). Terms of reference included definitions from the literature on autism and inclusion. The design of the questionnaire has to be user-friendly with the participants feeling comfortable taking part in this process. As a result, considerable time was devoted to the layout, design and structure of the questionnaires administered in this research.

A self-administered questionnaire was considered an appropriate method of data collection for the purposes of this research (Creswell, 2009; Robson, 2002). There are many examples in the literature that exemplify how questionnaires have been regularly used to describe the attitudes of children (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Fox & Messiou, 2004; Ware et al., 2011), parents (Armstrong, Kane, O'Sullivan & Kelly, 2010b; DES, 2001; Murphy & Tierney, 2005; Whitaker, 2007), teachers (Butler & Shevlin 2001; Emam & Farrell, 2009; Humphrey & Symes, 2011; O'Gorman & Drudy, 2011), principals (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008), and SNAs (Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Travers et al., 2010) regarding their experiences in schools. The main aim of administering a self-administered questionnaire was to record detailed information about the school and to triangulate successfully the viewpoints of each participant. The questionnaire provided essential

background information of each participant and school that guided the subsequent research phases (Rabiee, Sloper, & Beresford, 2005).

There are also a number of challenges in employing self-administered questionnaires as a method of data collection in research projects. Data can be affected by the characteristics of the participants and there is always the potential for responder bias (Oppenheim, 1992; Robson, 2002). The biggest challenge a researcher encounters during this process is having no control in the administration of these questionnaires. Many difficulties may ensue from this including the possibility for ambiguities surrounding the meaning of questions and language used, or apathetic responses from participants, resulting in poor response rates received (Oppenheim, 1992; Robson, 2002).

The evidence presented in the literature was reflective of the researcher's experiences during the employment of questionnaires. The pilot study enabled the researcher to receive feedback so that the design and wording of the questionnaires could be refined and administered during phase three. During this process, the researcher analysed numerous questionnaires that were used in relation to inclusion and the elicitation of stakeholders' views (Armstrong et al., 2010b; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Fox & Messiou, 2004). These were adapted to suit the research questions posed at the outset of the research. Oppenheim (1992) highlights the importance of this action, identifying that "we can borrow or adapt questionnaires from other researchers, but there still remains the task of making quite sure that these will 'work' with *our* population and will yield the data we require" (p.47).

Design of Questionnaires

Questions were based on current themes emanating from the literature on inclusion (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Dyson et al., 2004; NCSE, 2011a, 2011b; Rose et al., 2010; Travers et al., 2010; Ware et al., 2009; Winter & O'Raw, 2010), on autism (Barnard, Prior & Potter, 2000; Frederickson, Jones, & Lang, 2010; Guldberg, 2010; Jordan, 2008; Parsons et al., 2009a; Ravet, 2011) and from ongoing communications with participants in this research. Discussions with online participants during phase one proved to be an invaluable source of information for this research. The themes that emerged throughout this process assisted in the formulation and design of questionnaires employed in phase two. The information received from these questionnaires guided the planning for appropriate theme sheets and questioning for interviews discussed earlier. Oppenheim (1992) cautions proponents of this method that questionnaires are unsuitable for some individuals including those with poor literacy skills, language difficulties and children. These issues were taken into consideration during the questionnaire design process.

3.6.2.1 Adults' Questionnaires

The overall design of the questionnaires was adapted from a national survey describing parental attitudes to local and national services supporting pupils with ALN (Armstrong et al., 2010b). The first part of the questionnaires employed in this research was adapted from the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). It was considered an appropriate tool to gauge the general opinions of participants towards inclusion in various schools. The index provides a list of suitable

questionnaires for adult members of the school community and for children of various ages.

The Index is based on three dimensions that focuses on policies, the evolving practices and cultures in the school community. These questionnaires were amended accordingly to suit the needs of each cohort. Prior permission was sought from the authors through numerous emails to no avail. The source was explicitly cited on the finalised version of the questionnaires used in this research. The Manchester Inclusion Standard (Fox & Messiou, 2004) was also considered for this study. However, it was decided to use this as a reference guide only due to timing constraints.

Winter and O'Raw (2010) highlight ten major themes that were previously outlined in Figure 2.6 in chapter two. These themes were cross referenced in the literature to the views and experiences of parents of children with ASD (Armstrong et al., 2010b; DES, 2001; Murphy & Tierney, 2005; Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998; Whitaker, 2007), teachers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011; McGregor & Campbell, 2001; Park & Chitiyo, 2011; Shevlin et al., 2009), pupils (Beresford et al., 2007; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Ware et al., 2011), and the experiences of SNAs (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010; Jerwood, 1999; Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Rose & O'Neill, 2009). These themes enabled the researcher to generate pertinent questions for each cohort during the design process.

It was decided that the teacher questionnaires would be adapted from two primary sources (Humphrey & Symes, 2011; McGregor and Campbell, 2001). Prior contact was made via email with Professor Humphrey and Dr. Symes to seek information regarding the instruments used in their research. They kindly shared their questionnaire that was an adapted version of the instrument used by McGregor and Campbell (2001).

3.6.2.2 Children's Questionnaires

Greig, Taylor, and MacKay (2007) found that "questionnaires can be a good way of finding out about children's attitudes, and they can be designed to cover exactly the areas you are interested in" (p.125). However, some pupils prefer the anonymity and privacy when completing questionnaires (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). Questionnaires can still be viewed as an appropriate method of data collection for eliciting the views of children (Greig, Taylor, & MacKay, 2007; Tisdall, Davis, & Gallagher, 2009; Williams et al., 2009). These can be suitably tailored to suit the needs of children of various ages and abilities (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Fox & Messiou, 2004; MacBeath et al., 2003; Rabiee, Sloper, & Beresford, 2005).

Questionnaires in this research were carefully adapted to suit the specific needs of the pupils with autism participating in this study (Tisdall, Davis, & Gallagher, 2009). The researcher compiled the questionnaire recognising the possibility that children may need assistance to accurately fill in and respond to questions posed (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Individuals on the autism spectrum "have a different

way of thinking, sometimes thinking in pictures rather than words" (Attwood, 2007, p.252). The layout and design of children's questionnaires incorporated the use of colour, pictures and graphics to make it more attractive for pupils to complete (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Tisdall, Davis, & Gallagher, 2009; Travers et al., 2010). Visual cues and pictures were used to "accommodate the visual learning styles of many children with ASD" (DES, 2001, p.113). Clear and unambiguous language was used throughout to ensure that pupils could answer the questions successfully (Greig, Taylor, & MacKay, 2007). Sentence completion techniques were used as some "pupils who find writing difficult may be less daunted by completing sentences than by shaping their own responses" (MacBeath et al., 2003, p.24). This technique has gained significant coverage in the literature (DES & NEPS, 2007; Harris, Doyle & Greene 2011; MacBeath et al., 2003).

The first section of the questionnaire relates to the personal background information of pupils. The second section is adapted from the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) and aims to generate baseline data on the opinions of pupils regarding their experiences of school. The third section aims to elicit specifically what pupils think of their school. The fourth section aims to reveal how pupils believe pupils, teachers, principals and other adults in the community can improve their school. A combination of writing and drawing activities were devised for pupils to choose from within these sections (MacBeath et al., 2003; Travers et al., 2010). According to Prosser and Loxley (2007) "the combinations of visual and text-based qualitative approaches are often

fruitful and potentially insightful" (p.56). The benefits of drawing reduces any fears some pupils may have engaging in the research process, as it gives pupils the freedom to answer questions as they wish (Christensen & James, 2008). By breaking down these barriers to participation, it was the researcher's intention to engage more pupils on the autism spectrum in the research process. By employing these methods, pupils are also less likely to be judged negatively by their peers as their anonymity is preserved (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). The final section asks for written responses to their thoughts on the three items they like, dislike and would like to change about their school (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). All data received were coded systematically in files stored on the researcher's personal computer that were password protected to ensure data could not be accessed by third parties.

3.6.3 Documentary Evidence

Documentary evidence is a key source of information in case study research that can come in a variety of forms, including letters, notes, internal records, minutes of meetings, correspondence, administrative documents and newspaper clippings (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009). The main role for the "use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (Yin, 2009, p.103). Documents are considered to be advantageous as they can be regularly reviewed and due to their broad coverage in terms of time, events and settings (Yin, 2009). The main weaknesses centre around issues relating to retrievability of data, biased selectivity and reporting bias (Yin, 2009). Documentary evidence collected in this study included

external school assessments, mission statements and school policies. Prior consent was sought from parents and the schools involved, before the analysis of these documents commenced. Documentary analysis was undertaken towards the end of phase two in order to gain a better understanding and knowledge of each school and was reviewed again in the final phase of this research.

3.6.4 Visual Methodology

The use of visual methodology has gained significant coverage in the literature, recognising the valued role children and young people have to play in the decision making processes that effect them (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003; Clark & Moss, 2011; Daly et al., 2016; Humphrey & Lewis 2008; Punch, 2002). Alderson (2008) emphasises that "children are the primary source of knowledge about their own views and experiences" (p.287). As a result of this change, "consideration needs to be given as to whether existing research methodologies and ethical positions, largely designed for adults, are appropriate when the research participant is a child" (O'Kane, 2008, p.126).

Despite increased research incorporating visual methods in recent years, Prosser and Loxley (2007) suggest that "visual studies of inclusive education will be best served by developing visual methodologies that combine 'critical', 'empirical' and traditional approaches to answering substantive research questions" (p.56). As a result, visual methodologies were incorporated into this research to ascertain new themes and different issues that affect pupils with autism. This provides a new opportunity for pupils to have a voice on issues of importance to them.

During phase five, disposable cameras were circulated to every pupil along with questionnaires to ascertain their experiences of school. Every pupil—with the assistance of their teacher—was required to take photographs around their school that generated feelings of happiness or sadness. These photographs were then used as stimuli by the researcher to stimulate discussion with each pupil throughout the pupil interviews that were conducted during phase six.

3.7 Analyzing Case Study Evidence

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008) "there is no right or wrong about analysis....Analysis is, for a large part, intuitive and requires trusting the self to make the right decisions" (p.71). The techniques for analyzing the case study data have been previously outlined in Figure 3.3. These analytical techniques were used alongside the triangulation of data collected. Once the data has been collected, Miles and Huberman (1994) define "analysis as consisting of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction; data display, and conclusion drawing / verification" (p.10). The generation of themes emerged from these activities throughout this research.

Fieldnotes were used to as a method and source to recall and review specific events including meetings, conversations and interviews throughout the research. These personal notes were formally written up after the event took place, with the aim of capturing "the interview, archival or observational evidence in a methodic manner, later to be compiled and then used as part of the analysis of all your case study

data" (Yin, 2012, p.21). Thematic analysis in this research was guided by the following principles set down by Braun and Clark (2006):

1. Familiarising yourself with the data;
2. Generating initial codes;
3. Searching for themes;
4. Defining and naming themes;
5. Producing the report. (p.87)

Criteria for good quality thematic analysis was outlined in the same study. This checklist was applied to this study to guide the process of transcription, coding, analysis, and the final written report (Braun & Clark, 2006). These strategies were integral to the collation of data throughout this study. All data generated through questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and documents were coded using the established coding framework that is presented in Appendix B.

The researcher spent considerable time and effort in the process of planning and devising this crucially important coding framework. This enabled the researcher to reduce and make the volume of data more manageable for effective comprehension and analytical purposes. The importance of developing a coherent, coding framework has been recognised for some time (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rose et al., 2015). The researcher underestimated the arduous process of creating 47 first level codes, that was eventually reduced to eight second level codes. However, this process was invaluable to providing the researcher with a greater knowledge and understanding of the data that led to the development of emergent themes that subsequently followed. Corbin and Strauss (2008) emphasise the

importance of asking questions and making comparisons throughout the entirety of the research. Regarding research that generates qualitative data, Tesch (1990) suggests the research process should focus on the characteristics of language, the discoveries of regularities, the comprehension of meaning regarding text or action, and reflection. In addition, the initial coding of data for this research was guided by Tesch (1990) who outlined eight steps for the organization of qualitative data which are presented in Figure 3.4.

1. Get a sense of the whole. Read and re-read the transcriptions carefully to elicit necessary background information and increase understanding of emerging issues. Jot down ideas that arise throughout when reading the data.
2. Pick any data document (e.g. interview transcript). Pay attention to switches or transitions from one topic to another. Distinguish between content and topic. Write your own thoughts in the margin.
3. Repeat this process for other participants. Upon completion, cluster together similar or dissimilar topics by using lines, colour, and numerous printouts of each data document.
4. Using this list, go back and review original data. This preliminary organizing system will provide abbreviations of topics called codes, that can be written beside appropriate segments of text. Keep relevant data only. Test your new system on new data to assess its effectiveness and to ascertain if new codes or topics emerge.
5. Find the most descriptive wording for your 'topics' and use these to create categories. Write the list of codes on a big sheet, looking for connections. Draw lines, map and group the codes for the purposes of recall.
6. Make a final decision on the abbreviation for each category name and list them alphabetically. The abbreviation 'PST' means parental stress in this study for all references to parents experiencing stress or difficulty.
7. Upon completion of coding, assemble all the data material in each category in one place, and perform preliminary analysis i.e. look at the collection of material in one category at a time. Identify and summarise content for each category. Identify commonalities, uniqueness in content, confusion and contradictions in content and missing information regarding the research questions.
8. If necessary, recode your existing process. Use the results to guide subsequent research phases. Apply same process for new data to answer research questions.

Figure 3.4. Steps undertaken in this research to organise qualitative data (adapted from Tesch, 1990, p.142-145).

Similar schema have been reported in the literature (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Dey, 1993; Lofland, 1971). Additional sources provided the researcher with supplementary knowledge and explicit understanding of the mechanics of coding and the coding process in general (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Charmaz, 2014; Gibbs, 2007; Saldaña, 2013). Gibbs

(2007) outlines the importance of making constant comparisons and line by line coding. Similar suggestions were conveyed by Miles and Huberman (1994, p.9), as they highlighted some common features of analytical practices that included: affixing codes to filed notes; noting reflections; sorting and sifting through materials by focusing on patterns, processes, and relationships; isolating commonalities and differences; producing a small set of generalizations; and confronting them to create a coherent body of knowledge. The process of focusing on the commonalities and exceptionalities of data mentioned above is a popular analytical technique in studies generating qualitative data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Creswell, 2009; Rose & Shevlin, 2016). The skills required to undertake good quality thematic analysis—as outlined by Boyatzis (1998, p.11)—include: sensing themes; doing it reliably; developing codes; and consistent interpretation of the data in each context of analysis. It is envisaged that the consistent application of these principles throughout this research, will enhance the integrity and dependability of its subsequent findings.

From the outset, it was the researcher's aim to convey reported data accurately and consistently throughout. As a result, a list of terms will be used to ensure consistency of usage is applied during the analysis and discussion of the research findings and are provided in Table 3.7.

Table 3.7 Research Terminology

Few	Some	Many	Most
One to Two Parents	Three to Five Parents	Six to Seven Parents	Eight to Ten Parents
e.g. one out of ten parents would like smaller class sizes	e.g. three out of ten parents would like smaller class sizes	e.g. six out of ten parents would like smaller class sizes	e.g. eight out of ten parents would like smaller class sizes
Therefore few parents would like smaller class sizes	Therefore some parents would like smaller class sizes	Therefore many parents would like smaller class sizes	Therefore most parents would like smaller class sizes
One to Two Pupils	Three to Five Pupils	Six to Seven Pupils	Eight to Ten Pupils
e.g. two out of ten pupils attend special classes	e.g. four out of ten pupils attend special classes	e.g. seven out of ten pupils attend special classes	e.g. nine out of ten pupils attend special classes
Therefore few attend special classes	Therefore some attend special classes	Therefore many attend special classes	Therefore most attend special classes

Note. Research terminology used for this study, adapted from Rose et al. (2015, p.49).

For example, few schools will relate to one or two schools that are in agreement or disagreement on any given issue, some will constitute three to five whilst many schools will refer to six to seven. By using these terms in a systematic manner, it is intended to aid the readability and presentation of the research findings.

3.8 Credibility, Transferability and Confirmability of Findings

Different terminology is adopted within this research paradigm, with "terms like credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability" replacing "the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011a, p.13). Yin (2009) establishes that the use of a case study protocol augments the reliability of case studies as it guides the researcher through the data collection and analytical processes. The quality of this case study was enhanced by using multiple sources of evidence, a case study database that was devised in year one of this research and by maintaining a chain of evidence from which comparisons, outliers, and conclusions could be drawn (Yin, 2009). The thirteen tactics outlined by

Miles and Huberman (1994) guided the process of generating meaning from data as "they are arranged from the descriptive to the explanatory, and from the concrete to the more conceptual and abstract" (p.245). An additional checklist for enhancing the quality of data was applied to this research that included: checking for representativeness; checking for researcher effects; triangulating; weighting the evidence; assessing the meaning of outliers; using extreme cases; following up surprises; looking for negative evidence; making if/then tests; ruling out spurious relations; replicating a finding; checking out rival explanations; and getting feedback from informants (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.263).

The process of verifying data included the member checking of interview transcripts that were emailed to each participant prior to the commencement of coding, to ensure the document was accurately transcribed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Member checking is described as an effective technique for minimising researcher bias (Robson, 2002). The coding framework was devised for this study using a system of cross checking of transcripts, that were independently coded by a doctoral colleague (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Creswell, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This intercoder agreement (Creswell, 2009) involved follow up discussions with my colleague to ensure consistency and agreement was achieved to enhance the reliability and dependability of the coding framework presented in Appendix B.

3.9 Triangulation

Denzin and Lincoln (2011a) succinctly explain that "triangulation is the display of multiple, refracted realities simultaneously" (p.5). By

triangulating the viewpoints of case study participants, this will give greater insights to the attitudes and experiences of inclusive practices for pupils with autism. Triangulation involves the use of multiple sources of evidence and this allows the researcher to analyse the consistency of findings (Yin, 1994). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011a) "the combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigour, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry" (p.5). Stake (2008) claimed the credibility of case studies can be reinforced by the consistent triangulation of evidential sources throughout the research. Denzin (as cited by Miles & Huberman, 1994) outlined different types of triangulation that can be achieved by:

1. data source (persons, times, places, contexts);
2. method (observation, interview document);
3. researcher (investigator A, B etc.);
4. theory (use of multiple theories and perspectives);
5. data type (added by Miles & Huberman [1994] to include evidence such as qualitative text, interview recordings, quantitative data from questionnaires). (p267)

By incorporating these triangulation techniques into this case study research, it is intended to "produce knowledge on different levels, which means it goes beyond the knowledge made possible by one approach and thus contributes to promoting quality in research" (Flick, 2011, p.186). The greatest benefit of "using multiple sources is the development of converging lines of inquiry, a process of triangulation and corroboration" (Yin, 2009, p.115-116). This provides a rationale for

eliciting the opinions of pupils with autism and key stakeholders regarding inclusion in each school context.

3.10 Researcher Reflexivity

According to Berger (2015) "questions about reflexivity are part of a broader debate about ontological, epistemological and axiological components of the self, intersubjectivity and the colonization of knowledge" (p.220). Reflexivity acknowledges the researchers' own preconceived ideas, biases and values (Creswell, 2009). It also accepts that the researcher is part of the world that is being examined "and that neutrality and detachment in relation to data collection, analysis and interpretation are impossible" (Horsburgh, 2003, p.308).

The reflexivity protocols set down by Ahern (as cited in Robson, 2002, p.173) guided the researcher to identify and reduce any potential biases throughout this research. The researcher gained much both professionally and personally throughout this journey of research. Many new insights and fresh ideas were gleaned from numerous communications and correspondence with participants throughout this research. It has been a privilege to learn from every individual—particularly the parents and pupils—who welcomed me into their homes to share many personal insights and private experiences throughout this research. The reflexive experience throughout this thesis made the researcher more aware of the increased challenges encountered by parents and families with children on the autism spectrum. This awareness placed an additional responsibility on the researcher to ensure each participant's account was accurately portrayed and was

intermittently used for increased motivation to ensure completion of this study. The researcher also learned a great deal about the complexities and the intricacies involved in the construction and implementation of inclusive school policies. This learning will continue to inform and guide my future teaching experiences and academic pursuits.

3.11 Ethical Issues

Ethical clearance was successfully granted by the University of Dublin, Trinity College to pursue this research, with details presented in Appendix C. Informal ethical approval was granted during phase one as part of the University's regulations that were in effect at that time. A change in the university's protocols resulted in the formal ethics application being approved in the second year of this research. It should be noted that the researcher was compliant with the university's regulations pertaining to all aspects of ethics that were in operation throughout this research.

Upon receipt of ethical clearance from TCD, the process of recruiting participants for the school based phases of this research commenced. All participants were assured that every effort would be made to protect their anonymity and that privacy and confidentiality would be maintained throughout. Each participant and school was given a unique code that would preserve their anonymity throughout. All electronic data and correspondence were stored securely on the researcher's personal computer and all files saved were password protected to prevent any possibility of data being compromised and accessed inadvertently by any third party. All paper files collected were

stored and locked in a fireproof folder in the researcher's home and were accessible only to the researcher. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the research process without prejudice at any time. As this study involved the participation of children, parental consent to participate was required at the outset. The following guidelines informed and guided the direction of this study (BERA, 2011; TCD, 2009; Whyte, 2006).

3.12 Chapter Summary

An outline of the methodologies employed and a rationale for their application in this case study research was presented and discussed. An overview of the research aims, objectives, and questions was provided. The three stages of data collection were described and included preparing for data collection, data collection, analysing case study evidence. The data collected and analysed here enabled the researcher to generate recurring and emergent themes. The final stage of the data collection process involves the presentation of the research findings and these will be reported in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

Research findings will be presented under the following sub-headings:

- Preliminary Findings.
- Policy.
- Provision.
- Experiences.
- Outcomes.
- Pupil Voice.

The first section presents an overview of preliminary findings that were gathered during phase three of this research using questionnaires, across eight primary schools with access to special classes for pupils with autism. The findings presented here were used as baseline data to inform the subsequent phases of the research. During phases four to eight, an in-depth case study analysis was undertaken involving four of the original eight primary schools. Questionnaire data—in conjunction with stakeholder interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis—were used to guide and present findings under the four overarching research themes of policy, provision, experiences and outcomes. The final section provides an overview of the experiences of pupils with autism that participated in this research.

4.2 Preliminary Findings

One hundred and sixteen questionnaires were circulated to teachers,

parents, pupils and SNAs across eight schools during phase three from January to March 2013. The analysis of questionnaires (n=72) enabled the researcher to generate baseline data on the participating schools and an overview of questionnaire responses is presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. Questionnaire Responses

	Pupils	Parents	Teachers	SNAs	Total
	13/27	27/39	20/27	12/23	72/116
%	48%	69%	74%	52%	62%

Note: Stakeholders' questionnaire responses using the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

The overall responses received for this research are consistent with many national and international studies using questionnaires (Douglas et al., 2012; Segall & Campbell, 2014; Whitaker, 2007). A decision was taken in consultation with parents not to circulate questionnaires to pupils attending junior primary schools. It could be argued that response rate is weakest among pupils because some parents made the decision that their child would be unable to complete questionnaires. It was agreed with parents that more positive insights could be gleaned from pupils through informal discussions, that were undertaken in phase six of this research. Findings will be presented based on the perspectives of parents, teachers and SNAs, to illustrate their experiences of inclusive practices within each school context.

4.2.1 Overview of Questionnaire Findings

For the purposes of this research, junior primary school runs from junior infants up to and including second class, with ages generally ranging from four to nine years. Upon successful completion of junior primary school, pupils transfer to senior primary school with ages

ranging between eight to thirteen years. Information on the educational provision for pupils with autism participating in this research is provided in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2. Educational Provision for Pupils with Autism

Mainstream Class (n=8)		ASC Class (n=19)		Total Pupils (n)
Junior	Senior	Junior	Senior	
2	6	8	11	27

Note. Educational provision for pupils with autism (n=27) across eight primary schools.

The mean age for the twenty seven pupils recorded in phase three was 8.8 years, with ages ranging from 4.5 to 13-years-old. The median age for all pupils (n=27) was 9-years-old and consisted predominately of male pupils (n=24). An overview of participants' profiles was previously outlined in tables 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5 in chapter three.

A significant number of pupils (n=19) were attending special classes for pupils with autism. The majority of these pupils were in the senior end of primary school with ages ranging from 6.5 to 13-years-old. Pupils comprising of eleven males and two females completed questionnaires and of these pupils, five were attending mainstream classes on a full-time basis. An additional 14 parents returned questionnaires with information on their child that also formed part of the questionnaire data set and subsequent analysis. Parental responses were received primarily from mothers (n=25) of children, and of these children a significant majority were male (n=24).

The number of children in each household ranged from one child in five families to five children in two families. Some parents (n=4) indicated they had other children in the family with additional learning needs (ALN). Nineteen parents reported that their child attends a special

class in their respective school, with most (n=17) parents indicating that this was on a full-time basis.

Most parents (n=24) were presently satisfied their child is attending the right school. Within Scoil Conn, Olive was happy with her son having access to "a dedicated ASD unit with specialy [sic] trained teachers and SNA's". However, few parents (n=3) were concerned about the schools' ability to meet their child's needs.

Of the 20 teachers that responded to questionnaires, fourteen were female and six were male. The range of teachers' ages based on responses is presented in Figure 4.1.

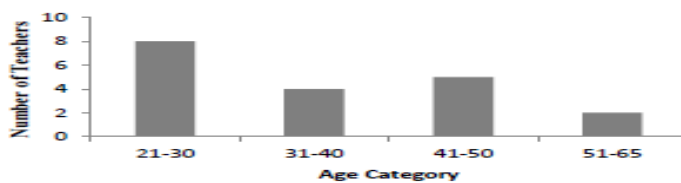


Figure 4.1. Age Category of Teachers (n=19).

The eight teachers in the age category 21-30 years have been teaching on average for 3.5 years. Figure 4.2 shows that teachers have many varied roles in their respective school.

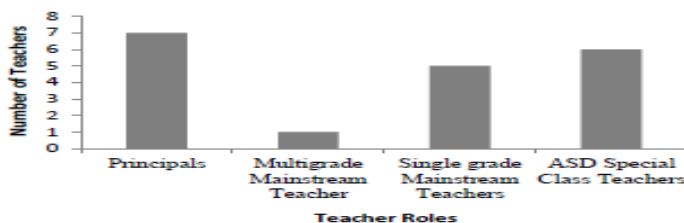


Figure 4.2. The roles of Teachers (n=19).

Moreover, seven principals participated in this phase. The length of service completed by teachers participating in this study ranged from one teacher in their first year of teaching to one principal with thirty six years service. Teachers (n=20) in this sample have been teaching on average 12.95 years. Teaching experience for many teachers (n=14) was

predominantly acquired in mainstream classes. A significant number of teachers (n=15) indicated they didn't have any qualification in learning support or special education. The highest qualification obtained by half the teachers surveyed (n=10) was to undergraduate degree level.

Both ordinary and honours bachelor degrees correspond to levels seven and eight respectively on Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ, 2017). Some teachers (n=6) had obtained their master's degree which corresponds to level nine on Ireland's NFQ. Of the twelve SNAs that returned questionnaires during phase three, 10 were female and two were male. The age categories of SNAs and their length of service is presented in Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4 respectively.

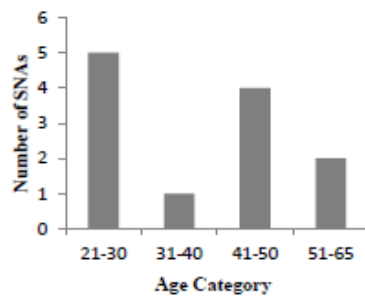


Figure 4.3. Age Category of SNAs (n=12).

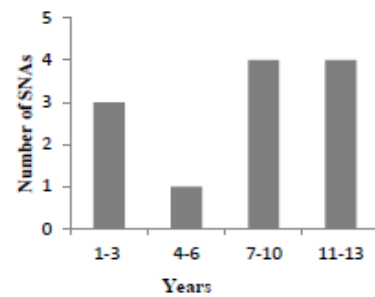


Figure 4.4. SNAs' length of Service (n=12).

Most SNAs (n=10) reported they had undertaken some form training for the role of SNA, with only two SNAs indicating they had undertaken no formal training. Three SNAs stated they had completed the training course at FETAC Level Five, while another SNA had completed Level Six (NFQ, 2017). Few SNAs (n=3) stated that had completed an unspecified SNA course or certificate in SNA training. One SNA was a qualified nurse, alongside two other SNAs who completed a degree in education and a certificate in special needs respectively.

4.2.2 Experiences of Inclusion

The Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) was used to provide an insight into stakeholders' experiences of inclusive practices in each school. Emergent themes were identified that were either common or unique to each school environment. Each question on the questionnaire required individual stakeholders to respond with either a positive, negative or unsure response. For analytical purposes, these responses were allocated a score of one, minus one and zero respectively. An aggregate score for each respondent was calculated to interpret their attitudes towards inclusion within and across each school setting. The sum of respondents' scores was then calculated to provide a composite score for each cohort. The composite score and equivalent percentage value presented in Figure 4.5 enabled the researcher to describe and interpret the overall attitudes and experiences of inclusion within each cohort. All responses were colour coded to aid the researcher's understanding and interpretation of data.

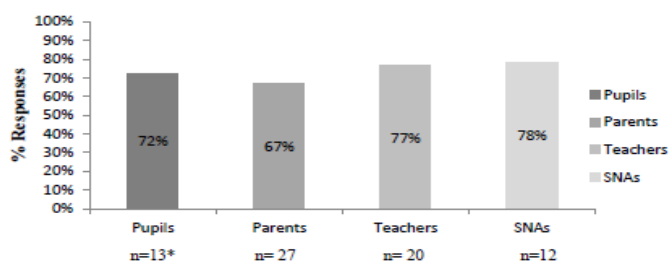


Figure 4.5. Stakeholders' (n=72) composite scores reflecting their positive & negative experiences of inclusion.
* Questionnaires circulated to 6 primary schools as pupils from junior schools did not participate in this phase.

Based on these results, it can be inferred that stakeholders have experienced many positive aspects of inclusion across the eight participating primary schools. For example, parents had a

composite scoring of 812 out of a possible 1,215 responses. Although the equivalent percentage value of 67% suggests that parents have experienced many positive elements of inclusion, there are still certain aspects of schooling that parents would like to see improve and change in practice. Due to the small numbers involved, no direct comparisons or definitive conclusions can be drawn from each school's measure of inclusivity. As a result, data presented here will be analysed in greater detail within each stakeholder cohort starting with the parents.

4.2.2.1 Parents' Perspectives

The composite score for inclusion for 27 parents surveyed was 67% (Figure 4.5) and the breakdown of their responses is presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3. Questionnaire Responses from Parents (n=27)

(No. of Questions)	Positive	Unsure	Negative	Unanswered	Total
Creating Inclusive Cultures (21)	455	71	13	28	567
Producing Inclusive Policies (9)	191	29	5	18	243
Evolving Inclusive Practices (15)	243	68	59	35	405
Total Responses	889	168	77	81	1,215
% Total Responses	73%	14%	6%	7%	100%

Note. Overall breakdown of parents' responses using the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

The high percentage of positive responses suggests that parents have experienced many favourable aspects of inclusion across the eight case study schools. There was strong consensus on the importance of positive relationships experienced in schools. Most parents (n=25) indicated that adults are kind to the children in each school and that children and adults get on well together. Many parents (n=16) stated their child has good friends in school. For

many parents (n=19), positive relationships were encouraged in an effort to make parents feel more involved when their child began school. Although some parents (n=14) felt included in the school community, a number of parents (n=10) were unsure on this issue. According to the majority of parents (n=26), positive home-school relationships are crucial to achieving successful outcomes for their children. Communication was positively viewed as many parents (n=20) feel they are well informed about school activities. Most parents (n=24) indicated that teachers are approachable, receptive to their concerns and value their feedback regarding their child's education. Regarding school choice, many parents (n=19) were satisfied that their school was the best option in their area for meeting their children's needs.

According to most parents (n=23), children of all abilities are respected and accepted in their respective school. A similar number of parents (n=22) believe that schools have good systems in place for supporting pupils with any difficulty. Although many parents (n=21) identified SNA support as very helpful, two parents indicated they were unhappy with the support their child receives.

Some parents (n=13) stated their child has no difficulty joining in activities with other pupils during break time. Many parents (n=20) indicated their satisfaction with their school's communication procedures. It is the opinion of most parents (n=23) that schools value parental feedback. Many parents (n=19) stated they were satisfied with their school's IEP procedures. Most parents

(n=23) were consulted by the school for their input to the development of an IEP for their child, with a similar number of parents (n=22) stating this was reviewed annually.

Preliminary analysis of parents' responses gives a strong sense of community, engagement and participation amongst parents on many levels in each school. Although happy with certain aspects of inclusive practices, these responses suggest that parents have mixed experiences on inclusive practices in schools. Based on these responses, questions remain on the quality and nature of each child's academic experiences in schools.

4.2.2.2 Teachers' Perspectives

The composite score for inclusion for the 20 teachers surveyed was 77% (Figure 4.5) and the overall breakdown of their responses is presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4. Questionnaire Responses from Teachers (n=20)

(No. of Questions)	Positive	Unsure	Negative	Unanswered	Total
Creating Inclusive Cultures (11)	174	42	2	2	220
Producing Inclusive Policies (18)	308	37	2	13	360
Evolving Inclusive Practices (26)	396	79	30	15	520
Total Responses	878	158	34	30	1,100
% Total Responses	79.82%	14.36%	3.09%	2.73%	100%

Note. Overall breakdown of teachers' responses using the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

The high percentage of positive responses suggests that teachers have experienced many beneficial aspects of inclusion in each school. Many positive inclusive practices were identified with agreement shared among most teachers on a number of issues. Most teachers (n=18) stated that pupils help each other in school, while a similar number of teachers (n=16) indicating that staff and

pupils respect one another. Positive peer relationships were identified by many teachers (n=15) as pupils work effectively together. There was strong consensus among most teachers (n=17) on positive relations experienced between home and school.

A pupil centred curriculum is employed across all schools as most teachers (n=18) stated they link what happens in school to the home environment. Positive staff relations with management were also experienced, with many teachers (n=12) indicating that their respective Boards of Management and staff work well together. Positive working relationships among staff were also highlighted, as many teachers (n=15) stated that staff respect each other in their school. A strong theme emerging from this section is the importance of building positive relationships within the school community to create authentic inclusive cultures in schools.

All teachers (n=20) agreed that their school ensures that inclusive school policies support inclusive practices in each setting. According to most teachers (n=17), schools have an inclusive approach to leadership in an environment where staff expertise is known and used. Professional development activities have assisted many teachers (n=14) to respond to pupils' needs in their class.

There was consensus among all teachers (n=20) that SNAs support the learning and participation of all pupils. The same number of teachers (n=20) indicated that their school has good resources to support pupils with autism. A significant majority of teachers (n=19) believe that pupils with autism are actively

engaged in the learning process and that all pupils learn from each other. However, a fewer number of teachers (n=12) indicated that every pupil is challenged academically, alongside eight teachers who were unsure on this issue. One teacher disagreed that pupils with autism take part in all academic activities.

Most teachers (n=19) stated that pupils with autism were benefitting socially from being in mainstream school. Most teachers (n=16) responded that pupils with autism participate in extra-curricular activities in school and join in activities with their peers during break time (n=17). On the issue of planning, many teachers (n=15) revealed that staff plan, teach and review together. In addition, it was noted by many teachers (n=13) that time was given to liaise with support teachers. There was reported evidence of differentiated lessons, with many teachers (n=15) planning with all pupils in mind and encouraging the participation of all pupils (n=14). Only some teachers (n=6) indicated they were happy with their SENO. Only two teachers conveyed their satisfaction with the support services provided by the state. These findings suggest that teachers believe that schools are doing their best to include pupils on the autism spectrum with limited access to resources.

4.2.2.3 SNAs' Perspectives

The composite score for inclusion for the 12 SNAs surveyed across six schools was 78% (Figure 4.5). The high percentage of positive responses suggests that SNAs have had many positive experiences of inclusion in their respective schools.

Many positive inclusive practices were identified, with agreement shared among most SNAs on a number of issues. The overall breakdown of their responses is presented in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5. Questionnaire Responses from SNAs (n=12)

(No. of Questions)	Positive	Unsure	Negative	Unanswered	Total
Creating Inclusive Cultures (11)	99	30	2	1	132
Producing Inclusive Policies (18)	166	38	8	4	216
Evolving Inclusive Practices (26)	275	21	13	3	312
Total Responses	540	89	23	8	660
% Total Responses	81.8%	13.5%	3.5%	1.2%	100%

Note. Overall breakdown of SNAs' responses using the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

Most SNAs (n=11) indicated that everyone is welcomed in their respective school. A similar number of SNAs (n=10) stated that staff and pupils respect one another, with eight SNAs reporting that staff cooperate in each school. Positive home school relations were experienced by some SNAs (n=7), with the same number reporting on the collaboration between staff and parents in each school. Only one SNA indicated that negative relations exist between home and school. It was also the view of many SNAs (n=9) that the Board of Management and staff worked well together. Important themes emerging from SNAs' responses highlight the importance of developing and fostering respectful, positive relationships amongst all stakeholders, in order to create genuine inclusive cultures in each school environment.

Most SNAs (n=10) indicated that bullying is minimised and that each school ensures that policies about SEN support inclusion. Knowledge of additional school policies was exhibited by many SNAs (n=9) who stated that the school's behaviour policy is linked to learning and curriculum development. Many SNAs (n=7),

believe professional development activities help staff to respond to diversity. Every SNA reported that pupils with autism participate in extra-curricular activities in school. According to most SNAs (n=11), inclusive practices have incorporated activities outside formal lessons for all pupils. All but one SNA stated that pupils with autism are benefitting socially from being in mainstream. Every SNA indicated that pupils with autism are actively engaged in the learning process, learn from each other and are encouraged to be confident, critical thinkers. There was further agreement on the SNA's role in supporting the learning and participation of all pupils. Each SNA indicated that assessments and homework contribute to the learning of all pupils. The role of parents was also highlighted, as most SNAs (n=11) acknowledged their importance of being involved in school events.

Many SNAs (n=9) reported that time is given to liaise and plan with teachers. The majority of SNAs (n=11) stated that IEPs are regularly reviewed and that they are happy with the IEP process in their school. Satisfaction was expressed by many SNAs (n=9) on the work carried out by the SENO. Based on the evidence presented here, it can be argued that the process of evolving inclusive practices in schools is looked upon favourably by the majority of SNAs.

4.2.3 Summary of Preliminary Findings

Questionnaires during phase three were used to elicit the experiences of stakeholders across eight primary schools with

access to special classes for pupils with autism. An analysis of these views and experiences was presented based on feedback received from parents, teachers and SNAs. It can be gleaned from the results presented above that while many stakeholders across participating schools have experienced positive practices regarding the inclusion of pupils on the autism spectrum, some barriers and obstacles remain. Additional findings from the subsequent phases of this research will be explored and presented in the following sections under the overarching themes of policy, provision, experiences and outcomes. The final section will present findings based on the experiences of pupils on the autism spectrum.

4.3 Policy

4.3.1 Inclusive School Policies and Documents

The analysis of policies and documents from each school provided a greater understanding about their underlying commitment to the principles of inclusion. During phase eight, requests were made for the enrolment and special education policies to each of the four in-depth case study schools that were pertinent to the research aims and objectives. These policies were successfully obtained from three of the four schools. Additional policies and documents were accessed on each school's website.

All four schools that took part in the in-depth phases of this research were Catholic schools and operated under the patronage of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin. In addition, these schools were all subject to the rules set down in circulars—or prescribed

directives that are regularly circulated to schools by the Department of Education and Skills (DES)—and were managed on behalf of the Patron and DES by their respective Board of Management (BOM). Table 4.6 presents a range of documents that were analysed from the four in-depth case study schools.

Table 4.6. Document Analysis across Four In-Depth Case Study Schools

Documents	Scoil Allen	Scoil Conn	Scoil Derg	Scoil Mask
Whole School Evaluation (WSE)	x	x	x	x
School Self Evaluation (SSE)		x		
Mission Statement		x		x
Enrolment Policy	x	x	x	x
Special Education Policy	x			x
Anti-Bullying Policy	x	x	x	
Child Protection Policy	x	x	x	
Code of Behaviour / Discipline	x	x	x	x
Inclusion Policy		x		
Enrolment & Transition Policy		x		
Special Class Placement Procedures			x	
Intercultural Policy			x	
Attendance Strategy			x	
Religious Education Policy	x			
Total School Documents	7	9	8	5

Note. School documents include selected school policies, mission statements and inspection reports.

The majority of parents expressed little or no knowledge about their school's policies on inclusion. Questionnaire data confirmed that very few parents (n=5) were aware of their school's policy to support pupils with additional learning needs (ALN).

Only one of four special class teachers was aware of Scoil Derg's special or inclusive education policies. The same teacher did acknowledge that their special education policy was overdue for review. One special class teacher from Scoil Mask was also unaware of any policies regarding special education and was reluctant to make any enquiries because she felt "it would be put on my back to write it and I wouldn't know what goes into it".

A Code of Good Behaviour or Good Discipline was in operation in three of the four schools. The use of positive language here is important as it infers that schools focus more on positive

behaviours of pupils in schools. A specific policy supporting pupils with ALN was made available from Scoil Allen and Scoil Mask. Although every school had an enrolment policy in-effect, Scoil Conn had a separate policy that combined enrolment procedures and transitional arrangements for pupils in the school. This policy also set out the placement criteria for pupils in the school. Although the policy notes that staff are consulted during the decision-making process, the final decision regarding pupil placement—either in the mainstream or special class—rests with the principal. A declaration is also made within this policy that Scoil Conn “must have the necessary resources in order to adequately cater for the child’s needs”. In addition, any child requiring transportation must make an application to the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO). The policy states further that a child can enrol into the pre-school “when the application has been processed by the transport section of the D.E.S.” Delays in the processing of these applications have resulted in pupils from both junior primary schools being excluded from school for extended periods and will be explored later in this chapter.

4.3.1.1 Scoil Allen

A recent WSE Report in Scoil Allen commented positively on the effectiveness of management who have successfully cultivated a positive school environment that enhanced the teaching and learning experiences for both pupils and teachers alike. The collaborative work practices among all stakeholders within Scoil

Allen and with the parents in the wider school community were also praised. The quality of provision made for pupils on the autism spectrum in school was deemed to be very effective. Scoil Allen had a comprehensive policy supporting pupils with ALN that provided clear aims, objectives and responsibilities so that all stakeholders can work effectively in partnership “to create learning opportunities for all children”. Scoil Mask had a similar policy in effect. It should be noted again that Scoil Allen is the feeder school for Scoil Mask when pupils transfer after second class at approximately 8 or 9-years-old. Based on these similarities and through numerous discussions with staff members, both schools have collaborated during the formulation and review of their respective policies in supporting pupils on the autism spectrum.

4.3.1.2 Scoil Conn

A recent WSE Report carried out in Scoil Conn commended school management and staff “for the work that has been achieved in developing high quality provision for pupils with ASD”. This has been facilitated through the commended existence of a “strong spirit of community between the board of management, teachers and parents”. The report recommended that, in general, the content of lessons could be made more challenging for all pupils. A similar recommendation was published in a recent WSE Report in Scoil Derg, with additional opportunities required “to further enhance the level of challenge within lessons”. Ciarán’s mother Olive from Scoil Conn had previously expressed concerns

regarding the standard of school work and the limited requirement for homework—in the special class setting—and the difficulties this could pose for pupils transferring to mainstream. Scoil Conn's inclusion policy aims to meet the educational needs of every child by providing them “with the experience of a mainstream class so that he/she is given the opportunity to model appropriate behaviours and experience and respond to age appropriate mainstream teaching”. An Inclusion Co-ordinator liaises with the Principal and staff members throughout the year to oversee the management, implementation and review of this policy.

4.3.1.3 Scoil Derg

It is explicitly stated in Scoil Derg’s Special Class Placement Procedures that pupils will only gain access to a special class with an official diagnosis of asperger syndrome (AS) and a referral from their local health authority. A recent WSE report stated that the overall quality of learning and teaching in Scoil Derg was proficient. In response to parental questionnaires, almost all parents agreed that the teaching in Scoil Derg was good and that their child was progressing positively. The WSE Report further stated that pupils observed in the special classes presented as competent and interested learners, within a learning environment described as very positive and structured. It was suggested that additional opportunities are required “to develop independent and social learning skills in a systematic manner”.

Serious deficiencies were also highlighted, one of which revealed that the current board of management was incorrectly constituted. Despite acknowledging the effective management of the school, it was recommended that “significant improvements in aspects of procedure and practice at board of management level are required as a matter of priority”. The report also recommended that the school make provisions for school refurbishment and redecoration “to ensure that every classroom presents as a stimulating learning environment”. It is noteworthy that all three pupils from Scoil Derg made suggestions to changing the aesthetics of the school. Both Emmet and Robert suggested a new colour scheme of paint for their classroom. Emmet stated he would bring this idea—to have brighter colours on the classroom walls—to the representatives of the School Student Council for further discussion because the current colour scheme is “a drag”. Jerry would like an improved “classic doorway” and decorated alongside with “really nice-like flowers” at the front of the school. Emmet also disliked the classroom’s tables and chairs because they are uncomfortable. Evidence presented above illustrate that pupils with autism have much to contribute to the development of their school.

4.3.1.4 Scoil Mask

Scoil Mask’s vision statement is underpinned by the principles of respect, equality and fairness. This vision facilitates learning in a safe, happy and caring environment so that individual differences can be overcome to allow individuals reach their true

potential. The leadership qualities of the principal in Scoil Mask were commended in a recent WSE Report and these have fostered positive collegial attitudes and relations among all staff members. It was reported that parents praised the work and commitment of the principal with regular opportunities for parents to communicate to the school in a culture where “parents’ opinions are valued”. During the evaluation, very good teaching and learning strategies were observed for pupils with ALN. It should be noted that all pupils on the autism spectrum attended mainstream classes, as no special class existed at the time of this WSE Report.

4.3.2 Enrolment

The enrolment of pupils was subject to each school's enrolment policy and ranked criteria for admission. Priority for enrolment was given to Roman Catholic children, to siblings of pupils already attending the school, and to those living within the school's catchment area. It is noteworthy that the stated ethos was more or less identical in three of the four schools. The ethos was underpinned by the principles of: equality of access and participation in schools; respect for diversity of values, beliefs and traditions in society; and acknowledging parental choice in the enrolment process. All four schools made reference in their policies to supporting the principles of inclusive education.

4.3.2.1 Enrolment to Special Classes for Pupils with Autism

All four schools had an additional enrolment policy for admitting pupils to their respective special classes for pupils on the

autism spectrum. There was consistency across all policies that placed the onus on the DES to provide supports in advance of pupils securing a placement in each special class setting. All policies indicated that the final decision regarding pupil enrolment was the responsibility of the BOM in each school. There was also evidence of a number of exclusionary criteria identified in each enrolment policy.

Admission to each school operated on a strict referral basis. At the time of enrolment, parents should have a referral confirming their child's diagnosis of autism and a recommendation for their child's placement in a special class from the Health Service Executive (HSE) Centre X, as each school received supports from this publicly funded service provider. Scoil Conn also accepted referrals from St. Monica's Services as they received additional supports from this service provider. Scoil Derg clearly specified that their special classes were solely for pupils with AS. As previously discussed, no official correspondence from the DES could be sourced to support this assertion. Inspections in primary and post-primary schools are undertaken regularly by the DES, within which the quality of: management and leadership; teaching and learning; planning and assessment are evaluated. The Whole School Evaluation (WSE) Report provides a summary of findings and recommendations for further development in a school that are publically available on the website of the DES. It is noteworthy that a recent WSE Report in Scoil Derg recommended a review of the

school's admissions and enrolment policies to ensure the school is compliant with current legislation surrounding the enrolment of pupils with ALN. This report goes on to state that Scoil Derg caters for pupils with ASD—and not AS—as previously maintained by Scoil Derg's former principal.

The Principal of Scoil Mask recalled reading another school's enrolment policy that restricted access to their special classes for pupils with mild autism only. The principal was openly uncertain surrounding the legality of this issue. The same principal identified challenges for mainstream schools to successfully include pupils with more complex needs by stating “we can't meet the needs of these children”. It was clear from my discussion with this experienced principal that he struggled to bring clarity on this issue, as he suggested “maybe we should be refusing people that have needs that we can't meet and maybe if that was done, maybe something would be done to change the situation”.

There was general agreement among stakeholders on the benefits and challenges associated with the labelling of children with autism. The majority of parents acknowledged the importance of having a diagnostic label to access clinical services and additional supports in schools. However, these parents also voiced their concerns at the potential stigma associated with their child having a labelled disability. Although the Principal of Scoil Derg disliked the labelling of students with AS, he acknowledged the

importance of having an official diagnosis for the purposes of school enrolment and accessing clinical supports.

Scoil Derg is the main feeder school to the adjoining secondary school. During phase seven, Alison revealed changes had occurred to the enrolment policy of the secondary school, causing anxiety among parents who now had no guarantee of securing a place for their child in the secondary school.

The difficulty was raised by parents to the Board of Management in Scoil Derg in June 2014. It subsequently transpired that a limit had been introduced on the intake of pupils for the special classes for the following year. Based on current pupil numbers in Scoil Derg, 11 pupils are due to transfer to the secondary school in 2015 and 2016, with only two places available in the special classes as two pupils will be finishing secondary school in 2016. It was reported by Alison that the Principal of the Secondary School—who was managing the transfer of six pupils in September 2015—had "wanted to interview the six boys individually to see if they would be able to cope in mainstream with supports". Although Alison was unaware of the enrolment criteria adopted by the principal, the SENO had liaised with parents and informed them that this should not be happening as it could be potentially construed as discriminatory. Alison stated that four pupils had secured a place in the mainstream secondary school but—at the time of our focus group—were still awaiting confirmation of SNA supports for September 2015. She added that

the remaining two pupils—who required continuity of access to a special class—found alternative secondary schools for the following year. Although the Principal of the Secondary School could not refuse admission to any pupil from Scoil Derg—in line with their Enrolment Policy—it was fervently maintained by Alison that he did not want any more pupils for their special classes for fear of being "seen as a special needs school and apparently the numbers are dropping in the mainstream school". Uncertainty prevailed on this issue as Alison was openly concerned at these latest developments, especially as her son Jerry is planning to transfer to the secondary school in September 2016.

Margaret questioned the varying enrolment policies and criteria adopted by different schools. She claimed that certain schools are only enrolling pupils—with similar levels of ability—as was the case in her son Mark's new primary school where the pupils are "all really likeminded kids". She decided against sending Mark to another prospective school because most of the pupils she observed during a visit had more complex needs. It was her belief that the principal of this school was "letting any child in and I didn't want my child to go there because there's two of them rocking".

Focus group discussions highlighted the perception that the current policy of inclusion is not working regarding special class provision. There was an overwhelming consensus among parents that viewed the present system—of having pupils with mild,

moderate and severe autism in the same special class—as ineffective and not meeting the needs of children. Alison and Olive both indicated that their children had difficulties coping with some other pupils with more complex needs in their class. With regard to special classes, Keeva suggested that "that children should be—socially and emotionally—children should be matched better". Seán's father Colm agreed on the importance of matching the child and their respective ability levels to the right educational and social environment as opposed to being "lumped in" to a classroom with pupils of varied abilities.

4.3.3 Disconnect between Policy and Practice

Despite its legislative importance, the majority of parents interviewed were either unfamiliar or had never heard of the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004). There was a general sense of disillusionment among parents with the government, as Dermot's mother Sam from Scoil Allen illustrated "it's the EPSEN Act—2004—and we're now nearly in 2014 and it's not fully implemented. Who's it helping? That should have been implemented straight away...I don't think it's helping anyone really to be quite honest". A teacher in the special class from the same school suggested that the continued failure to ratify this act indicates "that the government is not committed to the EPSEN Act". The same teacher criticised aspects of this legislation as there is no statutory obligation on the government to provide assistance or resources to individuals once a child reaches 18 years of age.

The Principal of Scoil Mask emphasised that the development of pupils is dependent on their levels of abilities and needs. He added further that the measurement of outcomes for pupils on the autism spectrum needs to be fair and “realistic and a certain level of achievement for one child is going to be absolutely phenomenal compared to another child”. The Principal of Scoil Conn agreed by promoting “a realistic aspiration of inclusion” in the school—which she feels is a direct result of the current policy adopted by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE)—regarding the opening up special classes irrespective of individual cognitive ability.

Many concerns persist for parents on many issues regarding their children's academic and social experiences. It can be argued that the difficulties encountered by parents are mainly attributable to an inability by parents to access regular supports required for their child's successful inclusion to mainstream schools. This mismatch between policy and practice presents many challenges, as Donald's mother Geraldine outlined:

Having been in a mainstream school for Junior Infants, he could not cope at all and he got very little support. When he moved to an ASD Unit in a different school he got great support but progress was slow due to different levels of ASD in unit. The best outcome so far for him has been a move to the school he is in now for 6th class with a special Aspergers class with one teacher and two SNAs.

In contrast, Larry's mother Molly from Scoil Allen highlights the benefit to the wider community for including children on the autism spectrum in mainstream schools:

I think it is wonderful that the students in the autism unit are integrated in the school that my son attends and think there should be more of these facilities in other schools. It is not a good thing for the children just to be kept separated and isolated from other children in the school.

Teachers also highlighted their concerns regarding the disconnect between policy and practice. One special class teacher from Scoil Erne identified a disconnect between policy and practice, suggesting "it's typical 'Ireland ed. policy' throw it out there and just expect people to get on with it". The issue of professional development was raised by few teachers (n=4), which suggests that teachers would like increased opportunities to train and upskill in the areas of autism and inclusion. The Principal of Scoil Conn accepts that "inclusion must be a positive experience for the child", while the Principal of Scoil Ree believes that the "school and class must work around SEN children and not expect children with SEN to conform".

The challenges encountered by pupils and parental expectations of the outcomes of inclusion can vary across different school environments. According to the Principal of Scoil Gowna, inclusion is dependent "on level of ability and ASD parents who wish to mainstream need to understand the difficulties academically and socially and explain what they want for their

child". It is important to keep parents informed of the school's inclusive practices, as the Principal of Scoil Conn acknowledged that "parents' understanding of long term goals & [sic] the short term strategies to meet these goals must be sought-they must be kept informed ón tús [sic] of how it operates in the school". This suggests that communication and the forging of relationships with parents are important to the process of inclusion in schools.

The majority of stakeholders repeatedly expressed their dissatisfaction with the role of government regarding supports and the educational provision for young people with autism. There is little or no accountability in government for change, as Robert's mother Olivia believes they are consistently "passing the buck". Based on the lack of financial investment and policies pursued, Edgar's mother Phoebe from Scoil Mask suggested the whole area of disability has not been a priority for successive Governments. Colm was fervently critical of the system that he feels is presently failing his son Seán. He would like to see policies being introduced in the future that would recognise individual pupil needs and "concentrate on their abilities and not their disabilities".

4.3.4 Summary of Policy Findings

It can be argued that based on the evidence presented above that there is currently a disconnect between policy and practice within participating schools. While all schools have inclusive policies in effect, it is clear that most parents have little knowledge or awareness of these policies. This suggests that improvements

could be made regarding the communication and dissemination of policies and their content within the wider community. Exclusionary clauses were identified in the enrolment policies in the four in-depth case study schools, that required access to additional supports and resources prior to the enrolment of a child with autism. The inability of parents and teachers to access additional clinical supports for children on the autism spectrum is placing increasing challenges on schools for their successful inclusion. The next section will analyse the accessibility of supports and will be presented under the theme of provision.

4.4 Provision

Provision findings will be discussed and presented within themes that emerged under the following sub-headings:

- Class Level.
- School Level.
- Child and Family Levels.
- Community and National Levels.

4.4.1 Class Level

4.4.1.1 Teaching Content and Resources

The mainstream curriculum is used by many teachers across each school, who adapt it accordingly to meet the specific needs of pupils with autism. For example, a special class teacher from Scoil Derg combines individual and group work activities, treating all pupils the same because "we live in the real world so you can't do everything for them". According to the Principal of Scoil Allen,

teachers follow Aistear—the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009)—and the national guidelines for teaching children with learning disabilities (NCCA, 2007). Within these guidelines, the special class teacher from Scoil Allen added "while I might work off the moderate learning curriculum, actually what I'm doing is, I'm looking at the general curriculum, the mainstream curriculum and I'm differentiating within".

It was reported by parents and teachers that social programmes were in operation across all schools. Lessons aimed at improving pupils' social skills through mixing with peers included baking, cooking and swimming alongside class and whole-school excursions. All schools used their immediate community to good effect, by getting the pupils regularly outside the classroom for library visits, shopping in the locality and for walks to the local park and playground. Two special class teachers from both Scoil Allen and Scoil Conn highlighted the importance of operating a regular social programme for pupils with autism:

We have a big drive here to ensure that whatever is happening in this classroom gets out onto the corridors, it gets out into the staff rooms, it gets into the other classrooms, it gets into the library, so the children here, we take them out, we don't keep them. We teach them a skill and we try to ensure that it's something that they can do outside so we bring them out a lot. (Special Class Teacher Scoil Allen)

In Scoil Derg, one teacher incorporates the shopping activities to prepare for in-school baking activities, with each pupil

having "to go in and get our bits and pieces, everybody has their own shopping list...we give them money and they go up and they have to do all of that". All schools emphasised the importance of curricula focussing on the explicit teaching of life skills. The Principal and both parents from Scoil Mask spoke positively on the teaching of life-skills such as interacting with peers, mixing with strangers, and learning about brushing teeth and tying shoe laces. The following comment illustrates the benefits for pupils when they successfully engage in well-organised social programmes:

We come back from the coffee shop on Friday sweating but the children in the space of six months the difference. They can walk a longer distance. They can sit, we don't actually even sit beside them anymore we sit away from them and they have to talk to each other, you know, I mean that's a huge skill. (Special Class Teacher Scoil Conn)

Two teachers from Scoil Derg and Scoil Conn highlighted the challenges and risks associated with bringing pupils outside the school grounds which revolved around pupils' health and safety. There was no mention by any teacher or principal of any risk assessment carried out in advance of any planned trip. Despite acknowledging that teachers are "taking a chance" by bringing pupils out into the community, the special class teacher from Scoil Conn believes that "we have to do this to make it socially acceptable. If nobody does it, it won't happen".

Some teachers reported using visual schedules and the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) as part of their

daily teaching strategies. Describing pupils as predominantly "visual learners", the special class teacher from Scoil Mask revealed using computers to engage more easily with pupils as "anything that I have taught successfully to the children in history or geography has been by the use of my own, making my own PowerPoints". Moreover, both SNAs in Scoil Conn agreed on the importance of limiting the use of language when working with pupils with autism. The importance of visual methods were also identified in the home. Alex's mother Amy described how she "painted a wooden spoon all different colours...because it's big and it's visual" in order to teach him the conventions for taking turns. Amy described further the importance of using coloured paper when teaching rules to children with autism and doing "it in highlighters and laminate them, which any mother with an autistic child has to get a laminator, and hang them up".

Social stories were utilised in each school except Scoil Mask. One teacher from Scoil Derg would use social stories for teaching boys about "anger management and growing up". Another teacher from the same school would like to see the content of social stories updated as they can be "a little bit kind of babyish for the boys who are a little bit older". Story sacks is an innovative practice of storytelling, developed by teachers in collaboration with the parents' association of Scoil Allen. The special class teacher from Scoil Allen outlined "they literally make activities to enhance the comprehension levels of the children....it's very professional

looking. Books and activities, jigsaws to do, you'd have a toy that might go along with the book".

In terms of additional teaching strategies, Scoil Allen was the only school that reported using elements from the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) Programme and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) strategies. Few teachers (n=3) cited the use of technology in the classroom that included interactive white boards and smart boards.

4.4.1.2 Assessment in Practice

There were very few concrete examples outlining the specific forms of assessment implemented by teachers. The Principal of Scoil Allen was aware of the teaching and learning processes as "the teachers give me their cúntas míosúil (monthly report) and IEPs and both of them will tell me what's going on within the class". The special class teacher from Scoil Allen monitors pupils' progress by devising sample portfolios for each pupil. According to the Principal of Scoil Conn, a similar individualised programme is operated separately to the IEP "for each child of inclusion and it is totally based on what they're able for". The special class teacher from the same school incorporates the preparation of monthly notes, the formulation of IEPs, pupils' textbooks and the national curriculum to plan, assess and monitor each child's progression. The same teacher also noted the benefits of having reduced numbers in the class as it allowed the pupils with

autism to receive more individualised support as required. Methods of assessment cited by the special class teacher in Scoil Mask included the administration of whole-school standardised tests and in-class teacher designed tests within core subject areas. There were no explicit references to assessment methods made by teachers in Scoil Derg. However, Emmet's mother Róisín confirmed that weekly tests take place as the teacher sends home "a notebook on a Friday with the tests in it and I have to sign it".

There were mixed experiences regarding parental involvement in the development of IEPs in each school. Emmet's mother Róisín had not been involved in the IEP process in Scoil Derg. Dermot's mother Sam highlighted varying IEP practices within Scoil Allen, where a change of resource teacher improved her experienced levels of input, communication and consultation. Sam also reported a different approach to IEPs at the time of Dermot's transfer to Scoil Mask. Having previously experienced exclusion from the IEP process in Scoil Allen, she was now being consulted by teachers in Scoil Mask as "the first thing they said to me when I went down they said listen you know Dermot best you tell us and I was in shock".

Both teachers from Scoil Allen reported that IEP meetings were held twice a year. This was challenged by Larry's mother Molly who indicated that only one IEP meeting was held annually. Three IEP meetings were reported by teachers in Scoil Conn and Scoil Derg respectively. The only IEP meeting in Scoil Mask was

held in February as the teacher felt time was required in advance to get to know the children. Edgar's mother Phoebe from Scoil Mask spoke positively of the termly review of IEPs. Moreover, she was also happy that planning for the transfer to post-primary school had commenced within the overall IEP process.

IEP meetings involve discussions with parents regarding the child's abilities, their academic and social needs including general health and personal hygiene. The Principal of Scoil Allen stated that therapists and psychologists can attend IEP meetings, should parents welcome their involvement. The special class teacher from Scoil Allen reported that the intended aim of the IEP process is to make them less teacher focused, with levels of responsibility and ownership shared between parents and school staff. The collaborative IEP process within Scoil Allen allow parents and teachers to identify a number of agreed targets during term one and to review them during term two. The special class teacher added that once agreement has been achieved "these are confirmed targets for the rest of the year, and that's when the parent signs off on them". One parent Keeva acknowledged becoming more confident in IEP meetings as her daughter Kerry progressed through school.

There appeared to be limited involvement of SNAs in the IEP process. Only one special class teacher from School Derg explicitly acknowledged involving the SNA in the formal write up of IEPs. Although both SNAs from Scoil Conn were involved in the discussions surrounding IEP content with the special class

teacher, neither SNA was directly involved in IEP meetings. The Principal of Scoil Conn acknowledged being involved in these meetings alongside the parents, the special class teacher, and occasionally members from the clinical team. This was the only principal directly involved at all stages of the IEP process. With this exception in mind, it was commonplace that IEPs were generally drawn up and driven by the special class teacher. In addition, there was limited evidence to suggest any collaboration took place or input was received from mainstream class teachers within the IEP process. Based on the evidence presented, practices vary in schools regarding the implementation of IEPs.

Differentiation was reportedly carried out by many teachers across all schools and was primarily achieved through individualised programmes. It was evident through my discussions with most teachers that various methods of differentiation were employed including differentiation: by content and activities; by level and pace; by interest; by grouping; by support; by dialogue; and by teaching style with some examples illustrated below.

One special class teacher from Scoil Derg differentiates the curriculum and learning activities according to each pupil's level of ability. The special class teacher from Scoil Allen commences each day with collaborative listening and learning exercises involving play. This is followed by a variety physical activities involving "heavy, hard work, which might be high knees up and down the corridor, could be riding the bicycle, it could be pushing the ball"

which prepares and settles pupils for a more relaxed reading lesson. One SNA reported that a similar early morning programme combining play and physical activities is also in operation in Scoil Conn. It was clear from both teachers that having an eclectic range of tasks and activities influenced greatly the levels of engagement experienced by pupils with autism in their respective classrooms.

Teaching from the fourth class curriculum for English and Maths, one special class teacher from Scoil Derg would "do a lot of group work, we do a lot of story time as well, every Wednesday morning we'd have circle time which would last about 20 minutes". The importance of routine was emphasised by two teachers who cover the core subjects of English and maths at the beginning of every day, followed by a range of collaborative exercises involving SESE, SPHE, arts, music and ICT. Another special class teacher from Scoil Derg stated this incentivised approach to learning is working well as pupils "know if we get a big chunk of work done in the morning that later on we will be able to do something a little bit more relaxed".

Additional activities were described that catered for pupils' wide ranging abilities and needs. One SNA from Scoil Conn described the individualised programme for "one particular child here now where you would have to bring him over for a few exercises during the day because he just needs that break from the classroom". SNAs from Scoil Derg and Scoil Mask described similar systems in operation regarding timeout breaks. In Scoil

Derg, the abilities of pupils in one class—as stated by the teacher—can range "from senior infants to some kids will be able for 1st year work. So its huge! It is like you have to differentiate". The special class teacher from Scoil Conn combines individual and group work for pupils as it can be "hard to manage that because they are at different levels".

4.4.1.3 Classroom Challenges

There was widespread consensus from most stakeholders on the difficulties to successfully include pupils with autism. It was also acknowledged that these difficulties can become greater as pupils progress through school. Time constraints were problematic for four teachers, especially working with pupils with more complex needs. The special class teacher from Scoil Conn commented on the difficulties physically getting around the classroom to assist every child and noted "there doesn't seem to be any consideration for putting mild with mild and with *[sic]* moderate with moderate". The same teachers described inter alia being overburdened with paperwork and increased workload associated with teaching pupils on the autism spectrum. Similar challenges were described by a newly appointed teacher to the special class in Scoil Mask:

Another part of the job is all this, like beyond the admin and beyond the planning and beyond the trying make tasks because it's all so new and beyond going out and buying stuff all the time because it's all so new on top of it all then you are dealing with psychologists, occupational therapists,

speech and language therapists, constantly phone calls and the parents.

The spectrum of ages and abilities in Scoil Allen were acknowledged by Keeva, as her daughter Kerry was the only pupil in junior infants, alongside three pupils in first class and two pupils in second class. Keeva stressed the importance of having pupils that are similarly matched in terms of age and ability. One special class teacher highlighted the challenges currently faced by staff in Scoil Allen “because they have never experienced children with moderate autism before in this school”. Pupils should be of similar ages and abilities in the special classes for pupils with autism, as Seán’s mother Diana indicated “he shouldn’t be in a class with kids that are, you know, doing things like Seán doesn’t do”.

The Principal of Scoil Mask also acknowledged the wide ranging abilities of pupils in classes can present challenges for teachers and principals alike. He added that some pupils are capable of coping in mainstream on a full-time basis, compared to others who would only benefit from a part-time mainstream placement. It can be argued from the evidence presented above that the spectrum of ages and abilities within the special classes for pupils on the autism spectrum is too broad and is influencing pupil outcomes accordingly.

The management of challenging behaviours was raised as an issue in all schools. One special class teacher from Scoil Derg stated "I wasn't prepared for the amount of physical violence that

you are actually subjected to" describing how an isolated but serious physical assault by a pupil, resulted in the principal's nose being broken during the year. Both SNAs from the same school also reported regular incidents of spitting, kicking pinching and punching. In Scoil Mask, the special class teacher reported experiencing severe ill health and weight-loss due to stress resulting from working in the special class environment:

I had never been like that about school before but, this awful anxious and sick feeling at the thoughts of coming to school the next day because like the amount of lunchtimes I even spent crying in my room because I didn't know how to manage the behaviours.

A special class teacher from Scoil Derg agreed on the job's unpredictability which "take its toll and you know, you question your ability to actually do your job which is supposed to teach academics and social and emotional things and sometimes it just becomes overwhelming".

It is important for teachers to eliminate the possibility of underlying problems that may exist with an individual exhibiting challenging behaviours, as one such incident occurred in Scoil Allen. After implementing the antecedent-behaviour-consequence (ABC) approach to behaviour management and listening to the voice of the child, the special class teacher discovered the "student was thirsty" and as soon as a drink was given to the child, it "eliminated all scratching and biting and kicking and pinching".

4.4.1.4 Overcoming Classroom Challenges

A number of additional strategies were reportedly implemented by teachers in each school. These formed part of teachers' classroom management practices that facilitated improved classroom practices through class based rewards systems that incentivised learning and encouraged improved behaviours. Few teachers (n=3) described using a system for monitoring and tracking patterns of pupil behaviours. The antecedent-behaviour-consequence (ABC) behaviour tracker chart was referenced by two teachers that provides a record tracking the cause and effect of certain behaviours.

A token system was reported by one SNA in Scoil Conn, with pupils receiving tokens for completed assignments and exhibiting good behaviours. Pupils in receipt of these tokens "might get a couple of minutes on the iPad or a couple of minutes on the computer which they love or maybe get their favourite book". A similar rewards system was reportedly in operation in Scoil Derg. According to Jerry's mother Alison, it is "very incentive driven" as pupils accumulate points that can be awarded daily for good work and positive behaviour. Incentives for pupils included no homework vouchers for pupils. One mainstream teacher from Scoil Mask rewarded pupils for good work and encouraged positive behaviours by having an in-class raffle with prizes awarded on a weekly basis. Additional reward systems described by two special-class teachers from Scoil Derg and Scoil

Mask included pupils being awarded time to fill pasta in a jar and blowing bubbles respectively. These practices highlight the importance of having reward systems that are accessible and attractive to a group previously described as predominantly visual learners. A class based reward system was adopted by one special class teacher in Scoil Derg. This system was implemented in conjunction with a school based programme that promoted positive behaviours for all pupils called 'Discipline for Learning'. Each day begins positively with "just a little positive story that you'd repeat and just reinforce good behaviour for the rest of the day". Despite failing to elaborate in great detail on the specifics of these systems, the same teacher noted that rewards were awarded at three separate intervals throughout the day after pupils satisfactorily completed their assigned tasks.

Nine teachers were emphatically positive about the work and contributions being made by SNAs in each school. It should be noted that no SNAs from Scoil Allen were available to participate in the interview process. It was evident from the feedback received that positive working relationships were generally fostered through collaborative work practices, where positive management structures with clearly defined roles and responsibilities were established and understood by all staff. As one SNA from Scoil Conn suggests "you have to be able to take correction and direction that is what you are there for and that is part of the job". Some teachers suggested they would be unable to teach in a special class

without the provision of SNA supports. Every principal was supportive of the work being carried out by SNAs in their school.

Not all parents were satisfied with SNA supports. Strong reservations were made by Jerry's mother Alison from Scoil Derg regarding SNAs "that are teaching our children have zip qualification...also people feel that if they become an SNA that they're like psychologists and they start telling me all of these things which are alarming". Ciarán's mother Olive from Scoil Conn agreed that the qualifications of SNAs need to be revised.

Challenges associated with the management of SNAs in classrooms were highlighted by some teachers. These challenges can be exacerbated for newly qualified teachers commencing employment where there are established SNAs in schools, as one mainstream teacher from Scoil Mask described:

My SNA has changed but the old SNA I had, she was there in the school for, I don't know, twenty years or so, so it was kind of like 'I don't want to be questioning her on her role', type thing...you don't want to ruffle any feathers.

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) was criticised for their failure to clarify and broaden the functions of SNAs for financial reasons, as one special class teacher from Scoil Allen explains "their role here is much bigger than their job description, and it has to be. But it's the department that are lacking in their recognition of that role". Having access to SNA support is critical in the process of teaching and learning due to time constraints. According to one special class teacher from Scoil

Conn, "if I teach a child a skill I'm depending on them to reinforce it, you know, because I can't sit with a child every day for a week". When asked if SNAs perform in a teaching capacity, the Principal of Scoil Conn responded "well yes is the answer. But it is totally under the direction and guidance of the teacher". Monthly meetings take place in Scoil Conn between the principal, teachers and SNAs. Both SNAs expressed their confidence in raising any issue with management in these fora.

The Principal of Scoil Conn reported that SNAs are rotated on a termly basis. Both SNAs spoke positively of the CPD opportunities in the school. One SNA in Scoil Derg described working in a roving capacity with many pupils in the special class as "less intense" in comparison to the "intrusive" nature of sitting beside one pupil in a mainstream class. Based on these experiences, it can be inferred that the roles and responsibilities of an SNA vary considerably within mainstream and special class environments.

4.4.2 School Level

4.4.2.1 School Leadership

There was broad consensus among parents and teachers that the role of principal was central to the successful implementation of inclusive school policies. The vision and ethos for inclusion in each school was heavily guided by the principal's management style and leadership qualities. Based on the feedback received, it is argued that these qualities significantly influenced the quality of

relationships that developed among stakeholders in each community.

One special class teacher from Scoil Allen school stated the principal plays a very active role in fighting for resources on behalf of the pupils, staff and parents. The welcoming ethos of Scoil Mask was acknowledged by Sam, the mother of Dermot who transferred from Scoil Allen, as she liked the “open door policy in the school”. In contrast, Sam had encountered difficulties with a former Principal of Scoil Allen—the current principal's predecessor—who blamed the parent for her child's anxiety. Both SNAs acknowledged the efforts made by the Principal of Scoil Derg, with one stating he has "been very proactive" regarding the setting up new initiatives in the school. The same SNA added that this supportive approach benefits the whole community as it spreads a "sort of a can do attitude that's really infectious to people".

All principals acknowledged the work and commitment shown by the school staff, in particular those working in the special classes. Both principals of Scoil Allen and Scoil Mask stated the setting up of the special classes in had contributed positively to the school and wider community. The observable improvements in the children due to the valued work of the staff in the special class could be further improved, as the Principal of Scoil Mask claimed "if they had got all that extra help with the speech and language and with the occupational therapy and all that I have absolutely no doubt that they would have improved an awful lot more". There

was a sense that principals were doing their best to include all pupils on the autism spectrum with the current availability of resources at their disposal. The recurring theme of struggling to access sufficient supports for pupils with autism was common in each school setting, with the Principal of Scoil Mask reporting they "work within the parameters we have and try and meet the needs of the children as best we can".

4.4.2.2 Staffing Arrangements

The appointment and retention of teachers in special classes was an issue raised by staff in each school setting. The Principal of Scoil Allen noted the importance of appointing experienced teachers to the special classes. The unwillingness of certain staff to teach in the special class was also reported as a potential source of friction among few staff members. The appointment of staff has been difficult for the Principal of Scoil Conn as it presents "a huge ongoing challenge in terms of staffing but definitely people are far less reluctant than they used to be". In addition, the management of staff relations and expectations can also present certain challenges for principals. Some teachers in the special classes can sometimes feel excluded and isolated from their colleagues on staff. One special class teacher from Scoil Conn commented that "although inclusion here is fantastic we are slightly isolated because we have to have the corridor locked". The same teacher would like to see the staff rotated every two years as these classes form "part of the school and that's how you break down barriers is by introducing

the children into mainstream and bringing the mainstream kids here and for the teachers to have a try". Seán's father Colm suggested "if you get the right teacher in the right environment with the right services you're going to make progress one way or the other".

The Principal of Scoil Mask admittedly did not get directly involved in the daily operations of the special class but did communicate that an open door policy existed for resolving staff issues. However, the special class teacher had difficulty with this lack of involvement and guidance offered from management and colleagues throughout her tenure. For example, limited support was offered in advance of setting up the special class:

There was nothing about, you know, what it entails or what will need to be in place before the students come in. So the day before they were coming in, I literally had tables and chairs, five tables and chairs, and that was it.

It is noteworthy that having gained much of her teaching experience in the senior classes of primary school, the same teacher felt that having previous experience of teaching in junior classes would have been beneficial because—with the exception of teaching practice—she had never "taught phonics or taught reading or any of that like and I wasn't aware of the Oxford Reading Tree Programme or the Phonological Awareness Programme, none of these Dolch Lists, Sight Vocab, it was unheard of to me". The inexperience combined with the stressful nature of the job and extra responsibilities including the purchasing of the classroom furniture and resources, resulted in longer working days and weekends.

Work related stress caused her ill-health which was previously outlined. Despite the isolated nature of these experiences and the contrasting version of events from the principal, it emphasizes the importance of providing teachers with supports from the very beginning and throughout their time in the special class setting.

It was evident throughout my discussions with SNAs and teachers in particular, that SNAs perform a myriad of duties in schools which revolved mainly around: assistance with mobility and orientation; assisting with in-school supervision duties; and assisting with the withdrawal of pupils from a classroom setting when required. One SNA from Scoil Derg describes the volatility and uncertainty surrounding his daily practice as "it's just go with the flow to be honest because the day is so unpredictable".

Additional duties were reported that extended beyond their contractual obligations to attend to the care needs of children (DES, 2014). One SNA from Scoil Mask developed a rewards system in class to incentivise more positive pupil behaviours. Both SNAs in Scoil Conn provided assistance in the social programmes which included cooking and shopping activities. One SNA described the educational value of having dividers in the classroom for designated work spaces, the benefits of using PECS, and the use of reinforcers to assist with challenging behaviours.

The importance of having trained staff was exemplified further when a pupil with autism left a classroom without permission in Scoil Conn. One SNA intervened, brought him to a

therapy room where "I just rolled him up in the mat and I done a few decompressions on him". The SNA explained this was a structured form of manual handling used to make the child feel more relaxed and comfortable. Having the requisite skills enabled this SNA to deal with this situation effectively and prevented the situation from escalating further.

Uncertainty surrounding job security and training was an issue for three SNAs. The SNA from Scoil Mask reported the minimum qualification "should be a little bit more than Junior Cert" or the equivalent of level three under the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ, 2017). By raising the minimum qualifications, one SNA from Scoil Conn claims this "would actually give a little bit more value to the job as well".

4.4.2.3 Accessing School Supports

Many parents commented on the positive impact school staff had on inclusive practices across the four in-depth case study schools. A special mention for the classroom teacher was conveyed by Amy, as she resolved Alex's previous difficulties completing homework. Homework can be a source of anxiety at home for some parents. Jerry's mother Alison from Scoil Derg outlined "it's not the understanding, he's no issue, he just hates it and the stress it causes us every day is so ridiculous". Ciarán's current teacher in Scoil Conn created a more structured and challenging classroom environment this year, and this had his mother Olive's approval "the fact that they got homework, that kind of thing whereas before

that I think it was maybe a bit easier for them, a bit more unstructured in terms of more playtime”.

In Scoil Derg, Emmet’s mother Róisín was happy with his teacher and his SNA from last year. Róisín was unsure of the current status of Emmet’s progression, as a meeting had yet to be arranged with his current teacher by the time of our interview. Despite receiving some criticism from Jerry’s parents, the new principal of Scoil Derg was doing a good job given the difficulty of taking over from a very popular principal, as Robert’s mother Olivia outlined “I don’t think anyone would ever replace him but the new principal I do think she seems really good”.

Edgar’s mother Phoebe acknowledged the quality of teaching in Scoil Mask. Seán’s parents agreed with Phoebe who were also delighted with the staff and his current teacher. His dad reported “he’s got a teacher that genuinely has an interest in his progression and development”. This positive relationship with the teacher and attitude toward school contrasted significantly to their previous experiences that occurred prior to Seán’s transfer from Scoil Conn. Their first parent teacher meeting was stressful, as his mother Diana described “we had to sit there. I was crying, I couldn’t even talk because I was just so upset...Not one small little bit of good thing did she say about him”. Despite the passing of time, it was clearly evident that both parents were still very upset at this experience, which caused irreparable damage to their relationship with the principal in the intervening years. Mark's

mother Margaret also had negative experiences with the Principal of Scoil Conn as she described "you get the feeling that you are not wanted by the principal a little bit".

Olivia also experienced difficulties during Robert's time in Scoil Allen. She maintained that Robert missed out on one school year that was caused by his teacher who failed to implement recommendations from a medical report. It was for this reason that she described the special class teacher as "the boss and no one was going to tell her how to do her job". The lack of knowledge and understanding exhibited by some professionals regarding autism can create additional challenges in schools, as Jerry's dad Justin asserted:

None of the people looking after him in education even know what triggers are...We're being told by people in charge of our son in a specialist unit that he's having temper tantrums which fundamentally shows that they don't understand his condition.

The experiences above highlight the importance of fostering good relations between parents, teachers and school management, as they can impact on the creation of inclusive cultures in schools.

Varied Levels of Inclusion

Some parents were unsure on the proportion of time that their children were spending between special and mainstream classes on a daily basis. As a result, Kerry's mother Keeva acknowledged being "sick of feeling like I am annoying everyone but I have to ask". Olive had similar experiences as the Principal of

Scoil Conn rejected her repeated requests for more inclusion in mainstream classes for her son Ciarán. Despite feeling confident in his capacity to survive for increased periods in a mainstream setting, she admitted "it's hard because I know my child but I don't see him in school so you'd kind of have to go by the professionals and what they think".

Only two of the twelve pupils at the time of being interviewed attended mainstream on a full time basis. Both pupils were withdrawn from their respective mainstream classes to access additional support, in the form of one-one resource teaching. The recent government cutbacks in education have impacted negatively on service provision, as Sam outlined "at the moment Dermot gets four hours 15 minutes resource which was five hours—that's been cut, it's a joke".

It can be argued from the evidence presented above that inclusive practices are inconsistent across each school setting.

4.4.2.4 Training and Professional Development

According to the Principal of Scoil Derg, having special classes in mainstream schools requires advance training for teachers, and without such provision will "lead to widespread problems if teachers are being forced into autistic classes by principals, unless there is some sort of preparatory classes". Scoil Mask's commitment to the continuous professional development (CPD) of teachers was evident, as the school's Board of Management (BOM) sanctioned funding for the special class

teacher to complete a number of courses which included postgraduate training in autism. The principal added that this was open to all staff members and "if we can find the money for it we'll pay for it". All staff members are encouraged by the management in Scoil Conn to access to further training to meet the learning and social needs of pupils with autism.

The frustrations of teachers at the lack of opportunities to upskill in these areas were also apparent throughout each interview. Three teachers reported that their initial teacher training (ITT) to support pupils with ALN did not fully prepare them for the classroom. All three teachers noted there were neither teaching practice observations nor placements in any special school or classroom setting as part of their ITT. The inadequacy of training opportunities and the lack of qualified personnel presented challenges to inclusion, as Jerry's mother Alison questioned "why doesn't the principal have a special ed. [*sic*] qualification, of managing five units?"

4.4.2.5 Practices Supporting Pupils with Autism

Buddy System

Formal buddy systems were in operation in each school, with no specific references being made by staff in Scoil Conn. An innovative and non-intrusive buddy system was reportedly in operation in Scoil Derg that provides pupils on the autism spectrum opportunities to learn social skills and increase their self-confidence by interacting with all pupils during break time. A bus-

stop was secured by the principal and placed as a permanent fixture in the yard, to be used by all pupils as a mechanism to access a buddy when required. Anyone wanting to avail of a buddy, stands beside the bus stop and waits for a buddy to come along to play. Another positive aspect of this system—cited by Robert's mother Olivia—was that all pupils could be chosen to be a buddy, including pupils attending the special classes.

The Principal of Scoil Derg created a rota for the buddy system, consisting of three teams of eight pupils from sixth class. While acknowledging these pupils are giving up their lunch breaks, incentives are put in place for pupils to undertake these duties, as the principal added "they are very well rewarded let me tell you, between goodies and trips and tours and prizes".

There was general agreement across most stakeholders from each school that inclusion was positively impacting on the attitudes of pupils in the wider school community. It is also noteworthy that very few incidents of bullying were reported in this study.

Retractable Net

A noteworthy yard intervention was also in operation in Scoil Derg. A retractable net was installed dividing the yard into two zones, as most of the pupils on the autism spectrum—as suggested by the principal—would not be able to cope with the "the rough and tumble of a regular primary school yard". The principal added that during the lunch break, all pupils can decide on entering either the "Wild Zone" where you are allowed run and play

football, or the "Quiet Zone" where no running is permitted in a space where you can "take out your books, play board games, have a walk around, have a chat, play marbles, play conkers, that sort of stuff".

School Garden

The importance of the school garden was acknowledged by four teachers and four SNAs in each school, though this facility was not mentioned by any stakeholder in Scoil Conn. After numerous visits to each school and many conversations with stakeholders, it became apparent that each garden was constructively used and maintained regularly by all pupils. The positive aspects of the garden in Scoil Derg were the designated seating area and a walkway, as one SNA explains, where pupils "can walk around this nice soft surface that was put in there a few months back". The soft surface is important here especially for pupils experiencing sensory difficulties. Despite already having a well maintained garden in situ, the Principal of Scoil Allen would like to invest in "a sensory garden and we were looking into that but we couldn't come up with enough financially".

Safe Spaces

In Scoil Derg, the benefits of having a quiet area within the classroom were acknowledged by one special class teacher. One SNA from the same school agreed and reported "we have a quiet corner down the end with chairs and a beanbag so sometimes if they're tired or in bad form they can chill out here". The buddy

systems outlined previously suggest the importance of the yard or playground as a positive school resource. A soft surface yard was also viewed by the researcher during a visit to Scoil Allen. Although primarily used for junior infants, the special class teacher explained that a timetable was in operation giving access to all pupils.

Multisensory Supports

The benefits of having on-site access to therapy and quiet rooms were communicated by four parents and five teachers. The importance of having movement and sensory breaks was a recurring theme in each school. In Scoil Allen, Dermot's mother Sam was pleased with her son's access to the sensory room because of his anxiety issues as "he was allowed to pick a child" to accompany him. A similar process was reported by the SNA in Scoil Mask—with pupils that are "feeling frustrated"—can access the sensory room together with their peers as part of a rewards system for good behaviour. With the exception of Scoil Derg, there was evidence from stakeholder's in other schools to suggest this positively impacted on the attitudes of peers. In Scoil Conn, the special class teacher also spoke positively of their sensory room in terms of providing space for much needed movement breaks for pupils. It is noteworthy that the practice of reverse inclusion was reported in each school except Scoil Mask.

Few stakeholders (n=8) reported the benefits of having access to a ball pool room. Mark's mother Margaret was unsure if

such a room was accessible in Scoil Conn, which may suggest certain issues exist surrounding communication between school and home. Both teachers from Scoil Allen spoke positively of the ball pool room.

Prior to Seán's transfer to Scoil Mask, his father Colm felt the sensory room in Scoil Conn was "a get out of jail card" that had the potential to be used negatively by pupils to get out of the classroom. However, one SNA in Scoil Mask reported that the sensory and ball pool rooms have been accessed as part of a rewards system for incentivising positive behaviours and not necessarily utilised by pupils on the basis of need. One special class teacher from Scoil Allen was against the practice of using these support rooms and resources such as the trampette as part of a rewards system for good behaviour.

Certain issues were raised regarding the logistical operations of the sensory and ball pool rooms and the fear of losing access to these essential resources. Striking a balance for the movement of pupils with autism between the special class and mainstream class was challenging. Ciarán's mother Olive explained her son's frustrations at being excluded from time in the ball pool room whilst attending the mainstream class. Kerry's mother Keeva raised her confusion about choosing a suitable placement for her daughter. However, there was a sense that Keeva had no alternative because "if she was in the mainstream class you know she wouldn't

have access to this quiet room, this sensory room, this ball pool like stuff she really needs".

4.4.3 Child and Family Levels

4.4.3.1 Dilemma of School Placement

The process of finding an appropriate provision of schooling was raised as an issue for many parents. Keeva from Scoil Allen felt confused trying to decide between a mainstream or special class placement. The lack of information and certainty surrounding the future provision of schooling for Colin was an issue, as his mother Grace acknowledged "like I don't even know, like he goes to the senior school now in September but I don't even know what happens to him after sixth class". Dermot dislikes going to the special class for reading in Scoil Allen as his mother Sam reported he "doesn't actually like other kids that have problems". The mainstream and special classes were both unsuitable for Dermot, as his mother Sam added "he kind of falls between the cracks, we have always been told that about him, he kind of fits in nowhere". As a result, a bleak outlook was predicted for her son who she feels will repeatedly have to overcome difficulties by being left to "stumble through the system".

Class size was a factor that influenced the choice of school for some parents. Margaret was reluctant to transfer her son Mark to a full-time mainstream setting because she "wouldn't want him disrupting 25 other children in a class". Despite making enquiries to enrol her son Ciarán in their local school, Olive was informed by

the school that special class placements were limited each year, with 56 pupils currently waiting to enrol. Long waiting lists were also experienced by Jerry's parents at the time of his transfer to Scoil Derg, with one school principal responding in advance that their application would be unsuccessful due to the large numbers already on file. The challenges of securing a suitable placement at third class in their local school were magnified, as Ciarán's mother Olive explained "some years they don't have any places because all the children stay in the class" before transferring to secondary school. Not all parents were satisfied with the policy of having six pupils in every special class for pupils with autism. It is noteworthy that Jerry's parents felt the small numbers in each special class paradoxically restricted his opportunities to create lasting and genuine friendships.

Many parents alluded to difficulties surrounding the inequitable allocation of supports across schools. This in turn limited their options and impacted on their subsequent choice of school. Margaret recalled that no other option was made available to her at the time Mark started in Scoil Conn and added "you don't really have a choice, people say choose the school you want your child to go to, you don't, you go where you can get in". Edgar's mother Phoebe agreed that choices were limited when choosing a school for Edgar because there were "so few autism unit places back then". She was given one week's notice before his school place was approved. She was unhappy with this uncertainty,

especially when “every other parent in the country knows a year or two years in advance where their child is going to go to school”.

Margaret visited one prospective school that had access to a special class. At the time, Margaret was informed by the principal that this school did not have access to clinical supports provided by Health Service Executive (HSE) Centre X. In addition, this school was located outside of Mark’s local community which would necessitate access to transportation. However, as this school was not within the remit of HSE Centre X, Margaret was unsure of Mark’s future entitlement to services, including transportation that could not be guaranteed at the time of applying. Seán’s parents also experienced withdrawal of services during his transfer from Scoil Conn to Scoil Mask. They explained how they had to reapply to access clinical supports through the community that were accessed previously within Scoil Conn. Soon after Seán’s transfer to Scoil Mask, a bureaucratic error failed to remove his name from the list of pupils receiving clinical resources in his former school. This error resulted in the loss of speech therapy for Seán for one year.

Similar anxieties were expressed by Amy, whose anger was palpable at the decision to transfer Alex from Scoil Conn to a mainstream school with no special class. The assessment process was questioned by Amy, alongside her expressed dissatisfaction at the decisions taken by Government:

Why go through the whole bullshit of getting your child diagnosed so that you can get him the help?....And now they’re just going to say oh well, save a few pound now and

kick him into mainstream...it's all down to the government saving money, it's a cheap fucking exit, and it's our kids that are going to pay for it.

The difficulty of choosing an appropriate school before Seán started in Scoil Mask was highlighted, as his mother Diana admitted “we just didn't know what to do because we didn't know where to go or to ask”. Seán's father noted “there was no number you could ring that would give you information”. It was widely accepted that many parents received little professional guidance regarding the decision making surrounding school placement. Whilst attending his previous primary school, Edgar was educated in the special class on a full-time basis. His mother Phoebe spoke proudly of his progression to currently being taught in mainstream full-time since “Edgar only even started putting sentences together when he was seven”. However, Phoebe recalled being nervous at making this decision because a mainstream placement would result in the withdrawal of Edgar's clinical supports. Based on the evidence presented, it can be argued that the potential future loss to existing resources is a cause of concern to many parents and can influence their decisions surrounding school provision and placement.

4.4.3.2 Difficulties with Transportation

Pupils living outside their respective school community could access transportation services—if required to attend school—that would normally consist of either a mini-bus or taxi service. A

range of issues were raised by stakeholders regarding access to transportation services for pupils with autism including living outside the community, travelling long distances and the subsequent longer school days. Jerry's mother Alison acknowledged the importance of having transportation access as it "is essential for their independence". The Department of Education and Skills (DES) was criticised by the Principal of Scoil Conn for failing to provide appointment procedures for the recruitment of escorts which has over time "been fobbed out on the boards of management".

Delays in accessing transportation services were communicated by Grace, the mother of Colin from Scoil Allen, as they were left waiting six months without transportation. Similar experiences were reported in Scoil Conn by Olive—the mother of Ciarán—who was left without any form of transportation for one year. During this time, both pupils were subsequently unable to attend their respective schools. Both teachers interviewed from Scoil Conn raised their concerns regarding certain pupils' absences. The principal added that delays can regularly last three months and that last year a child with challenging behaviour "ended up missing six weeks of school because it wasn't resolved".

Travelling Long Distances

According to the special class teacher from Scoil Allen, pupils should not be required to get transportation to attend school:

They should be coming here to this school and engaged with their brothers and sisters or their peers that live next door to them and that's part of the inclusion. It's not just the school, it's the community.

Pupils accessing transportation services experienced longer school days. The Principal of Scoil Conn identified the earliest collection time of 7:20am for pre-school aged children that leaves them "exhausted by the time they come here". For this reason, both SNAs from Scoil Conn reportedly carried out routine exercises every morning to get pupils moving, especially for those who maybe stiff and tired after travelling long distances. Difficulties were also experienced in Scoil Derg, as Jerry's mother Alison witnessed young children being asleep on the bus, describing their daily routine "like a job going to school at half seven and they wouldn't be home till five".

Reduced School Connections

Transportation can paradoxically act as a barrier to inclusive practices. According to Ciarán's mother Olive, some children attending Scoil Conn are precluded access to after school clubs as collection and drop-off times dictate every child's daily schedule. The location of Scoil Conn was so difficult for Alex's mother Amy to access that she couldn't attend parent-teacher meetings and had to conduct individual education plan (IEP) meetings over the phone. These difficulties were exacerbated because she was living outside the school community and did not have access to a car. Most parents raised similar concerns

surrounding the lack of daily contact they had with their school. A recurring theme was that school inclusion was contributing to the isolation and exclusion of some parents and pupils in their own community. This is reportedly caused by pupils spending most of their days in school outside their community and having reduced opportunities for quality, social interactions with their local peer group. In order to reduce these experiences, Mark's mother Margaret believes "there should be a unit or facility in every school, in your community, in your locality". Limited parental contact can also present challenges for schools, as the Principal of Scoil Conn communicated it has become "more difficult to build relationships" with parents living outside the community.

4.4.3.3 Transition and Transfer

There were repeated expressions of concern by the majority of parents surrounding the transition within and transfer between schools. These concerns were based mainly on future uncertainties regarding access to supports and limited choices for schooling. It is noteworthy that parental fears and anxieties were identified across a range of pupils at various phases of their schooling.

Transfer from Junior to Senior Primary School

As soon as a school place becomes available, the parent must accept the offer of a pre-school and junior primary school that is generally made by the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO). Grace was unhappy with the lack of parental input and choices regarding suitable schools for her son Colin, who was

forced to transfer from playschool, to pre-school and primary school in quick succession. Grace added that "three different schools in six months would upset any four year old never mind an autistic child". Failure to accept the places offered by the SENO at these times could potentially result in the loss of access to future services for Colin and was a big cause for concern for Grace.

The lack of options regarding school choice was problematic, especially as children progressed through school, as Mark's mother Margaret described "I certainly don't want to just take whatever I'm given, this is more important now, when he was younger, when he was four I didn't know any better". As their child advanced through school, there was a recurring theme from most parents that they became more experienced and more confident in the decision-making process with regard to securing supports for their child.

All three parents interviewed in Scoil Conn expressed concerns that the transfer process to their respective senior primary schools would lead to uncertainty surrounding access to future supports and services. Regarding the future provision of supports, Ciarán's mother Olive stated succinctly "basically from third class on, there is nothing that I know of". The special class teacher acknowledged "I just think for parents it's very traumatic when your child is moving halfway through primary school". Margaret was further incensed that her son Mark will have to transfer

halfway through primary school, to another school outside of his local community where once again he will know very few people.

Transfer from Primary to Secondary School

There was reported evidence of transfer programmes being in operation in all four schools. However, the majority of parents expressed their specific concerns about their child's transfer to secondary school at the time of being interviewed. In Scoil Mask, Phoebe was already "nervous about what September is going to bring next year". However, Phoebe revealed during the focus group interviews that Edgar has been "coping really well and he seems to be really enjoying it". Phoebe was satisfied with both schools who have continuously worked closely together and with her, in advance of Edgar's transfer to secondary school. The principal of Scoil Derg identified the importance of the Home School Liaison Officer as a key link between schools and families during the transfer process.

The decision for all three parents to accept a place in Scoil Derg was largely influenced by the fact that this was the main feeder school to the nearby secondary school. It emerged during the focus groups that pupils are not guaranteed access to the special class in secondary school. Please see policy findings for further discussion on this issue. Alison spoke favourably of a "step-up class" that allowed pupils to repeat sixth class to become better prepared for secondary school. Despite the reported benefits, it must be noted that the criteria for being admitted to this class was a

little vague. Some teachers described Scoil Derg's transfer programme, with taster lessons and visits to the nearby secondary schools taking place every Wednesday in the final term of sixth class. Despite this, Robert's mother Olivia would like to see more school visits undertaken by pupils much earlier to make them better equipped for the challenges of secondary school.

The stress of finding a suitable secondary school was already evident in junior primary schools. Mark's mother Margaret had to put his name down already in two secondary schools due to "a three year waiting list". The limited supply of suitable and accessible senior primary and secondary schools was causing some distress for the majority of parents questioned. Much of this distress is reportedly caused by the discontinuity of supports at the time of transfer. Although some pupils had transferred last year to different senior primary schools within the remit of HSE Centre X, the Principal of Scoil Conn observed for the first time "the clinical support didn't follow the child". Based on this evidence, it is argued that a disjointed system of supports is in operation across various phases of schooling.

Both Seán's parents were anxious about secondary school, so much so that they were contemplating selling their home and moving to another county in Ireland approximately 20miles from where they currently reside. Colm reported that this move was being primarily considered for Seán because a secondary school had access to a special class and such provision was not available

in their current locality. Alex's mother Amy was also considering moving to a different county in southern Ireland due to limited access to services. Once again this highlights the inequity of access to appropriate provision of schooling and supports, experienced by many parents of children with autism in different communities.

Experiencing Transition

Challenges with transition, in particular, the movement from the special class to mainstream were experienced as Olive wanted to increase the amount of time her son Ciarán spent in the mainstream class. The general experience of transition was also challenging for Colin, as his mother Grace recalled how his recent move to a new class with new pupils in Scoil Allen had recently caused episodes of bed-wetting and general upset.

In Scoil Derg, Alison reported that her son Jerry was having difficulty making the transition to his new class as "everything changed" too quickly for him to cope and manage successfully. Jerry had to cope with new classmates, a new classroom, a new teacher, two new SNAs and was now travelling to and from school each day with "different people on the bus". Emmet also encountered similar difficulties on his first day in September, as he had presumed "he was going to be in the same class as last year and the same SNAs". His mother Róisín recalled "when he came home it was like 'I hate it! I hate the teacher! I hate the class!'" . Alison did acknowledge that changes were an unavoidable part of life but did stress that pupils—especially for those on the autism spectrum who

have an aversion to change—should be better prepared for certain changes that could be better planned for in advance. For example, it was customary practice that all pupils and parents in Scoil Derg were informed of their class teacher in September which caused many difficulties for families and school staff at the beginning of the school year. The heightened anxieties are avoidable, as Alison suggested "there should be communication over the summer about the changes that are coming for September". Many of the challenges raised by parents on transition and transfer were echoed by many teachers across all schools.

4.4.4 Community and National Levels

4.4.4.1 Impact of Systemic Issues

There was an overwhelming consensus from the majority of stakeholders that access to clinical support services is currently inadequate to satisfy current levels of demand. The lack of services was one of the negative aspects of the practice of inclusion, as Jerry's mother Alison indicated "you can't include children with special needs without supports". All but one of the twelve parents interviewed recalled their negative experiences of trying to access clinical support services. Regular occurrences of delays, long waiting times and intermittent access to supports were common experiences among these parents. Despite being happy with the school generally, the inconsistency of access to services was futile, as Kerry's mother Keeva from Scoil Allen outlined:

I do think the system in the school is quite good...I don't know how beneficial it would be anyway coming in for random speech sessions kind of one willy-nilly here three weeks later...Things have to be really, really frequent and really consistent, none of those things happen with HSE Centre X.

Olive was the only parent that did not report any specific negative experiences. It is noteworthy that Olive's son Ciarán from Scoil Conn did not require access to any of the clinical resources on a regular basis. Parents are permitted access to one clinical support service in the school or community that is operated through the Health Service Executive (HSE). Seán's father Colm communicated their disengagement from community services occurred "when HSE Centre X came into the school so essentially what you get is about half an hour a week through the school if you were lucky". Parental dissatisfaction accessing clinical support services was repeatedly apparent across each phase of primary school. Amy and Alison both described their respective access to clinical services as "non-existent". Parents also commented on the constant battles they have to endure to access resources, being described as inconsistent at best and at worst non-existent.

Accessing Clinical Services

Moving between health service providers where resources can be accessed either in the school or through the community, was a source of anxiety and confusion for many parents. As previously mentioned, not all schools have access to the same clinical service

provider, with some schools having no access at all. In general, parents have their child reassessed when transferring to another school. This provides their new school with an up to date clinical assessment to facilitate the school's planning to ensure that all required resources for the child can be applied for and sanctioned in good time. Many parents experienced long delays, withdrawal of supports and complained about the failure of the system to provide continuity of services when changing service provider. Having been transferred from St. Monica's Services to HSE Centre X nearly a year ago, Molly stated that her son Larry from Scoil Allen was "kind of in limbo at the moment" with no access to clinical services during this time. Colm reported over a seven year period—and excluding supports accessed privately—that “Seán has received less than eighteen hours individual speech and language therapy since the age of three”.

Three parents reported being particularly fearful of losing supports when transferring schools. Amy was very angry that Alex will transfer from Scoil Conn and from next year "they're cutting every help that he's getting" including access to transportation, SNA supports and special class provision. Similarly, Phoebe was unhappy that as soon as her son Edgar started in Scoil Mask, the supports previously received from HSE Centre X were withdrawn. Despite being already in the system, delays in accessing clinical supports at the time of transferring to mainstream were experienced, as Phoebe recalled:

It takes 18 months to two years for the whole process to start. You have to go on a waiting list to be assessed. Then you get assessed. Then you get put back on another waiting list to actually get your speech therapy appointments.

Phoebe added further that clinical access was reduced—as per government policy—to six 30 minute sessions equating to three hours speech therapy per annum. The government's budgetary constraints have contributed to delays and waiting lists that prompted many parents to access clinical services privately. One special class teacher from Scoil Allen would like to see "continuity of care and education, and that they are both linked and they are working in tandem with the needs of the child".

Funding Support Services

There was general agreement across all stakeholders that reduced funding and the moratorium on recruitment in the public service have adversely impacted on the provision of clinical support for pupils with ALN. It was reported that therapies were accessed privately by eight out of the twelve parents interviewed, mainly caused by systemic delays. Despite the excessive costs incurred for accessing these private therapies, it is interesting that all but one of these parents reported little observable benefits to their child.

An individual requires a psychological assessment to access supports provided by the state. Amy was told that she would be waiting for at least a year just to get her son Alex onto the list to access services for autism. The inference here was that Alex would

be waiting longer to actually receive any services. It was very difficult to cope during this period with limited financial resources as Amy noted “trying to get him a diagnosis was hell because you have to have money to pay for this”. Finance was also a barrier to accessing services for Grace who couldn’t afford to send her son Colin to private speech therapy, even though he was currently non-verbal and required immediate intervention. Both Kerry and Robert had initial private assessments that cost €480 and €400 respectively. Kerry’s mother Keeva reported that she had another private assessment that cost €200.

Parents were under financial pressures to fund for additional supports for their child. There were many variations in the costs associated with private therapies that mainly focused on speech and language (SLT) and occupational therapy (OT). The Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA) is a monthly social welfare payment provided for a child—aged under 16 with a severe disability—who requires ongoing care and support. Phoebe used the DCA to provide her son Edgar access to therapy that cost €80 for a 45minute session every two weeks. Seán’s parents paid €100 every week for SLT over two years. Colin’s parents could only afford OT services which cost €60 for a 45minute session. However, Grace said it would cost closer to €100, taking into account travel and food expenses for each visit. Dermot’s mother Sam reported paying €150 for both SLT and OT over a six month period. Olivia reported having numerous expenses for Robert which included a home tutor

incorporating applied behavioural analysis (ABA) that cost €40 for one hourly session each week. Apart from accessing therapies, other reported expenses included the maintenance of the assistance dog and Robert's extensive medical bills.

The sharing of information and knowledge between parents who have learned from their own experiences was once again highlighted, as Grace inadvertently found out from another parent about the 'Incapacitated Child Tax Credit', which she described as "a horrible name". As soon as they were made aware they "applied for that and it was backdated for like 4 years- we got €12,000". After spending a lot on money on resources and supports for Kerry outside of school, Keeva feels "the whole thing is a money racket". Mark's mother Margaret felt that one private company offering clinical therapeutic services at a cost of €500 for three mornings a week was inordinately expensive and excessively "commercial". The anomaly here is that you can't have an authentic inclusive system of education without the requisite financial investment. The challenge was proffered by the principal of senior Scoil Derg because the system requires "support, support, support and unfortunately support equates to money, money, money".

Financial Resourcing of Schools

All four principals interviewed commented on the difficulties associated with having limited financial resources at their disposal. The difficulties centred around the decision-making process and the associated opportunity cost of resourcing.

Moreover, principals commented on the difficult choices that must be made regarding the purchase of school resources that are sustainable within a budgetary framework where finances are consistently constrained. The Principal of Scoil Derg reported many benefits of having a special class. One benefit included the increased capitation grants that is payable to schools with special classes for pupils with autism. Based on a school's enrolment figures on 30th September 2015, the capitation grant paid for mainstream pupils in 2016 was €170, compared to €840 paid to schools for pupils attending special classes for autism (DES, 2016c). The capitation grant is payable to schools to cover costs associated with daily school operations—including the maintenance and upkeep of the school—and the provision of supports and resourcing for teaching and learning. The principal of Scoil Derg emphasised the importance of "partnership" among all pupils and teachers, that is greatly facilitated with increased financial incentives so that "the teachers want for nothing in terms of resources".

The grant received for the building of the first special class in Scoil Mask was reportedly €120,000. At the time of being interviewed, the Principal of Senior Scoil Mask had just received notification that the DES had sanctioned funding for the building of a second special class. Although the plans submitted to the DES were "an exact mirror image" of the first special class, an increased grant of €441,949 was sanctioned. The increased funds were

allocated to build a bigger class with it "taking up three times the floor space". As a result, the principal was informed by the architect that "you are after getting the unit with all the bells and whistles....this is a super unit". Although this development was broadly welcomed, challenges remained in terms of funding for classroom equipment and resources as the principal described:

Now the problem is for furniture then they give you €2,500 and they give you €5,000 for ICT. Now €2,500 wouldn't put desks and chairs into the place....So this is what I am saying it's thrown back on your own resources now to gather up the rest of it.

The principal also highlighted its disadvantaged school status and the difficulties associated with fundraising for resources at a time when "the money isn't in this parish". The principal was admittedly surprised with the "certain amount of resistance" shown by the Parents' Association (PA) on the issue of fundraising for the special class for autism. They voiced their opposition to such a fundraising event because, as the principal recalled, all of the school "children aren't benefiting from it".

Government Cutbacks

The pursuance of austerity policies following the economic downturn of 2008 by successive governments was impacting negatively on staffing, recruitment and classroom practices. According to one special class teacher from Scoil Allen, the moratorium on recruitment in the public service was "massively impacting on the functions of the school and the social

community". Jerry was sent to Scoil Derg because it was understood the resources would be readily accessible. However, the cutbacks in government funding have resulted in reduced services.

Colin's teacher from Scoil Allen and his mother both acknowledged that he is a child with significant needs, who requires one to one teaching and increased levels of support. The inadequacy of supports has adversely impacted on the progression being made by children with autism in both mainstream and special class settings. This presented a myriad of barriers to teachers and principals in their endeavours to implement inclusive policies. The Principal of Scoil Allen succinctly suggests that staff cannot "be expected to be the OTs, the psychologists, the SLTs, we just have to do our best".

Cutbacks were also impacting negatively on SNAs. Few SNAs reported having no direct contact with their Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) and fear the persistent threat of losing employment. The lack of job security was a source of frustration for one SNA in Scoil Mask, who encountered difficulties making financial commitments and securing a mortgage. The same SNA described how she lost her job in her former school as "the SENO came in and they didn't even meet with any SNA, didn't meet with any children, just came in and said "you're being cut'. Actually I found out of a website". Based on these experiences described above, it can be argued that improved

methods of communication between SENOs, parents and staff would facilitate more positive relationships in each community.

The Role of the Special Educational Needs Organiser

The responses from many stakeholders interviewed were generally negative towards the role of the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO). SENOs were primarily viewed as the person responsible for employment and retention of SNAs. It is interesting that three special class teachers from three different schools also reported having little contact from their SENO.

Most parents interviewed felt their roles and responsibilities were vague. Margaret described the service as "a whole load of crap" as no support was received from the SENO in securing a school place for her son Mark. Similar difficulties were experienced by Robert's mother Olivia as she revealed "you're just left you know, and unless you have fight and unless you are going to fight for your child, I don't know what they do". When asked about the levels of contact and communication she has had with their current SENO, Olivia quipped "see-no SENO! I have never met my SENO". Kerry's mother Keeva from Scoil Allen tried to meet with their SENO to seek advice on school placements, only to be informed that this was not within their remit.

Dermot's mother Sam from Scoil Allen was unhappy with SENO's not implementing clinical report recommendations, in particular "when you have a report saying your child needs an SNA and you have someone coming in saying no, they don't need one".

The fear of losing SNA supports was so great that some parents knowingly "filled their child full of Coke and sweets because they know the SENO is coming in". The recurring theme of fighting for resources was apparent when Phoebe was informed that Edgar's SNA in Scoil Mask was withdrawn. Despite battling to secure the reinstatement of an SNA over time, Phoebe maintained that Edgar regressed for one school term as "his handwriting suffered, his attention span suffered, everything suffered".

All principals were relatively satisfied with their respective SENO mainly because they received no cuts to their SNA allocation. All principals acknowledged the difficulties experienced by SENOs in their current role. The "slash and burn" approach to SNAs that is ongoing has made the position of SENO a very difficult one, as the Principal of Scoil Allen acknowledged "I think it's a tough job but I think it's all about counting hours and it isn't really about the children there...so her role is a little bit muddled". The effective undermining of the SENO by decisions taken by politicians makes the job even more difficult, as the Principal of Scoil Derg concluded "what that does for relationships between SENOs and schools, it destroys it! They are perceived as the people who are handing down this decision, where in actual fact it's the Minister for Finance".

In Scoil Conn, the principal maintained that the special class was set up specifically for pupils with mild intellectual disability. According to the principal, the SENO was respectful of

this arrangement who has up to now "never foisted, children with moderate learning disabilities upon us as a school". It is noteworthy that no official record could be sourced from the DES to corroborate this arrangement. Similarly, the Principal of Scoil Derg maintained their school was set up specifically for pupils with Asperger Syndrome (AS). Once again, no official record could be sourced from the DES to corroborate this arrangement.

The Principal of Scoil Derg would like to see the SENO working in a more supportive role, having increased contact and communication with the school to ensure pupils' needs are being met. Robert's mother Olivia also wants a more accessible SENO as she noted that a good SENO is "someone who goes into the school, someone who meets with the parents, someone who knows the child they are talking about when you are on the phone to them—not File 2568!" It can be argued on the evidence presented above that SENOs are doing their best within an environment of constrained resources.

Revised Allocation Process

All principals were critical of the lack of clinical supports currently available in schools. Moreover, explicit concerns were raised by two principals and two parents respectively at the revised allocation process to support pupils with ALN in mainstream primary schools (DES, 2017a). The Principal of Scoil Conn was admittedly anxious because "HSE Centre X apparently are now only going to clinically support children with very complex

needs....and the clinical services for the rest of the children with autism in our classes is going to go back into the community". The principal questioned how the overall assessment process and "that linkage between the school, the teacher and the clinical element is going to be made...I have no idea how somebody is going to be identified as having very complex needs".

The Principal of Scoil Conn also highlighted concerns about the current and future provision of psychological services for children on the autism spectrum. The system's capacity to respond to the evolving needs of pupils was also identified as a potential area of difficulty, especially in light of reported staff shortages, limited access to support services and reduced budgets. Pupils may not presently have complex needs but as the Principal hypothesized "if they don't have clinical services for the next few years, they will have very complex needs by the time they are six or seven". There was also a sense of scepticism surrounding the government's new model for supports as the Principal of Scoil Derg conveyed "they will put them all in mainstream and we will offer them the supports they require, but bull shit, they won't but it will be a way of clearing the decks". Two parents from Scoil Derg also raised concerns with the new system that will prioritise pupils with more complex needs. On this basis, some pupils who are higher functioning may continue experiencing difficulty accessing adequate levels of support.

4.4.4.2 Accessing External Supports

The 'Early Bird' Programme is a parenting course provided by the HSE specifically for parents of children with autism. Having access to this course was important and beneficial to three parents. According to Mark's mother Margaret, "as soon as a child gets diagnosed, they should be put on a course like that". The lack of support from the outset was evident, as Amy revealed "you just get your diagnosis 'here's your child, go home' that's it!". Grace had a similar negative experience during Colin's first assessment that involved six people in which she described as "so intimidating". She recalled standing in the car park alone, not knowing what to do next after being told "your child is autistic, goodbye, that was it!"

Most parents struggled at various stages of schooling as they endeavoured to seek appropriate assistance. Generally, parents learned from experience as their child progressed through the system. It is interesting to note that four parents mentioned a referral to the same audiologist as a key development in receiving their autism diagnosis. The importance of having qualified and understanding professionals cannot be underestimated, to guide parents especially during the early stages of receiving a diagnosis for their child. Achieving this can be fraught with challenges, as Jerry's father Justin highlighted the lack of understanding "not only with people but also with professionals who are involved directly with autistic children—it's remarkable the lack of knowledge they have as well". A senior clinician dispassionately summarised

Edgar's future upon receipt of his diagnosis, as his mother Phoebe angrily recalled "your son is mentally handicapped and he will never talk and will need care for the rest of his life". Phoebe acknowledged that this attitude was the exception rather than the norm and described the services received hitherto as excellent. It is noteworthy that the clinician's comments were reportedly made in the year inclusive education was legislated for in the Republic of Ireland (Government of Ireland, 2004).

Two of the four principals interviewed cited the benefits of being part of a cluster network that provided a professional support base for fellow principals. A similar cluster group for teachers working in special classes for pupils with autism was set up by the special class teacher from Scoil Allen. Both of these groups were set up voluntarily, as teachers and principals from various schools regularly meet to provide much needed support, advice and professional guidance on issues relating to the educational provision for pupils on the autism spectrum.

Social Groups for Individuals with Autism

Two parents set up separate activity groups for young people with autism and their parents. Robert's mother Olivia admitted learning all about autism and related services through connecting with other parents. Olivia concluded that families needed a mechanism for supporting each other, as every parent navigated the system differently because "it is just a minefield". The setting up of the group was borne out of Olivia's frustration of

the lack of options for extracurricular activities in the locality and the constant focus on therapies outside school. Olivia indicated that "everything was to do with—he has to do this therapy, he has to do that therapy and I kept saying, where is his fun?" There were 40 families already signed up to the group who meet regularly, incorporating a range of social, sporting and musical activities. Olivia also reported that the group had enabled the creation of genuine friendships amongst a group of young individuals who would have had difficulty doing so previously.

Edgar's mother Phoebe set up a similar social group that currently consists of 11 boys and one girl. The group was formed in 2008 when parents came together and realised "there is nothing for our kids to do". The children participate in a range of activities all year round including swimming, cycling, camping and summer projects. Phoebe emphasised the importance of including the siblings and making them very much part of the group. This suggests that siblings play a significant role in the lives of people on the autism spectrum. As children get older, their tastes and interests also change. With this in mind, Phoebe recognised the importance of ensuring the activities were reviewed regularly "to make sure they are stimulated and they are doing stuff that's appropriate for their age".

Jerry from Scoil Derg enjoys taking part in a weekly drama group for young people with Asperger Syndrome (AS), where his parents reported that he has made great friends. It is noteworthy

that everybody within the group wanted it to be exclusively for young people with AS, as Jerry's father Justin explained why:

It was one of the few places the parents could go where they weren't being judged and it was one of the few places where the kids could go and they weren't being judged and that was the reason because a lot of the Asperger's kids like to hang out with the other Asperger's kids.

Animal Supports

Graham spoke positively of the horse-riding school that his son Colin attends every Sunday with his grandparents. The horse-riding also provided an opportunity for Colin to form a greater bond with his brother, as they both enjoy interacting with the horses and other farmyard animals on show. A noticeable improvement in Colin's behaviour was also evident, as he regularly became calm and relaxed when sitting on a horse. Graham added that having access to the school's sensory road was beneficial, as it provided stimuli for increased individual engagement with other people and various animals.

The Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind launched their assistance dog programme in 2005 for children on the autism spectrum and their families. Since then, the guide dogs have helped over 350 families, and of these the families of Colin and Robert were included. Colin's mother Grace detailed the application process that has a three year a waiting list as it is presently oversubscribed. Grace had been on a waiting list for two years and just prior to our interview the entire family had to visit the national

headquarters of the Guide Dogs in Co. Cork for a family assessment. During my subsequent meetings with Colin's parents, they did notice positive changes in his behaviour since the dog's arrival. However, both parents were unsure that the welcomed and positive changes to Colin's behaviour were attributable to having a new dog or not. Colin's mother Grace was frustrated at people's failure to respect that this dog is supporting an individual with a disability, by repeatedly petting and playing with in public. It was the parents' contention that people treated this dog differently compared to other assistance dogs, as Colin's father Graham asserted "if it was a blind dog you'd never touch it". The positive impact of having access to a dog was evident, as Olivia emphatically expressed "it has changed Robert's life".

Both parents believed that having a dog was benefitting the wider family unit by bringing them closer together. Accessing this service requires on-going fundraising by parents and volunteers, as Olivia revealed the government "don't give anything and it costs €40,000 for the dog". She confirmed these costs were not incurred by parents, with the dogs being leased to each family instead.

4.4.5 Summary of Provision Findings

Findings relating to provision were thematically presented following the analysis of collected data. A number of themes were outlined on four discrete levels, highlighting a number of issues that related to the classroom, the school, the child and family and the wider national community. It does appear that schools are

working within a system that is failing to provide adequate clinical supports to ensure that all pupils with autism are benefitting from their respective mainstream school placement. The provision findings also highlight a further disconnect between policy and practice. It was evident that teachers, principals, SNAs and parents collectively play an integral role in determining the outcomes of inclusive practices for pupils with autism in each school context. Channels of communication and the quality of relationships can also influence these outcomes as evidenced in this section. The next section will present stakeholders' perspectives of schooling and will be presented under the theme of experiences.

4.5 Experiences

This section will present findings and an overview of key themes emerging from the data under the following sub-headings:

- School Experiences
- Family Experiences
- Community Experiences

4.5.1 School Experiences

Ten parents expressed varying degrees of satisfaction regarding their experiences of inclusion in each school. Alison's experiences of Scoil Derg had changed since the retirement of their long-standing principal. There was much anxiety and concern at the appointment of a new principal regarding the future direction of the school. The early signs were not positive as Alison had recently discovered from another parent that "there was a boxing match on

and the principal brought all of the mainstream and left the five units”. She questioned why the pupils within the special classes were excluded from this event and added that this would not have happened under the previous principal.

Sam and Olivia were currently happy with Scoil Mask and Scoil Derg respectively. However, both parents were dissatisfied with some of their experiences when their child attended Scoil Allen. They both felt that the staff—and in particular the former principal and special class teacher—were not sufficiently listening to their concerns. The reported limited opportunities afforded to both parents to voice their concerns resulted in a breakdown in communication, as fractious relationships ensued during their child’s intervening years in Scoil Allen.

The attitude of Grace and Graham towards Scoil Allen changed during Colin’s preparations to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion. All pupils that are Catholic generally receive this Sacrament in second class at the age of seven or eight, as Scoil Allen operates under the patronage of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin. Both parents were upset that their request to have a separate sacramental ceremony for the pupils attending the special class was rejected with no alternative being offered. Grace was particularly concerned that Colin would be unable to cope with such large numbers attending the full Holy Communion ceremony. It transpired that Colin was excluded from making his Holy Communion in Scoil Allen. A separate request was approved by a

local priest in a nearby parish that enabled Colin to receive this sacrament in a private ceremony with his family on one evening during Christmas week. Another parent had similar experiences, with her son having to receive the sacrament in his own parish away from his peers. Grace described how “devastated” she was that Colin would not be making his communion with his friends as it reminded her “how different he is”. Colin was also excluded from the subsequent daily sacramental preparations with his peers for the remainder of the school year. These events had a negative impact on their relationships with the school.

All three parents interviewed from Scoil Conn raised concerns regarding certain ongoing practices in the school. In addition, Colm and Diana fervently expressed similar concerns about their son Seán’s experiences during his time in this school. All four parents reported examples of exclusive practices which they felt created barriers to their child’s development. For example, parents disliked the particular name used for the special class as it made their differences more noticeable. Access to the special class was also an issue for parents, as it was located in a separate part of the school and accessible only with a buzzer. Pupils in the special class also took part in separate Christmas plays, separate sports day events, had a separate yard time and had a different notice board for their class achievements in the school’s reception area. Seán’s mother Diana disliked “the way everything is separate” regarding the operation of the special class.

In contrast, both parents were satisfied with Scoil Mask, as Seán’s father Colm reported “they make no difference” with each pupil on the autism spectrum having equal access to swimming lessons, library visits and the same school yard with their peers. It is noteworthy that the Principal of Scoil Derg had visited Scoil Conn to seek advice and to observe the special classes in advance of setting up their own. During these visits, the principal was dismayed that the special class was “kept absolutely separate from the school” and compared it to a “physical lock-up”. Building on these experiences, the Principal of Scoil Derg varied the location of their special classes around the school and “separated them to avoid the unit stigma as I would call it”.

Amy and Olive communicated that their sons Alex and Ciarán had regressed since transferring from Scoil Conn to their respective senior mainstream primary schools. It should be noted that neither school had access to a special class for pupils with autism. Amy and Margaret were highly critical that no provision of special classes was available to them for the senior end of primary school. Margaret did observe that Mark had improved both academically and socially in his new school. It should be noted this school had access to a special class for pupils with autism. Although Edgar transferred to a secondary school that also had no access to a special class, his mother Phoebe was happy with his progress to date. Róisín reported that her son Emmet was excluded from two playschools for exhibiting challenging behaviours.

Defining Inclusion

There was general agreement across all stakeholders that the principles of inclusion related to: equality of access and opportunity; attitudinal acceptance of difference; and increasing rates of participation in school and wider society. Dermot's mother Sam would like to see all children treated the same and to prevent others "treating them differently because they have a disability". It is important that young people with autism are not made to feel in any way different from their peers, as Mark's mother Margaret communicated the importance "to include them as much in the mainstream school that they don't feel excluded". Larry's mother Molly agreed that pupils on the autism spectrum should not be separated from their peers and that inclusive practices brings greater acceptance of difference in schools.

According to the Principal of Scoil Conn a school can be described as inclusive when it "changes its procedures and practices to fit the child" to ensure that all children are included and that they "have a very strong sense of belonging" in the school environment. The reported evidence shows a wide-ranging understanding of inclusion and its associated practices.

4.5.2 Family Experiences

The impact of receiving a diagnosis of autism for a family member was difficult for all families to accept and subsequently made family life very challenging. Dermot's mother Sam described how she cried with all the reports and despite acknowledging their

attempts to move on with life "it was devastating to hear it". Mark's mother Margaret also "cried rivers" and cited how leaving the house with her children became a struggle for nearly six months. She recalled becoming a "nervous wreck" and that daily life was a constant challenge and sometimes dangerous too. The unpredictability of children on the autism spectrum can present a myriad of challenges for parents. Margaret described one such occasion when Mark got "himself out of the car seat when he was three and we could be on the motorway and he would get my shirt and start choking me while you are driving, you know 120km".

Social Isolation of Parents

It was evident throughout this study that social isolation and loneliness were intermittently experienced by most parents since receiving their child's diagnosis. Jerry's parents both spoke candidly about the lack of support they receive from their extended family network, which was mainly caused by a lack of understanding and awareness of autism. Parents can also experience difficulties connecting with other parents, as Ciarán's mother Olive illustrated:

There is a lot of issues as well that kids with ASD would have that you just couldn't speak to, speak about with a parent of an average child, things especially around the likes of toileting and everything. There is, you know, smearing, all this kind of thing becomes, like even to talk to other parents who have a child with ASD is very difficult.

Similar difficulties were experienced by Grace with her son Colin, as she described that "he pooped [*sic*] in his room the other

day and stood in it. He's 9!". Additional challenges are faced on a daily basis, as she admitted that "my life is hard. He is like looking after a nine year old toddler. That's what he's like to look after. My whole house is locked up". Olivia also spoke of her frustration with people in her own family network who fail to understand Robert's difficulties and "because he is very sociable, people sort of forget—they don't realise the work that we put in".

Mental Health

Some parents spoke of the benefits of medication that was used to improve their child's behaviour and sleep patterns. As soon as Dermot started taking fluoxetine—a prescribed medication indicated for depression and anxiety disorders—his mother Sam observed that "his humour is back and he's laughing" and interacting with his family more regularly. Both sets of parents stated that Mark and Jerry were benefitting from taking the prescribed medication melatonin indicated for sleep disorder. Olivia spoke positively of the observable benefits since her son Robert started taking risperidone—a prescribed anti-psychotic medicine indicated for schizophrenia, mania and aggression—and emphasised that this medication "is giving him a lifeline". Despite these benefits proffered above, there were few concerns raised by parents regarding the potential side-effects or long-term health implications of taking such prescribed medication.

Suicidal ideation was raised by three parents who had troubling experiences on this issue. Despite the reported instances

of passive suicidal ideation, all three parents were justifiably anxious and fearful that their child was having these thoughts at such a young age. Two of the four children that were on prescribed medication had also made passive expressions of suicidal ideation. It should be noted that the listed side-effects of fluoxetine—the medication currently prescribed to Dermot discussed above—include children under 18 being at an increased risk of suicide attempt, suicidal thoughts and hostility. Suicidal ideation was not just expressed by children, as Margaret described having "suicidal thoughts" as she struggled to cope in the early stages of her son's diagnosis of autism. Margaret was encouraged by her husband Bobby to seek counselling support as she desperately wanted "to learn to love my son and not hate him and hate the autism". Despite finding some acceptance at counselling over a three year period, Margaret still wished that "Mark never had autism". She was envious of "other families being able to go off for pizzas or going to the panto" on a regular basis without incident.

Sibling Relationships

It was evident from some parents that certain challenges were experienced within a family—and in particular—by the siblings of a child with autism. It was widely reported from most parents that children had very few friends and were generally socially isolated in their locality. The importance of siblings was reinforced by some parents who reported that they were the only source of friendship that their child on the autism spectrum had

access to in their locality. Both Grace and Graham openly acknowledged how difficult family life has been, and especially the impact it was having on Colin's brother Jordan. Although Jordan had regularly offered to assist his mother, Grace declared "I don't want Colin to be a burden on Jordan". Margaret highlighted the challenges of family life and acknowledged that it has been "really tough" on Mark's siblings too. Margaret described that any occasion when the siblings were left alone "and Mark is talking away to himself they'd be mortified now, they'd find that hard". Finding it difficult to cope in the early stages of Mark's diagnosis of autism, she admitted to smacking Mark in frustration, with her daughter aged between "seven or eight and her crying to me to stop shouting and putting herself between me and him".

Inequitable Access to Services

Both Grace and Phoebe communicated that there is an ad hoc provision of supports and services across different categories of disability. Grace suggested more assistance was available for individuals with down syndrome (DS). Edgar's mother Phoebe revealed knowing many people who were refused the Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA)—a social welfare payment for children aged under 16—because autism is “not a physical disability. You can't look at my child and see there is something wrong there”.

Amy and Alison had a greater understanding of disabilities as they reported having other family members with a physical disability. Both of these parents cited differences in the treatment,

attitudes and knowledge of people on the autism spectrum compared to individuals with physical disabilities. According to Amy, these differences arise “because they’re normal, they’re normal looking kids. They don’t have a physical disability”. Both parents also highlighted their frustrations having to regularly inform people that their child has a disability. Alison’s husband Justin acknowledged that people’s lack of awareness and knowledge of autism have made it more difficult to cope and because their son Jerry “doesn’t look like he has a disability”.

Challenges within Families

Many parents reported having difficulties with the limited knowledge and understanding on autism exhibited by many members of their respective family networks. Grace described how she did not speak to her sister for two years because Colin was excluded from birthday parties and was treated differently to other children at family gatherings. Keeva’s mother in-law has made regular comments wishing that Kerry would be able for mainstream classes. Róisín also reported having difficulties with her own siblings who felt Emmet was just a bold child.

It could be argued that there is an information and knowledge deficit regarding autism across all sections of society. According to one SNA from Scoil Conn, “it is social acceptance that people are looking for”. The problem relates to society’s inability to accept difference, as Justin ardently believes that “people are ignorant about disabilities anyway, people won’t talk to

someone in a wheelchair because they assume they're mentally disabled...people can't cope with anything that's different".

4.5.3 Community Experiences

There was widespread agreement among most parents that attitudes can vary significantly towards individuals on the autism spectrum. A recurring theme was the perceived attitudinal differences held by people towards autism and other disabilities. These stigmatising attitudes were reportedly based upon the perception of autism being a silent or invisible disability that contributed to a lack of awareness and understanding in the community. Most parents reported the increased challenges that they have regularly encountered with many individuals' across many sections of society caused by their failure to discern individuals on the autism spectrum. Six parents suggested that the difficulties encountered by individuals on the autism spectrum relate directly to their child's disability not being easily recognisable. The following quote from Larry's mother Molly best summarizes the feelings held among these parents:

Because he looks normal, he doesn't look as if there is anything wrong with him so I find that worse. If he was Down syndrome (DS) or as you say he was in a wheelchair I think people have more sympathy and think they wouldn't judge him as much.

Phoebe recalled how difficult it was to cope in the early stages and sometimes wished that her son "Edgar had Down

syndrome” as opposed to autism so that “people wouldn’t look at me and think ‘oh you are a terrible parent’”.

Colin’s brother Jordan and Mark’s sister Ann also wished that their respective brothers didn’t have autism. For his school homework, Colin’s mother Grace recalled how Jordan wrote “I wish my brother didn’t have autism. I wish my brother’s autism could be cured”. Margaret sadly conveyed how her daughter Ann at eight years of age “wished Mark looked different, like a Down syndrome child so people would—saying that now I’m upset—that people would treat him differently, would treat him better”.

Most parents described having negative encounters in public where they felt people were judging them as parents. Three parents agreed that autism was commonly misunderstood. There was further agreement on the wider misconception that autism was—as Jerry’s father Justin described—a “bold child syndrome”.

Participation and Relationships

Both Justin and Alison recalled how people in their locality treated them differently when Jerry moved from their local mainstream primary school to Scoil Derg. Despite being well known and hitherto very involved in the community, Alison felt there were negative responses among some people as it was perceived that Jerry had moved to “the special school or the special unit”. Based on the evidence presented, it can be inferred that the experiences of inclusion vary across different communities.

4.5.4 Summary of Experiences Findings

It can be argued that based on the experiences outlined above, young people on the autism spectrum and their families have had mixed experiences in their respective school, home and community environments. Parents reported the existence of disability dependent attitudes, with the prevailing perception that autism is an invisible disability. This impacted greatly on the levels of awareness, understanding and knowledge of autism across all sections of society. The next section will analyse the progress of pupils on the autism spectrum under the theme of outcomes.

4.6 Outcomes

This section presents findings based on the outcomes for pupils with autism and will be presented under the following sub-headings:

- Academic Outcomes.
- Social Outcomes.
- Future Horizons.

4.6.1 Academic Outcomes

The evidence presented here suggests there was a firm commitment exhibited by staff members in each school to successfully include pupils on the autism spectrum. As previously discussed, there were many challenges regarding the academic inclusion of pupils with autism including curriculum access, the delivery of content and assessment. There was broad agreement among adult stakeholders that poor access to clinical support

services presented a significant barrier to the academic experiences and resultant outcomes for pupils with autism. Evidence regarding specific academic and learning outcomes for pupils on the autism spectrum was generally vague and ill-defined.

Each of the four principals interviewed were satisfied with their in-school provision of supports. In Scoil Derg and Scoil Mask, both principals reported delegating the responsibility of maintaining pupils' records of assessment, achievement and progress to their respective learning support team. The Principal of Scoil Conn defines academic outcomes "in the exact same way as I would for a child without autism, which is that they would meet their full potential". While the Principal of Scoil Allen spoke positively of the work carried out in every classroom, she also acknowledged "there is a huge amount put into the academic progress of those children" attending the special classes. The same principal monitors the academic progression of pupils by reviewing the pupils' individual education plans (IEPs) and the teachers' monthly reports.

Based on many discussions with stakeholders, there was little evidence to suggest that pupils on the autism spectrum in special classes participated in any standardised testing. Despite this, the majority of parents were satisfied with the academic progress of their child, with only two parents—both from Scoil Allen—expressing some concerns academically at this time. Difficulties with absenteeism of pupils on the autism spectrum were raised by

both the special class teacher and Principal of Scoil Conn respectively. It can be argued that poor school attendance could adversely impact on the progress of pupils over time.

The attitudes and expectations of parents and teachers regarding individual capacity can vary considerably. Both Keeva and Olive expressed their dissatisfaction with their respective school, as they felt the work in the special class was not challenging enough. They also wanted increased access to mainstream classes for their children. The following quote highlights the variance that can occur between parental expectation and professional opinion, as the Principal of Scoil Mask described how Colm's son Seán has progressed to date:

He has achieved to a certain level academically but he'll never be up to the level that his father thought he would, do you know what I mean?

According to the Principal of Scoil Allen, the classroom observations of teachers are critical "because you're not going to be able to assess these children in the way you'd assess children in the mainstream". The Principal of Scoil Mask believes "you have to be realistic" regarding pupils' ability levels. Despite this, Seán's father Colm emphasised:

If we get the correct resources and help as he goes through, why not, why should we limit it? The goal is that Seán can have a fulfilled life when we're gone, that he can be independent and live as normal a life as he possibly can.

Based on the evidence presented, it is argued that the academic attainment, curricular engagement, and subsequent outcomes for pupils with autism vary considerably across each school environment. Divergent attitudes and expectations among parents and professionals can also influence the academic experiences and resultant outcomes for pupils with autism.

4.6.2 Social Outcomes

There was widespread agreement among stakeholders that the special class has improved attitudes towards disability and difference in the school and wider community. The Principal of Scoil Derg also noted the improvement in the attitudes of pupils and a subsequent decline in the instances of bullying. Although the Principal of Scoil Mask expressed the view that inclusion is more about social rather than academic outcomes, he noted “a huge improvement in the children in our special unit now since they started. It’s absolutely amazing the transformation”.

Happiness and Independence

It was evident throughout my communications with parents that they loved and deeply cared for their child. There was general agreement among parents who wanted their child to be happy in life and to enjoy some form of independent living in the future. Through her own observations, Seán’s mother Diana believes the pupils are benefitting from being included in Scoil Mask because “all the kids in Seán's classroom look as happy as anything coming out of the school”. The importance of observations as an

assessment tool was further highlighted, as a special class teacher from Scoil Derg was satisfied with pupil outcomes in her class because “you can see that the kids are happy”. The Principal of Scoil Conn stressed that the social outcomes were dependent on the varied needs of each pupil on the autism spectrum.

School Inclusion and Community Exclusion

While pupils are being included on many levels in schools, there was a recurring theme from parents that school inclusion was resulting in various forms of social exclusion and isolation in their own community. The majority of parents reported that their children had difficulty forging meaningful friendships in their school and local community. As previously discussed, long distances travelled to and from school have further isolated families in their locality. It is important to recognise that some individuals on the autism spectrum are intermittently content in their own company, as one special class teacher from Scoil Derg outlined “sometimes even some of them don’t particularly want friends”.

Many parents were in agreement that their children were generally happy and were not concerned with having a limited social network. Experiencing minimal friendships could explain why most children participating in this study appeared to spend a significant proportion at home with their family, and at times alone in their bedrooms. Difficulties connecting with peers could become more problematic as children become older. Sam describes how the quality of peer interactions can change over time:

The groups have formed, you know, they're all 10-11 whatever and like I am standing, and there's very few parents in Scoil Mask's yard and I wouldn't walk away and leave him on his own in the yard. But the other kids don't bother with him anymore..

The gradual disconnection of individual's with autism from their peer group over time, as Edgar's mother Phoebe outlined "as they're getting older, you know, they are moving away. He gets off the school bus on his own and he walks around on his own every day".

Based on the evidence presented, the social outcomes for children with autism vary and are dictated by their respective levels of ability and need. The introduction of special classes appeared to have an overwhelmingly positive impact, particularly on the attitudes of pupils in each school community. Although some children with autism are being included in mainstream schools, they are also being excluded locally by attending schools outside their community.

4.6.3 Future Horizons

There was widespread agreement among most parents who expressed their concerns and fears about future uncertainties regarding their children. These expressions of fear were from parents of children of all ages. There were particular anxieties surrounding what would happen to their child should a parent decease or become physically incapable of caring for their child. According to Ciarán's mother Olive "I would have like these

nightmares of if I die or something and he is left in some grotty bedsit on his own with no friends....if he can support himself and have friends that would be, I'd be blessed". Colm would not like his son Seán to be "a burden on anybody" in particular his immediate and extended family. Challenges reportedly emerge as children progress through school. Keeva acknowledged that the overall schooling experiences of pupils with autism largely "depends where they are on the spectrum". She despairingly added that "we don't know what the future really holds". Life after school and poor employment prospects were already concerning Jerry's father Justin, especially "if you look at a statistic as alarming as 90% of Asperger's children don't get jobs".

Future Recommendations

Both Principals of Scoil Conn and Scoil Derg would like to see a system that is responsive to the changing needs of pupils as they get older. One special class teacher from Scoil Mask would like to see the introduction of a specific curriculum for children on the autism spectrum that would focus more on pictures and reduce the excessive use of language in textbooks. Computer software could be introduced to accommodate all abilities by introducing "basic PowerPoints [*sic*] to accompany some of the textbooks".

Many parents would like to see their children having more regular opportunities to access mainstream classes. Ciarán's mother Olive would like to see more communication from the school as she feels there is "too much emphasis on what happens when they

are in the ASD unit and they don't necessarily look at what happens when they are mainstreamed". The special class teacher from Scoil Allen would like to see "continuity of care and education, and that they are both linked and they are working in tandem with the needs of the child". Dermot's mother Sam from the same school agreed as she would also like to have more consistent and "continuous access" to educational supports and clinical services.

Many parents wanted more information and increased awareness of autism in society. Colin's mother Grace believed an information leaflet on autism would assist parents at the time of receiving a diagnosis for their child. The introduction of an informal, monthly coffee morning in Scoil Conn was proposed by Olive as a mechanism to meet other parents, the teachers and raise the awareness of autism in the school.

Seán's father Colm stated a more coordinated provision of supports is required at government level to provide parents with independent information on autism and related services, especially as children's presentation of needs can invariably change as they become older. According to Robert's mother Olivia the government is "forgetting that these are the men of the future". It was reported that much time is lost with parents becoming overwhelmed with many issues inter alia the provision of supports, school placements and disability entitlements. The decision-making process experienced by parents can be very stressful, as Colm

elaborated that “parents stumble upon the solution somewhere down the road. If we could cut out that we’d probably save ourselves three, four years searching in the wilderness and time is everything”.

Every member of society has a responsibility to ensure the future independence of these children, as Kerry’s mother Keeva proffered “if we’re going to be a society that cares about these children and wants them to be independent in any way like, we have to make more effort”. According to Jerry's mother Alison "you see it’s that balance you have all the time of pushing them to live in the world and then allowing them their autism space. That’s always the battle!" The importance of responding to the individual needs of each child will ultimately determine their experiences and outcomes of inclusion, as Edgar’s mother Phoebe explained:

Every child with autism is different. They all have different needs and requirements. In an ideal world every child with autism is going to be accepted and be included but not all of them can be.

4.6.4 Summary of Outcomes Findings

This section highlighted many concerns and future aspirations that parents currently have regarding their child with autism. Uncertainty surrounding their child's future was a commonly held fear for parents. An brief overview of stakeholders' recommendations to improve the educational provision for children with autism was also discussed. There was widespread agreement among all stakeholders on the need for immediate investment by

government to improve the currently inadequate system of educational and clinical supports. Continuity and consistency of these supports are required to give schools the best opportunity to meet the needs of every individual on the autism spectrum. The next section will present findings from participating pupils on the autism spectrum in this research.

4.7 Pupil Voice

This section will present findings and an overview of key themes emerging from the data under the following sub-headings:

- Responses to Questionnaires.
- Interview and Visual Data.

4.7.1 Responses to Questionnaires

During phase three, questionnaires were circulated to 27 pupils on the autism spectrum across six mainstream primary schools that had access to a special class for pupils with autism. Pupil questionnaires (n=13) were analysed and formed part of the overall baseline data for this study. The decision was taken not to send questionnaires to pupils who were attending the two junior primary schools participating in this study, as the questionnaire activities may have been too difficult and potentially stressful for younger pupils to complete independently. A breakdown of response rates from pupils to the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) is presented in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7. Questionnaire Responses from Pupils (n=13)

27 Questions	Positive	Unsure	Negative	Unanswered
Pupils' Responses	277	45	23	6
% Total Responses	78.9%	12.8%	6.6%	1.7%

Note. Overall breakdown of responses of pupils using the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

The composite score for inclusion for the 13 pupils surveyed was 72% positive and out of these pupils only two were female. An overview of stakeholders' responses to the Index for Inclusion was presented previously in Figure 4.5.

The high percentage of positive responses here suggests that pupils had many positive experiences of inclusion across six schools. Many positive insights were identified, with agreement shared among pupils on a number of issues. All pupils (n=13) indicated that they learn interesting things in their school, where they feel they are a respected member. All but one pupil believe they are accepted for who they are in school. The same number of pupils (n=12) revealed they had good friends in school and feel safe in the yard during break times. In contrast, two pupils stated they were unhappy at school, whilst making friends for another pupil in an all boys senior primary school was difficult. According to some pupils (n=5), children get called hurtful names at school. A similar number (n=3) stated that some children get physically attacked at school. Despite these varied social experiences in schools, many pupils (n=10) still believe they belong in their school, and have many opportunities to achieve.

Most pupils (n=12) stated that adults are kind to the children in school and feel they can approach an adult for

assistance if required. Many pupils (n=10) believe they are always aware of what to do during lessons and feel they can participate in school activities like all other pupils. However, only seven pupils indicated they had no difficulty completing specific exercises set by their teacher in class. Many pupils (n=10) reported that children help each other during lessons. The positive role played by adults in schools is further supported, as the same number of pupils (n=12) stated they liked their teachers and SNAs respectively. Most pupils (n=12) believe it is acceptable to make a mistake and that teachers encourage pupils to do their best in school. Based on the evidence presented, it is argued that communication, attitudes and relationships are important to pupils on the autism spectrum.

Ideal School

The next section was also adapted from the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Examples of pictorial responses are presented in Figures 4.6 and 4.7 respectively.

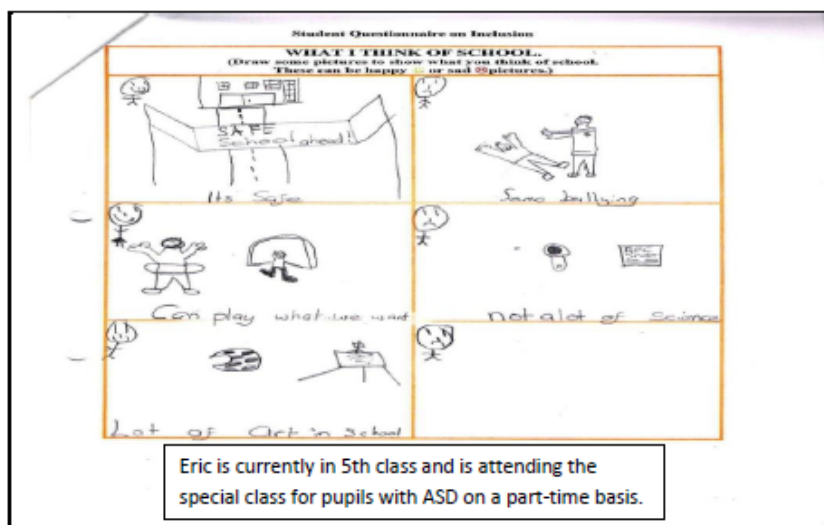


Figure 4.6. Eric's drawings (at age 11) providing a visual representation of his experiences in Scoil Gowna. Adapted from MacBeath et al. (2003).

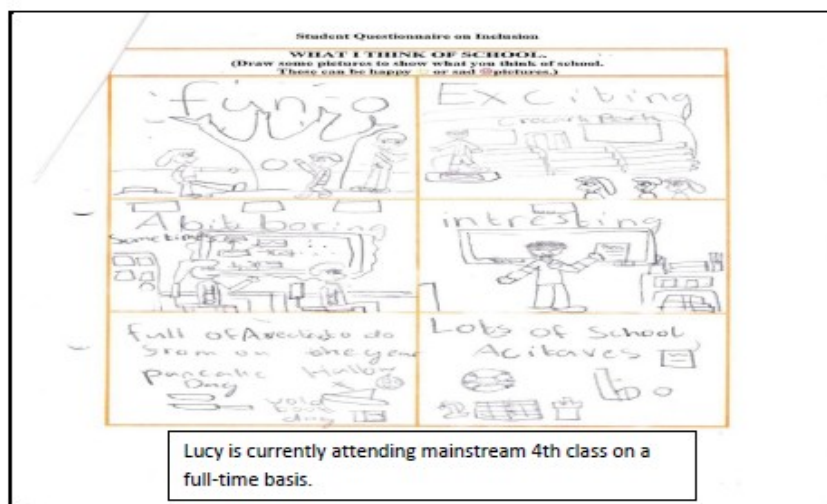


Figure 4.7. Lucy's drawings (at age 11) providing a visual representation of her experiences in Scoil Leana. Adapted from MacBeath et al. (2003).

Each example presented here suggest that friendship, play and having fun are important to these pupils. It could be inferred from the responses that certain challenges exist academically for pupils. Every response from pupils was coded using this study's coding framework. An overview of these responses is presented in Figure 4.8.

What pupils like at school (Pupils' written comments recorded here)			
Cooking	Nice Teachers	People	My Classroom
I love [sic] go to school	Students seem to get on well with the teachers	It is fun.	Ball room
School tours	Computers	Principal	Going out to yard
What pupils dislike at school (Pupils' written comments recorded here)			
Bullies	Not wearing normal clothes	Bit old	Singing Molly Malone
The bullying that goes on	Not enough science	Mean people	Homework
Hard work	Irish	People calling me names	Irish
What pupils would change at school (Pupils' written comments recorded here)			
The noise in my class	School lunches	Put on a student council	More longer little breaks
Better school tours	Bathroom	Start a book club	Have more time in the internet
Learning more	Closer to your house	Paint & brighten up school to look better	More books, games & toys

Figure 4.8. Explanatory model to illustrate what pupils like, dislike and would change at school. Adapted from Williams, J. & Hanke, D. (2007).

The strongest responses from pupils related to their network of supports in school and how learning can be made more

accessible. Twelve pupils positively viewed their supports in school which included their teachers, friends and principal. Nine pupils liked certain interventions adopted in school ranging from cookery classes, physical education, art activities and school excursions. The positive attitude held by some pupils towards their school was illustrated by John aged 10, who referred to Scoil Derg as “a world class school”. Having access to resources including a ballpool room, their own classroom with a desk, and the school yard were also viewed favourably by pupils.

Pupils identified difficulties surrounding their academic and social experiences in school. Pupils dislike homework and some subject content including maths and Irish. For example, Eric aged 11 dislikes that “not enough science” is provided for in Scoil Gowna. Two pupils had experienced challenges with homework while another pupil had difficulty with the disruptive behaviours exhibited by certain pupils in class. Four responses across four schools suggest that some pupils have experienced negative interactions socially with other pupils, with reported instances of bullying and general name-calling. The responses received here suggest that the social and academic experiences of pupils can vary in each school.

The majority of pupils would like to change how learning can be made more accessible to them in school. Pupils would like to have more access to certain resources including books, computers and toys. Noel aged 11 from Scoil Mask would like to

change its location by having it “closer to your house”. Pupils would also like to change certain aspects of their school’s operations. John aged 10 from Scoil Derg would like to see the introduction of school “assemblys [*sic*]” while Donald aged 13 from the same school would like to “make the school cleaner”. It can be interpreted from these responses that the physical environment of the school is an important issue for some pupils on the autism spectrum.

According to the examples, schools can be improved when teachers make learning more interesting and fun and by becoming more aware of pupils who maybe experiencing difficulties. Ultimately, pupils want their voices being heard and Eric believes that adults in the school community can facilitate this by “listening to the students”. Eric suggested that principals can improve schools by ensuring pupils are provided access to a fun, secure and safe learning environment. According to Noel from Scoil Mask, the principal should provide pupils with access to more up-to-date technology and would like to see the duration of the school day reduced. The difficulty associated with the length of the school day maybe related to the school not being in Noel's locality.

An analysis of pupils' viewpoints based on questionnaires collected during phase three was discussed. The next section will present findings from phases five and six, as the researcher wanted to gain a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of pupils with autism through visual and interview data.

4.7.2 Interview and Visual Data

The experiences of 12 pupils across four in-depth case study schools were analysed and findings are presented here. It must be noted that three pupils—who filled out questionnaires during phase three—participated in the in-depth phases of this research. The researcher subsequently decided to present these findings separately from the questionnaire data, to ensure the voices of all pupils—with varied levels of participation in this study—were heard. The following section provides an overview of pupils' experiences of inclusion consisting of 81 photographs, nine drawings, and 12 interviews with 12 pupils across four mainstream primary schools. An overview of the relationships of participating pupils and parents was previously provided in Table 3.5. Emmet, Seán and Noel were the only pupils to complete questionnaires during phase three. Two pupils within this group—Emmet and Seán—participated in phases five and six, as Noel's mother Aileen withdrew from the study during phase five due to personal circumstances.

Experiences of Inclusion

Prior to each interview, a social story regarding the interviews was circulated to each pupil and their parent, to prepare each child for this process. This social story was used as part of the ongoing consent procedures adopted for this study, that allowed all participants to withdraw at any stage. An example of a social story used is presented in Figure 4.9.

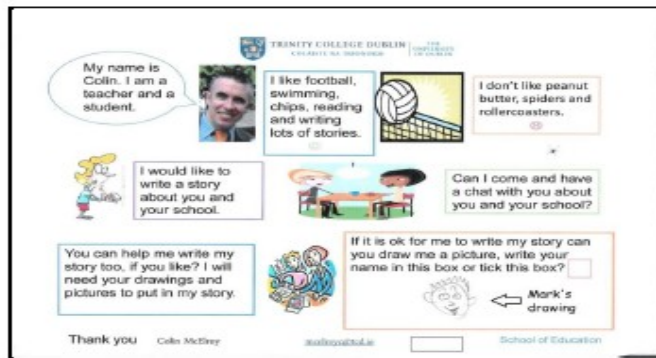


Figure 4.9. A drawing by Mark (at age 8) in the consent box acknowledges his willingness to participate in our discussions during phase 6. Social Story™ Adapted from Beresford et al. (2004)

Pupils were asked through informal discussions about their general experiences and specifically what they like, dislike, and what they would change about their school. An overview of pupils' responses is provided in Figure 4.10.

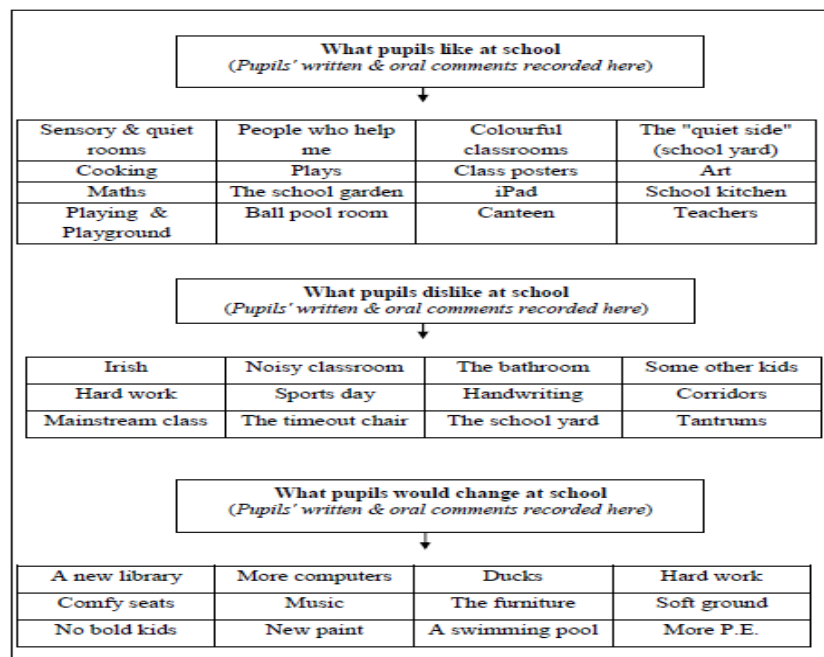


Figure 4.10. Explanatory model to illustrate what pupils like, dislike & would change at school. Adapted from Williams, J. & Hanke, D. (2007).

The schooling experiences communicated by pupils (n=12) during phase five and six were broadly similar to those discussed in phase three. Every pupil communicated that that they enjoyed school. The positive aspects of school broadly related to: the school yard; certain subjects including art and maths; the staff in schools

including their teachers; the school environment; and support rooms including sensory and quiet rooms. Alex likes his teachers and suggested that a good teacher "helps you and at break you can ask him lots of questions". Baking and cooking were reportedly ongoing in each school and were viewed positively by many pupils. The ball pool room was positively viewed by four pupils. Pupil interviews highlighted the importance of having access to a school garden for all three pupils attending Scoil Derg. The same pupils also acknowledged the importance of having access to a quiet space on yard. The bus-stop that was located in the school yard in Scoil Derg and used as part of the buddy system during break times was impacting positively on peer relations, as Emmet reported "nobody ever uses it anymore". The implied meaning here is that pupils are getting on well together and there is no further requirement for pupils to use for this resource. Pupils were presented with a range of interactive and engaging activities to identify positive and negative aspects of their school and examples of these are presented in Figures 4.11 and 4.12 respectively.

The image shows three separate pieces of paper with handwritten feedback. Each piece has a title and a list of three items.

- Card 1 (Green border):** "What are the three things you like most about your school?"
 - 1. The canteen
 - 2. After school work
 - 3. Half-day
- Card 2 (Red border):** "What are the three things you don't like about your school?"
 - 1. Less time in little break
 - 2. Assembly
 - 3. The line to canteen
- Card 3 (Purple border):** "What are the three things you would most like to change at your school?"
 - 1. Jean's court
 - 2. Some more trips
 - 3.

Figure 4.11. Edgar (at age 14) providing positive and negative feedback about his first year experiences in post-primary school during our discussions in phase 6. Adapted from MacBeath et al. (2003).

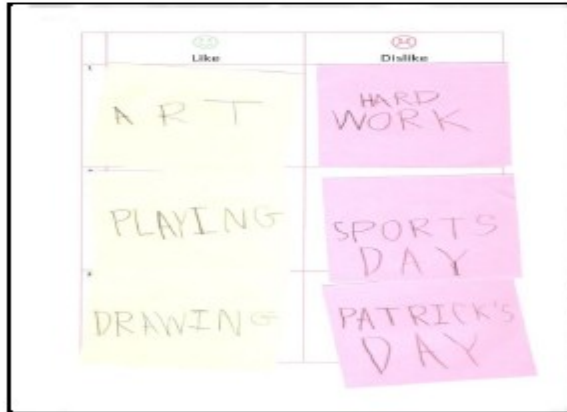


Figure 4.12. Mark (at age 8) providing positive and negative feedback using sticky notes about Scoil Conn.
Adapted from MacBeath et al. (2003).

The information elicited from Edgar and Mark presents clear information about the areas of school that they view positively and negatively. Although Mark had difficulty engaging in any extended conversation with the researcher—and his mother Margaret who was also present—the use of sticky notes proved to be effective, as it still provided an opportunity for Mark to communicate his viewpoints about school.

During our interview, Edgar was in his first term after transferring from Scoil Mask to his new post-primary school. The quiet space called the oratory was viewed favourably by Edgar because "you can also meditate". He mentioned that the colour coded timetables were working well but the heavier schoolbags were difficult to manage. Difficulties with understanding the intentions of his new peer group were alluded to, as Edgar revealed "well it's not just saying mean things, they could just mess around". He also missed being involved in certain activities from Scoil Mask including gaming, baking and cooking.

Although every pupil conveyed their satisfaction and enjoyment from being in school, each pupil identified some aspects where they experienced some level of difficulty in school. The negative aspects of school identified by pupils broadly related to: schoolwork and certain subjects; their peers; the noisy classroom; and the school yard. The range of behaviours exhibited by some pupils in the yard of Scoil Conn was difficult to cope with at times, as Ciarán explained that "some of them don't know how to speak...and some of them kinda like just scream and like go to everyone like doing crazy stuff". A similar issue regarding the challenging behaviours of some pupils was raised by all three pupils from Scoil Derg. Emmet had reportedly seen a pupil regularly "throwing chairs" and another occasion when "this fellow got sir's computer and smashed it off the wall". Robert dislikes the "tantrums" of certain pupils in school and recalled:

I was in third class and he was in fourth class and well he just had tantrums again and again, now...this is one of the shocking moments, he cursed. He cursed at a teacher.

The difficulty of making new friends was highlighted by Ciarán as he revealed "well I amn't [*sic*] able to make friends with them but it was kinda like a little hard". Difficulties were also experienced at times with some SNAs. For example, Jerry explained that "sometimes when there is just a small mistake she is like [*gasps*] and she is like so overreacting". Edgar commented that at times his SNA is "moody".

The aspects of school identified by pupils that they would like to change broadly related to: accessing more resources in school; making the learning content more manageable; improving classroom furniture; and the aesthetics of the school environment. Edgar, Ciarán and Emmet all would like to see an improvement in the classroom furniture currently used in their respective schools. Both Edgar and Emmet would like to see brighter and more colourful classrooms in their respective schools. Transferring between schools can result in changes to the accessibility of certain resources. Since Ciarán's transfer to senior primary school and Edgar's transfer to post-primary school, they both stated they missed having access to the ball pool room.

During phase five, every pupil was given a disposable camera and was asked to take photographs around their school of various locations that resonated positive or negative feelings. Under the guidance and assistance of their teacher, each pupil had to describe their feelings that corresponded to each location that was photographed. The descriptions and corresponding locations of each photograph taken were listed on an explanatory sheet provided to each pupil. The information gathered here was used to guide interviews with pupils conducted in phase six.

During the interview process, each pupil had to place their photographs on an enlarged wall chart. Each pupil was prompted to place these in hierarchical format on the sheet, with the most important picture being placed at the top, to the least important at

the bottom (Lewis, Robertson & Parsons, 2005). Once these photographs were placed in position, each pupil was then prompted to write a word beside each picture using a marker to capture their current feelings about each area discussed. Informal discussions about the photographs and their relative significance were ongoing throughout each interview. The majority of pupils really enjoyed this process, in particularly the activity involving the use of blu tac to stick the photographs on the wall chart provided. Examples of these wall charts are provided in Figure 4.13 and Figure 4.14.

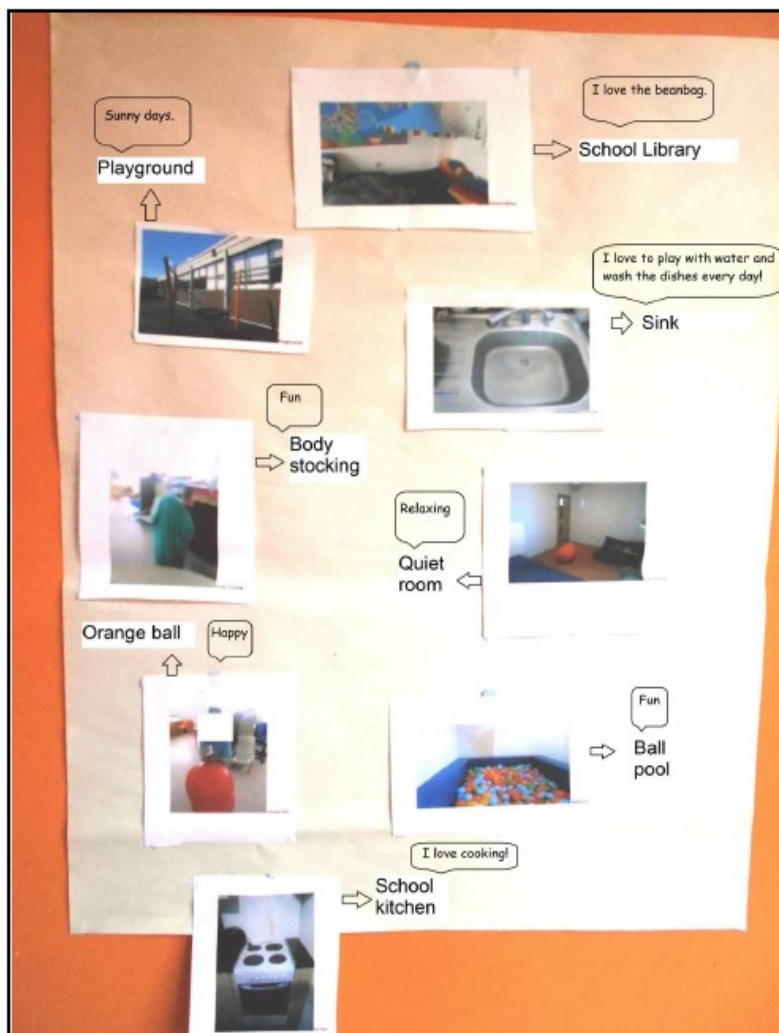


Figure 4.13. Photographs taken by Colin (at age 8) identifying positive areas within Scoil Allen. The speech bubbles provide a description of Colin's feeling in each area communicated to his class teacher during phase 5.

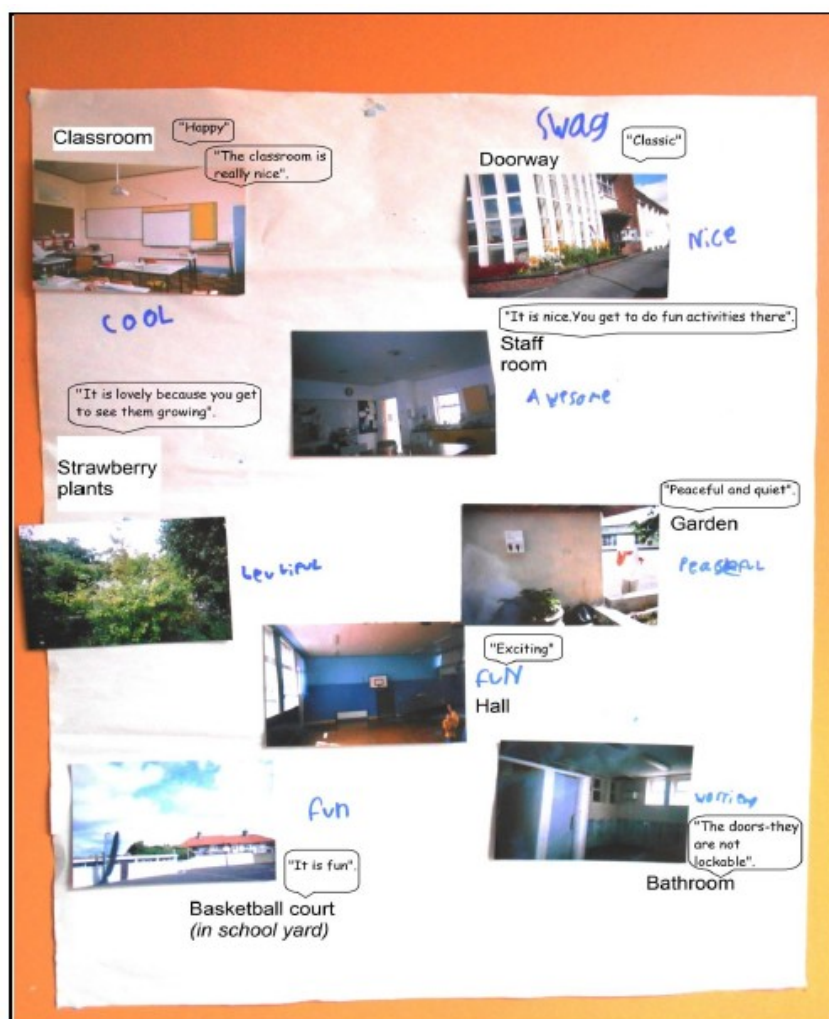


Figure 4.14. Photographs taken by Jerry (at age 10) identifying positive & negative areas within Scoil Derg. The speech bubbles provide direct quotations by Jerry about each area discussed. The blue words were written by Jerry himself to capture additional thoughts about each area during our discussions in phase 6.

Colin received assistance from his class teacher during this task as he has complex needs and is non-verbal. These photographs were used as stimuli for communicating with Colin—and every other pupil—and his parents in phase six. Colin communicated with the assistance of his teacher that he likes many aspects of school including the yard, the kitchen and the school library. Sensory activities were viewed favourably by Colin also through the use of the sink, the sensory stocking and the ball pool room. Jerry also liked various places around the school including the yard, his classroom and the school staffroom because they get to do

baking and cooking in there. He also added that the staff room was important so that "teachers can have a break as well". Jerry's mother Alison was surprised to hear that he had a fear of the school toilets. She was also surprised at the information conveyed by Jerry and commented positively on the methodologies used to capture his thoughts.

Ideal School

Oral, written or visual responses could be chosen by pupils for this task. The visual responses comprising of drawings was more suited to older pupils. It must be noted that the quality of each picture—as you would expect with any other activity given to pupils in any classroom—ranged between pupils. However, this process enabled the researcher to keep the conversation going and to gain further insights into pupils' experiences. The following drawings illustrate the ideal school for certain pupils with autism.

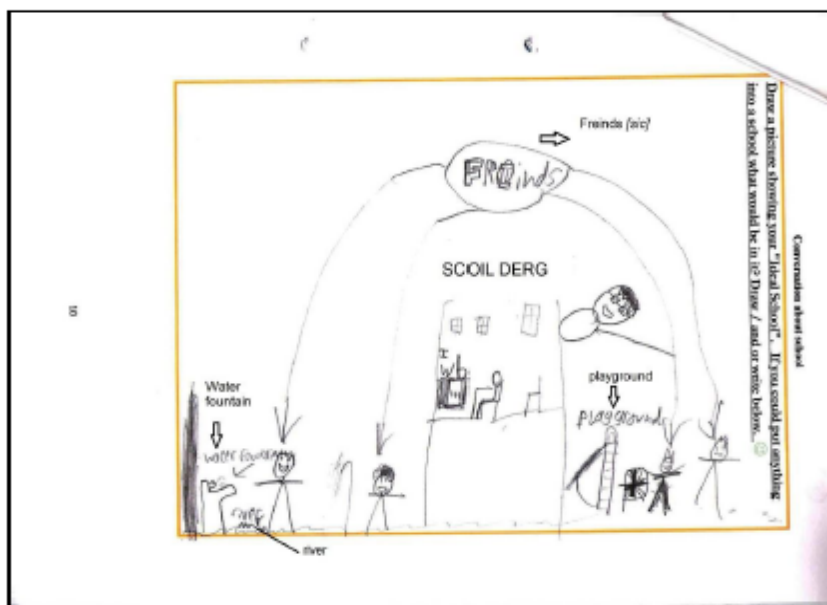


Figure 4.15. A drawing from Jerry (at age 11) depicting his ideal school. Adapted from MacBeath et al. (2003).

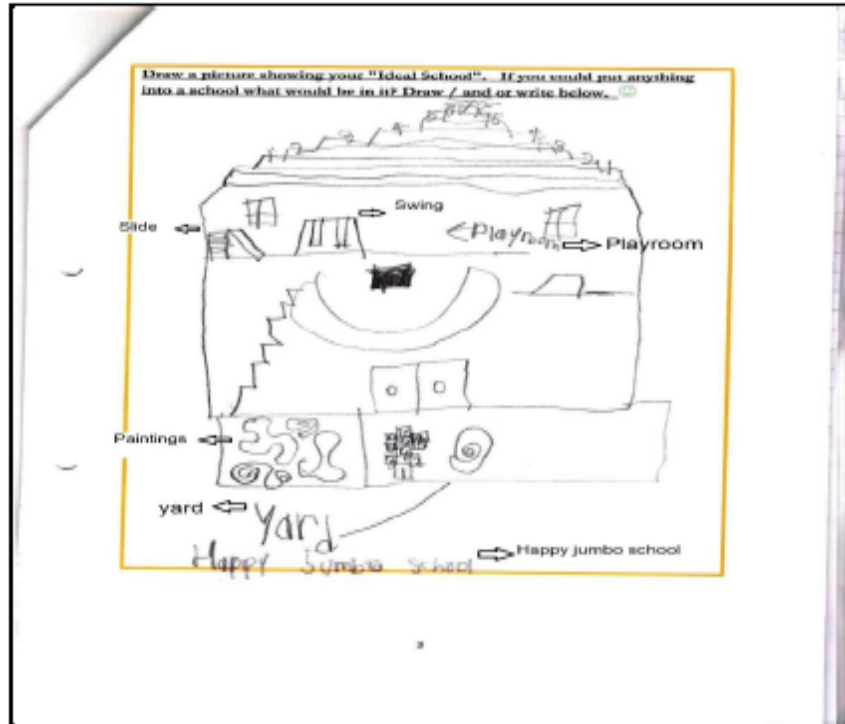


Figure 4.16. A drawing from Ciarán (at age 9) depicting his ideal school. Adapted from MacBeath et al. (2003).

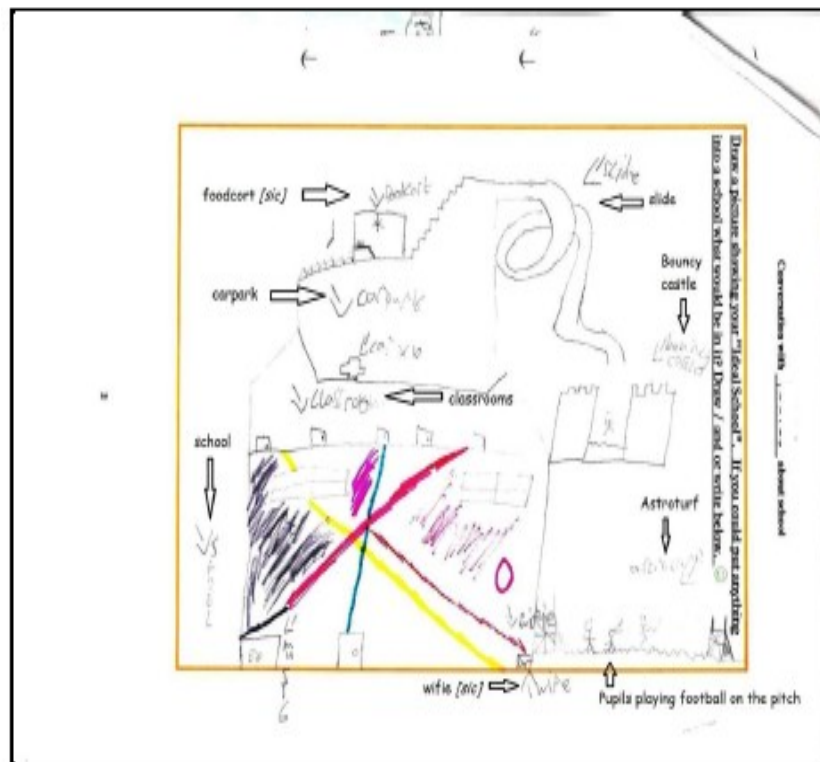


Figure 4.17. A drawing from Emmet (at age 11) depicting his ideal school. Adapted from MacBeath et al. (2003).

These drawings illustrate the importance of friendship, fun, and play for these pupils on the autism spectrum. It is interesting that each picture has a designated room or area for play. Ciarán reported having "little paintings" on the school yard for decorative effect. Emmet wants proper internet access and wi-fi coverage. Two pupils wanted to access animals. Edgar revealed he would like to see the introduction of tennis courts in his new school.

4.7.3 Summary of Pupil Voice Findings

This section presented findings from pupils with autism that incorporated child centred methodologies to elicit their experiences of school. The methods employed in this study highlighted the depth of insights and the breadth of knowledge that pupils on the autism spectrum have on issues of importance to them. The school environment was a recurring theme in this section alongside the importance of having access to certain school resources such as the school garden and ball pool room. All of the data collected and presented here would suggest that the ideal school for pupils on the autism spectrum would include opportunities: to create opportunities for friendship; to make learning fun and challenging; to play, have fun, be active and happy. The next section will present a summary of this chapter.

4.8 Chapter Summary

An overview of the research findings were presented alongside the main themes that emerged during data analysis.

Preliminary findings that employed questionnaires during phase three were used as baseline data and informed the four overarching research themes of policy, provision, experiences and outcomes. The final section on pupil voice provided an overview of the opinions and experiences of schooling for children on the autism spectrum. Based on the evidence presented and discussed, a myriad of micro and macro-level variables impact on the capacity of schools to meet the learning and social needs of children with autism. It was evident that home-school communication and the quality of relationships and interactions between parents, teachers and principals were critically important to improving the experiences for all children with autism. Findings also highlighted that inclusive practices vary across each school environment. The following chapter will present a discussion of key themes emanating from this research and link these to germane research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the findings emanating from this research regarding the experiences of inclusion for pupils on the autism spectrum. This chapter aims to present a discussion of these findings in the context of current literature. Research is a constantly evolving and self-reflective learning process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Within this context, it was considered appropriate to consult more recent literature following the presentation of findings from this study. This chapter will be presented under the following sub-headings:

- Creating Inclusive Communities.
- The Role of Government.
- Education and Training for Teachers.
- Economics of Autism.
- The Provision of Special Classes.
- Dilemma of School Placement.
- Evolving Parental Attitudes.
- Pupil Voice.
- Strengths and Limitations of Research.

5.2 Creating Inclusive Communities

The international impetus towards more inclusive education systems followed the publication Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). The recommendations and guidelines contained within this framework broadly mirror the findings within this current study. However, the principles of inclusive practices and the drive

towards mainstream provision of schooling have been contested in the literature over many years with many challenges still remaining (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2010; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995; Shevlin, Winter & Flynn, 2013). More recent research has tended to focus more on: the learning and social outcomes for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) (Douglas et al., 2012); pupils' levels of engagement and participation in schools (Booth & Ainscow, 2011); stakeholders' experiences of inclusive practices in schools (Rose et al., 2015); and the processes involved pertaining to inclusive practices (Cosgrove et al., 2014; McCoy, Quail & Smyth, 2014). Many interrelated factors were identified in this study that facilitate and inhibit inclusive school practices. These findings have been previously addressed in the literature (Hegarty, 2002; Kinsella & Senior, 2008; Travers et al., 2010; Winter & O'Raw, 2010). This section will outline emerging issues at national level, school level and child and family levels.

5.2.1 National Level

Systemic barriers and challenges reported in this study illuminate a disconnect between policy and practice that has been previously identified in the literature (Meegan & MacPhail, 2006; Shevlin, Winter & Flynn, 2013). A significant majority of parents reported their dissatisfaction and frustration with systemic barriers which mainly revolved around difficulties accessing clinical and educational supports for their child. Most parents and professionals in this study were critical of the lack of a coordinated system of

supports from national state agencies and bodies. The lack of access to supports enshrined in legislation (Government of Ireland, 2004) is negatively impacting on the learning and social experiences of children with autism. The need for improved access to coordinated and integrated system of supports has been previously called for nationally (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009) and internationally (Fuentes, 2015; WHO, 2013). It was evident from the findings in this study—and confirmed in the literature over many years (DES, 1993; INTO, 2002; Rose et al., 2015)—that schools and parents are working in isolation, being left for long periods with intermittent access to therapeutic supports or advisory services from various state agencies.

Many parents were critical of the role of the Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO). The views reported by most parents suggest that the roles and responsibilities are unclear. Similar findings were reported by Armstrong et al. (2010b) with approximately two-thirds of parents having no contact with their SENO and just over a quarter stating they were dissatisfied with their current relationship and access to their SENO. SENOs have a key role in identifying and allocating resources to schools in line with policies set down by the DES (NCSE, 2014b). SENOs informed schools of their allocation of SNA supports each year. Consequently, SNAs felt persistently anxious at the prospect of losing their job, working within an environment of fear and limited job security. Most special class teachers had limited contact with

their respective SENO. Parents had similar frustrations with limited communication, advice and information received from SENOs regarding appropriate provision of schooling, and particularly at the time of transferring between schools. The experiences highlighted here are inconsistent with the SENOs role in providing a specific support service to parents of children with ALN (NCSE, 2014b). Varied practices were also identified surrounding the SENOs' decision-making process in the allocation of resources to schools (Shevlin et al., 2013). Based on the evidence presented, future policy developments must ensure greater awareness of and clarity to the role of the SENO. It is also argued that communication between parents and SENOs must be improved to increase access to appropriate supports and services.

Additional frustrations regarding systemic challenges were echoed by the majority of professionals participating in this study. There was an overwhelming consensus from all stakeholders in this study on the importance of school staff having continued access to training programmes. The importance of appropriate of relevant professional development opportunities for teachers to improve the learning experiences of pupils with ALN has been cited for many years (Banks et al., 2016; DES, 1993, 2016a; INTO, 2002; McGee, 2004). O'Gorman and Drudy (2010) highlighted the inadequacy of teacher training programmes and called for the widening of professional development programmes for teachers that should "incorporate a proactive dimension to enkindle a culture of

inclusivity among the whole school community" (p.165). The majority of parents in this study want teachers and principals to be trained and equipped with the requisite knowledge in the provision of education for pupils with autism, especially regarding the operation and purpose of special classes in mainstream schools. Difficulties were experienced by some parents when there was a perceived lack of awareness and understanding exemplified by principals. A link could be made here to the varying attitudes and limited knowledge base of principals in the establishment and ongoing operation of special classes (Banks et al., 2016; McCoy et al., 2014a). The criticism of principals (Banks et al., 2016) for having no access to official guidelines for the establishment and organisation of special classes has since been addressed (NCSE, 2016b). Mandatory training and professional development have been recommended, commencing at the level of initial teacher training (ITT), through to the induction year of newly qualified teachers (NQTs), and as required by teachers and principals throughout their careers (NCSE, 2015).

Based on the findings in this study and extant literature, more consideration needs to be given to the levels of qualifications and experiences of teachers prior to any appointment to a special class. Findings from this study also support the requirement of teachers having a minimum of three years' teaching experience after their probationary year of teaching (NCSE, 2015). The implementation of the proposed national framework for teacher

education on autism and teaching standards would unquestionably improve the capacity of teachers and principals to meet the learning and social needs of pupils with autism (NCSE, 2015).

Despite reports identifying limited evidence of an inclusive system of education in Irish schools (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009; McCoy & Banks, 2012), in contrast, positive experiences of schooling had been identified for some pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) (Rose et al., 2015). However, as the learning became more challenging in content each year, the same study also reported that these pupils progressed at a slower pace and experienced difficulty keeping up with their peers. Similar findings were reported by participants in this study, as pupils with autism experienced increasingly more challenges as they became older and progressed through school.

5.2.1.1 The Divide between Policy and Practice

There was broad consensus among stakeholders that successive governments have failed in their remit to provide pupils with autism with an appropriate and inclusive educational experience, through their persistent failure to provide adequate clinical and educational resources. Findings from this study indicate the successful implementation of inclusive policies is "resource sensitive at multiple levels" (Flatman Watson, 2009, p.278). The failure of the Irish Government to enact the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) and to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006)

confirms the commonly held perception of many parents and professionals in this study, that successive Irish Governments have lacked a genuine commitment to advance their legislated and policy commitments into practice. This is evidenced by the experiences of the majority of parents and professionals in this study who regularly conveyed their frustrations in this study, at the perceived political ineptitude and inertia exemplified by successive Irish Governments to fully commit to bridge the well documented disconnect between inclusive policies and practices in Ireland (Barnardos, 2017a; Inclusion Ireland, 2017; Meegan & MacPhail, 2006; Rose et al., 2010; Ware et al., 2009). Findings from this study are supported by Dolan (2017) who criticised the Irish Government for exhibiting a lack of leadership, and for their continued pursuance of ineffective and incoherent policies regarding the provision of appropriate services supports that would improve the lives of people with disabilities. The need for improved leadership from policy-makers to overcome the existing difficulties, with the successful implementation of inclusive school practices has been previously cited in the literature (Shevlin, Kenny & Loxley, 2008). Hegarty (1993) highlighted the importance of having ongoing reviews of the administrative infrastructure of special education provision: to ensure best practices prevail; to enhance levels of accountability for all educational stakeholders; and to prevent any bureaucratic inconsistencies that may arise and

impede any future access to services for young pupils on the autism spectrum.

Inequity and inadequacy of access to clinical assessments has been identified, with long waiting times and delays being consistently reported over many years (Barnardos, 2017a, 2017b; Griffin & Shevlin, 2007; HSE, 2012, 2016a, 2017). Difficulties highlighted in the literature are consistent with the majority of stakeholders' experiences who participated in this study. In 2015, of the 5,818 applications received for assessments that are carried out under the terms of the Disability Act (Government of Ireland, 2005), only 3,318 were completed (HSE, 2016a). A further decline was reported the following year, in the number of completed assessments within the statutory timeframe and legislated guidelines (HSE, 2017). Recent reports indicated increasing inequality regarding access to services for children and adults with disabilities, as the prevalence of regional and income disparities still exists today (Barnardos, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Dolan, 2017). It would appear that the vision of collaboration between health and education for equity and consistency in service provision, to secure best outcomes for pupils with autism (HSE, 2012) has yet to be achieved in practice.

The awareness and knowledge of national and school policies supporting pupils with ALN in each school was generally poor. Inclusive practices were outwardly promoted and supported in schools. However, evidence of exclusionary clauses in the

enrolment policies in all four in-depth case study schools highlight a further disconnect between policy and practice (NCSE, 2015; Rose et al., 2010, 2015). Evidence of soft and hard barriers with schools having exclusionary and restrictive clauses in their enrolment policies have also been confirmed in the literature (Banks et al., 2016; NCSE, 2015; Rose et al., 2015).

Alison communicated that an unexpected change in the enrolment policies of the adjacent post primary school was going to create more difficulties in the future for her son Jerry and his friends, to successfully transfer from its main feeder school Scoil Derg. Alison maintained that the post primary school did not want to have the appearance of being labelled as a special school. This finding is consistent with Banks et al. (2016) who reported schools having to deal with issues of "cream off", as principals and special class teachers raised concerns of schools of being tarnished as a "dumping ground' for students with SEN" (p.26). It was further noted that these perceptions were adversely impacting on the morale of staff and the reputation of schools in the community and this was particularly evident in urban areas where the catchment areas were more socially diverse. It is argued that many of the challenges raised in this study and germane literature (NCSE, 2015) could be improved over time with the enactment of the Admission to Schools Bill (Government of Ireland, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c).

5.2.1.2 Accommodating the Spectrum of Pupils' Needs

Current national policy guidance on supporting pupils with autism recognises that the level of cognitive ability and autism symptom severity are key determinants when choosing an appropriate provision of schooling for any pupil (NCSE, 2015). There was widespread consensus among stakeholders that mixed ability special classes are unviable in its present form and that pupils with low functioning autism (LFA) and/or complex needs should have access to the special school provision if desired by the child and their parents. Complex needs of pupils with autism include the possibility of violent behaviour and injury to all school staff (NCSE, 2015). Similar findings were reported in this study with many teachers and SNAs indicating that spitting, biting, pinching and punching were regular occurrences in schools. The management of challenging behaviours was raised as a difficulty in all schools in this study and this has been confirmed in the literature (Daly et al., 2016; HSE, 2012; Ware et al., 2009). SNAs have also been injured in schools, with similar findings reported in the literature (Rose et al., 2015). Teaching in the special class was reportedly stressful for most teachers, with increased administration, extra class preparation and additional meetings with parents and ancillary support staff. One special class teacher suffered serious ill-health and stated that the stress experienced in the early stages of working in the special class had adversely impacted on their personal and professional life.

Guidelines and procedures have been devised for dealing with assaults on teachers (DES, 1997, 1999a), who can now avail of leave of absence following assaults that take place during approved school activities (DES, 2017c). It was reported in this study that a principal had suffered a broken nose resulting from a physical assault from a pupil with autism. It has been highlighted in this study and supported in the literature that violent or aggressive behaviours is a broader societal issue, as not all pupils with autism or additional learning needs (ALN) exhibit these extreme, violent outbursts and behaviours (NCSE, 2015). However, findings from this study and germane literature suggest that many staff members have experienced difficulties with challenging behaviours and have incurred various injuries during their work with some pupils on the autism spectrum.

5.2.2 School Level

5.2.2.1 School Leadership

Findings from this study indicate the quality of school management, the leadership qualities of the school principal, and the school's culture and ethos in accommodating pupils with diverse needs greatly influence stakeholders' experiences, attitudes and relationships that are cultivated within a school community. The importance of strong leadership in the development and operation of the special classes in each school was evident in this study and this has been confirmed in the literature (Banks et al., 2016).

There was widespread agreement among stakeholders that the principal plays a key role in overseeing the successful implementation of inclusive policies (Loreman, 2007; Rouse and Florian, 1996). The ethos and climate surrounding the principles of inclusion (Winter & O'Raw, 2010) influenced the varied levels of inclusivity achieved in each school (Dillon, Underwood & Freemantle, 2016; UNESCO, 1994). Quality learning is brought about through quality leadership, as Fullan (2006) reported that experiences of success and failure in schools are largely attributable to the principal, who is described as "the nerve centre of school improvement" (p.1). This was a commonly held perception of the majority of parents and professionals in this study.

Every principal in this study revealed having an increased workload with the management and operation of special classes. Additional workload and decision-making responsibilities related broadly to: transportation; communicating with external service providers; management of ancillary support staff; and applications for new building projects. One principal explicitly stated that he would not have pursued the opening of the special class if he had known in advance the increased workload and additional responsibilities. He also added that some school principals were actively discouraging the opening of special classes for these very reasons. The lack of awareness and understanding of what the role and operation of special classes entailed were reportedly evident

among principals and have also been confirmed in the literature (Banks et al., 2016). Another principal raised the specific issue of the additional costs incurred to the Board of Management (BOM) for having all staff members immunised against the potential threat of being bitten by pupils with autism. The importance of having a policy for schools regarding the administration of medicines to pupils in schools has been acknowledged in the literature (NCSE 2016a, 2016b; Rieser, 2000). However, little evidence was found in the literature on the issue of providing “appropriate financial support” to cover these additional expenses, as the same principal felt schools should have access to ongoing supports from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to deal with this issue.

Despite the increased workload, the commitment of principals was evident throughout this study in each school (NCSE, 2015). Higher quality of provision for pupils with autism has been cited where principals had increased knowledge, understanding and awareness of autism (Banks et al., 2016; NCSE, 2015). The understanding of principals of the potential stresses autism can present to family life, were important traits that principals should exhibit as identified by the majority of parents in this study (Whitaker, 2007). This enabled parents more easily to develop trust and to foster more positive relationships with their principal. In schools where this was achieved, it encouraged all members of the school community to embrace difference, and to collaborate more effectively by developing more positive attitudes and working

relationships. Pupils' exposure to and experiences of positive relationships that are naturally inculcated within daily school life, greatly influence inclusive practices and outcomes achieved in schools (Bossaert et al., 2013; McCoy & Banks, 2012; Rose et al., 2015).

5.2.2.2 Communication and Relationships

Positive communication systems in each school were identified by parents and professionals as an integral part of inclusive practices. Formal and informal communication protocols comprised of: parent-teacher meetings; individual education plan (IEP) meetings; home-school communication journals; informal conversations between parents and teachers; and email and telephone communications (Daly et al., 2016). It did appear that an open-door policy was in operation in each school, although all parents in Scoil Conn had experienced some difficulty with the principal. After transferring to Scoil Mask, one parent remarked that the new principal was more attentive and responsive to his son's needs. The importance of cultivating positive home-school relationships through effective channels of communication greatly influenced the levels of parental satisfaction with their school (Whitaker, 2007).

Most teachers reported that communication systems within schools were good. However, findings in this study highlighted that each school had one special class teacher who was the driving force behind the running and operation of the special class. Special class

teachers in each school reported feeling intermittently isolated from their colleagues. Greater collaboration, communication and liaison with mainstream class teachers is required to eliminate special class teachers feeling excluded on staff (Banks et al., 2016).

Principals and teachers in this study participated in separate cluster network of supports, where they liaised and collaborated on a monthly basis. During each meeting, they provided collegial support to each other on wide ranging issues pertaining to special class provision for pupils with autism. The schools involved in these informal meetings were generally located in close proximity to each other. Cluster network of supports have been previously recommended in the literature to share the skills, expertise and knowledge of all teachers within schools (McGee, 2004), and for teachers and principals across different schools (Banks et al., 2016; Daly et al., 2016). Findings from this study highlight the need to expand this into a more formal, structured system of professional support, as not all teachers and principals were aware or had access to these cluster support groups.

5.2.2.3 The Role of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs)

There was broad agreement among teachers, parents and pupils regarding the valuable contribution and positive work carried out by SNAs (Banks et al., 2016; Daly et al., 2016; DES, 2011b; NCSE, 2015). It has been acknowledged that the support of SNAs is crucial to the successful implementation of inclusive policies (DES, 2014; Rose & O'Neill, 2009). SNAs are now viewed

as an essential part of the educational system in Ireland (Logan, 2006). The Department of Education and Skills (DES) outlined that the duties of SNAs must be "non-teaching in nature" (DES, 2002, p.1) with their focus primarily on the care needs of pupils (DES, 2011b, 2014). There has been much debate on the roles and responsibilities of SNAs (DES, 2011b; Griffin & Shevlin, 2007; Lawlor & Cregan, 2003; Rose & O'Neill, 2009). Findings from this study are consistent with the literature that has repeatedly reported that SNAs are engaged in duties beyond their care remit (Carrig, 2004; DES, 2011b, 2014; Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Logan, 2004, 2006; Rose et al., 2015). The majority of teachers and principals in this study stated that SNAs were involved in the learning process in schools but emphasised that this was under the specific guidance of the class teacher. The shift in practice of SNAs becoming more involved in an educational capacity has also occurred in post-primary schools (Kerins & McDonagh, 2015). Despite their acknowledged importance, cutbacks have impacted on the provision of SNA supports to pupils with ALN in recent years (Banks et al., 2016). Findings from this study are consistent with the literature, as policies regarding the support of SNAs and their prescribed roles are not reflective of ongoing practices in schools (Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Lawlor & Cregan, 2003; Rose et al., 2015).

Special class teachers stated they would not be able to perform their teaching role and duties in special classes without the

support provided by SNAs. They considered access to SNA support essential for the provision of teaching and learning in special classes for pupils on the autism spectrum. Their importance is reflected in the increase in SNAs allocated to schools in recent years. In 1993, there were less than 100 SNAs employed in schools (NCSE, 2013b). The number of SNAs increased rapidly from 2,988 in 2001 to 13,015 in 2017, representing an increase of 336% during this period (DPER, 2017). Recent figures indicate there are 9,637 pupils on the autism spectrum in schools that have access to an SNA, and of these 3,229 are attending special classes in mainstream schools (NCSE, 2015). Despite the literature acknowledging the importance of SNAs in supporting pupils on the autism spectrum—and particularly pupils with complex needs—the literature supports this study's findings regarding the prevailing confusion among teachers surrounding the roles and responsibilities of SNAs (Banks et al., 2016; NCSE, 2015). SNA support has been allocated to sixty-nine per cent of all pupils with autism (NCSE, 2015) and is now the most prevalent category of disability provided for within the SNA scheme (IGEES, 2016). Most SNAs in this study were involved in duties pertaining to the educational and care needs of pupils with autism. Although these duties were guided by the teacher and the child's IEP, there was little evidence of SNAs being directly involved in the IEP process (Rose et al., 2015).

Difficulties with unqualified adults in supporting pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) have previously been cited in the literature, as it can act as a barrier to some pupils' learning and levels of engagement in schools (Ainscow, 2000). Giangreco, Suter and Doyle (2010) argued that unqualified personnel involved in the teaching of pupils without disabilities would not be tolerated but "we have grown to consider it acceptable for some students with disabilities" (p.51). Butt and Lowe (2012) previously highlighted the inadequacy of qualifications required to become an SNA. In 2017, the minimum qualifications required to become an SNA are: a Feta Level three award on the national framework of qualification in Ireland (NFQ, 2017); the Junior Certificate with three grade Ds; or equivalent (DES, 2017b). The varied qualifications of SNAs in this study—with two SNAs failing to meet the minimum entry criteria—are similar to the findings reported in Banks et al. (2016). The varied qualifications of SNAs were addressed by schools through ongoing access to professional training programmes and this was also mirrored in the literature (Banks et al., 2016). One newly qualified teacher in this study felt ill-equipped to manage another adult in the classroom (Banks et al., 2016). Based on the findings presented and extant literature, it is argued that further clarification is required from the DES on the roles and responsibilities of SNAs that will look to research (Giangreco, Suter & Doyle 2010; Keating & O'Connor, 2012;

NCSE, 2015; Sharples, Webster & Blatchford, 2015) to inform future best practices to support pupils on the autism spectrum.

5.2.2.4 The Role of Teachers

Every parent in this study acknowledged the important role of teachers, in particularly teachers working within special classes for pupils with autism. Every principal reported giving teachers their full support and having the utmost respect for teachers in these positions. The learning and social experiences of pupils on the autism spectrum and additional learning needs (ALN) are greatly influenced by the teacher's requisite knowledge, skills and capacity to accommodate pupils with diverse needs (Banks et al., 2016; Daly et al., 2016; Donnelly, 2010a, 2010b; NCSE, 2015; Rose et al., 2015). McGee (2004) argued that the learning for pupils with ALN is largely dependent on the teacher's requisite levels of expertise and the majority of parents in this study would corroborate this view. It has been recommended that teachers should have a minimum of three years post-probationary teaching experience prior to any special class teaching appointment (NCSE, 2015). The findings from this study would support this requirement, as teachers would have some prior teaching experience that would benefit them in a special class setting.

Inclusion was conceptualised by the majority of parents and professionals in this study in terms of the social inclusion. Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley (2008) reported similar outcomes, with difficulties regarding pupils' levels of academic engagement and

educational participation in schools still reported in the literature (McCoy & Banks, 2012). A reduced curriculum experienced by pupils in this study was also highlighted (Banks et al., 2016; Daly et al., 2016; McCoy & Banks, 2012). The varied learning and social experiences of pupils with autism in this study are consistent with Banks et al. (2016) who highlighted the need for schools having greater clarity regarding the social and academic objectives and corresponding outcomes of special class provision for pupils with autism. Reduced curriculum experiences can lead to increased numbers of pupils with ALN dropping out and permanently disaffecting from the school system (Rose et al., 2010). Findings from this study and extant literature have highlighted that difficulties and inconsistencies in practice persist with the academic inclusion of pupils on the autism spectrum.

Schools with access to special classes for pupils on the autism spectrum receive additional capitation funding, with pupils entitled to access transportation services for school attendance (DES, 2011a). Despite schools receiving extra capitation funding for pupils attending special classes, one special class teacher from Scoil Mask was frustrated that no additional allowances are payable to teachers teaching in these classes. The same teacher indicated that teachers with a special education diploma receive an additional allowance as part of their overall remuneration. Special education diploma allowances were payable to teachers up to 31 January 2012, and were withdrawn thereafter as part of the

education cutbacks that occurred in recent years (DES, 2013). The teacher highlighted the unfairness surrounding this pay disparity and called for an allowance being paid to teachers teaching in special classes. This finding was supported in the literature as Banks et al. (2016) suggested the need for incentivising special class teaching positions—including financial incentives—that would increase the uptake of teachers and raise the status of these teaching positions within the school community. Teachers currently pursuing an approved training course on autism spectrum disorders (ASD) from the Department of Education and Skills will not receive any additional remuneration entitlements upon course completion (DES, 2017d).

5.2.2.5 Inclusive School Practices

Good practices that benefitted the learning and social outcomes for pupils with autism were reported in each school. Many teachers differentiate activities based on the primary school curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999). The practice of differentiation has been positively reported in the literature with further development required to ensure more consistent practices are embedded within schools (Daly et al., 2016). The practice of reverse inclusion was working well in every school except Scoil Mask, and its importance has been identified in the literature (Jones et al., 2008; Parsons et al., 2009a). Classroom seating arrangements that used moveable dividers to create a clearly defined workspace were beneficial to the learning process for pupils with autism.

Moveable dividers in the classroom are important as they facilitate pupils to work more independently and minimise external distractions (Winter & O'Raw, 2010). Visual supports and thematic displays were popular among teachers, as they enhanced the learning outcomes and experiences for pupils with autism (Banks et al., 2016). Social programmes were in operation in each school, comprising of social activities that were considered very important among all parents and professionals for children with autism. Short breaks during the day were important to reduce stress levels of pupils with autism and to aid their learning in schools (Jones et al., 2008; NCSE, 2015). Good practice identified in schools included cooking, baking and the use of local facilities in the community for children with autism to develop their social skills such as coffee shops, restaurants, the local park and library. The explicit teaching of social and life skills to pupils with autism was significantly important to all parents in this study (Bond et al., 2016a; Jones et al., 2008; Parsons et al., 2009a).

The Individual Education Plan (IEP) provides a roadmap for the experiences of pupils with ALN in schools and its importance to inclusive practices has been acknowledged with the publication of national guidelines (NCSE, 2006b). At present, schools and teachers are not legally required to participate in the IEP process (Bond et al., 2016a). However, the legislated basis for parental involvement and consultation during the IEP process has been enshrined within the EPSEN Act (Government Ireland, 2004).

IEPs were reportedly used in each school. A lack of clarity surrounding the IEP process has been identified in the literature (Rose et al., 2015) with inconsistencies in practice previously raised in the literature (Rose et al., 2012) and confirmed in this study. Mixed experiences were reported regarding parental involvement in the development of IEPs. Findings from this study are consistent with Prunty (2011) who found that parents want greater input in the IEP process to ensure that "tokenism" is replaced with more "meaningful involvement" of parents (p.32). Effective levels of communication and the quality of relationships between parents and teachers were key factors in determining the outcomes of a child's IEP. Difficulties with IEPs were identified for parents who live outside the school's locality, alongside one example of variation in practice between primary and post primary school. There was limited SNA involvement in the IEP planning process in each school in this study. While the literature supports this finding of limited SNA involvement in planning for IEPs (Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Prunty, 2011), it has been acknowledged that SNAs are involved in the implementation of IEP targets (Daly et al., 2016). Varied practices were reported regarding methods of assessments in schools and this is supported in the literature (Rose et al., 2015). Assessment strategies of teaching and learning generally comprised of teachers submitting their *cúntas míosúil* (*monthly reports*) and IEPs to principals.

Therapeutic rooms were positively viewed by most teachers and professionals as they facilitated movement and sensory breaks when required for pupils with autism. Having access to these support rooms facilitated movement breaks for pupils with autism (Daly et al., 2016) and ALN (Banks et al., 2016). One parent was concerned that the ball pool room in Scoil Conn was being manipulated by pupils as a mechanism to get out of class based activities. Class based rewards systems to access the therapeutic rooms were evident in this study, with occasional access also being provided to pupils from mainstream classes to incentivise good behaviour. Similar findings were cited by Rose et al. (2015) on the importance of class based rewards system as part of classroom behaviour management procedures. Structured play activities as an important teaching methodology for pupils with autism were identified by few teachers in this study, with similar findings identified in the literature (Bond et al., 2016a, 2016b).

The school garden was a very popular facility among teachers, SNAs and pupils in each school except Scoil Conn. The importance of the school garden to pupils with autism has been previously acknowledged in the literature (Daly et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2008). It was particularly important to every pupil from Scoil Derg, who liked having access to a safe, quiet, designated space in the yard. The yard was divided into two areas by a retractable net, with pupils having permission to run around on one side while on the other side, pupils could only walk, play board games or visit the

school garden. Despite the reported benefits of having access to a sensory garden (Daly et al., 2016; Banks et al., 2016), one principal wanted to invest in a sensory garden but was precluded due to financial constraints. A soft surface area observed in two schools is beneficial as playing on this surface can have a calming effect on pupils with sensory difficulties. The quiet area in the classroom was also popular in Scoil Derg, as pupils can go to relax and read on bean bags provided by their teacher in this designated area (NCSE, 2015).

Buddy systems were in operation in each school and were positively viewed by the majority of parents and professionals. Rose et al. (2015) reported that these systems were not always evident in schools. In contrast, the buddy system was one of many strengths identified in supporting pupils with autism in schools (NCSE, 2015). An innovative buddy system was identified in Scoil Derg. Any pupil wanting to avail of a buddy must go to a permanently fixed, bus-stop in the yard, and wait for a buddy to come along. One parent was satisfied that pupils on the autism spectrum were given the opportunity to become buddies of other pupils themselves.

Colin and Robert had access to assistance dogs for children with autism. In addition, Colin was also benefitting from accessing horse-riding lessons in a local horse-riding school. The first guide dog school in Europe was set up in Ireland in 2005 to provide assistance to children with autism and their families (Irish Guide

Dogs for the Blind, 2016). Having access to the support of animals was improving the behaviours of each child and also having a positive impact on family life. Moreover, the positive impact of accessing a guide dog on family life has already been highlighted in the literature (Burgoyne et al., 2014).

5.2.2.6 Collaboration with Parents

Many of the themes highlighted by parents in this study are broadly consistent with previous studies relating to parents and their children on the autism spectrum (Murphy & Tierney, 2005; Whitaker, 2007). The criteria set down by most parents in this study to improve the provision of education in special classes include: a flexible and competent special class teacher; a supportive school environment; the matching of pupils with autism with similar needs; and increased access to clinical support services when required. The importance of parental confidence in the provision of supports for pupils with ALN has already been recognised (DCSF, 2009). A recurring theme throughout this research was that pupils on the autism spectrum attending special classes should be matched according to their needs. Decisions regarding the most suitable provision of schooling for pupils with autism should be guided by the level of ability and need of each child with autism (NCSE, 2015).

There was much evidence in this study to suggest that the majority of parents were satisfied with the attempts made by schools to successfully include their children (Rose et al., 2015). It

was evident in areas of identified good practice that positive home-school relations were actively encouraged and that this was the foundation for ameliorating the learning and social outcomes for pupils with autism in schools. Most parents expressed their satisfaction with their relationship with the school but this was dependent on the individuals involved. The documenting of meetings and correspondence between schools and parents to enhance home school-relations could form part of a school plan that has been previously recommended in the literature (Daly et al., 2016).

Strong leadership and a welcoming school environment that fosters mutual respect between stakeholders in the school community, enabled principals to adopt a flexibility of approaches in schools. This generally resulted in greater fluency of movement between mainstream and special class settings for pupils with autism in this study and is supported in the literature (Banks et al., 2016). Although Whitaker (2007) reported that the majority of parents were satisfied with their experiences of mainstream schooling, concerns remained for a significant minority of parents with similar concerns presented in this study. The challenge for policy makers is to equip teachers with the necessary skill set and the promotion a system underpinned by inclusive principles (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996) that increases the capacity of schools to meet the diverse needs of pupils with autism (Whitaker, 2007).

5.2.3 Child and Family Levels

5.2.3.1 Advocacy

The Lamb Inquiry (DCSF, 2009) reported the importance of having higher expectations for pupils with ALN and giving parents an authentic voice in their child's education. All parents in this study—and confirmed in the literature (Parsons et al., 2009a)—demonstrated that they were a leading advocate in their attempts to secure the best possible outcomes for their child. Improved outcomes have been cited for pupils with ALN as a result of a positive advocacy on their behalf (DCSF, 2010). Every parent was committed and determined that their child availed of supports to ensure they had every opportunity to progress in line with their ability. Most parents reported in this study that their children had limited, genuine friendships in their respective school and home environments. Social isolation has been identified in the literature as problematic for children with autism (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; NCSE, 2015). Chamberlain, Kasari and Rotherham-Fuller (2007) highlighted the need for further research on eliciting more effective techniques to bring pupils with autism in from the periphery to engage more regularly with their peers. It can be increasingly difficult for young people with autism to create friendships, as most parents cited a lack of accessible and fun activities in their local community. Two parents in particular were so frustrated about their child's social isolation, that they set up two social groups to provide a network of support and friendship for young people with autism

and their families. It also provided much needed support to siblings of children with autism with opportunities to connect with other people through the various social gatherings.

5.2.3.2 Transition and Transfer

The transfer from primary to post-primary school was a concern for most parents at various intervals throughout primary school. Parents were dissatisfied with the lack of choices afforded to them regarding their children's provision of schooling, with similar difficulties identified in the literature (Flatman Watson, 2005, 2009). All three parents from Scoil Conn were extremely dissatisfied that their children had to transfer to a new school in the middle of primary school. Moreover, anxieties were raised at the prospect of transferring to a new school that did not provide continuity of supports and access to a special class for pupils with autism. The challenges of transitioning within schools and transferring to new schools have been cited in the literature (Dann, 2011; Jones et al., 2008; Parsons et al., 2009a, 2009b; Rose et al., 2015). Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman (2014) identified that individuals need support at key stages of transition in their lives. The potential loss of supports was particularly acute for parents when making decisions regarding mainstream and special class placements for their child. The continuity of supports was not always guaranteed at the time of transition, and access to services was a barrier identified by most parents that influenced their decisions regarding school choice.

5.2.3.3 Attitudes

Few parents stated it would have been easier to cope if their child was diagnosed with Down syndrome as opposed to autism. There was a perception among the majority of parents in this study that autism is treated differently in the community in comparison to other categories of disability. Barnard, Prior and Potter (2000) reported similar findings, describing autism as a "hidden disability" because their disability maybe more difficult to discern "and as such do not attract the same attention from society as more obvious physical disabilities" (p.6). The same study found that the general level of autism awareness was poor and this was a common perception among parents in this study. Many parents in this study reported incidents where stigma, negative attitudes and ignorance prevail in the community regarding autism and disability in general. Similar findings have been reported in the literature (NDA, 2011b), with increased interactions being recommended between people with and without autism to improve awareness and to dispel any misconceptions that currently exist about autism (Huws & Jones, 2010).

Parsons, Lewis and Ellins (2009) reported that parents of children with and without autism had similar views and experiences of schooling that were in the main very positive. Kasari et al. (1999) reported attitudinal differences regarding inclusion among parents of child with autism and Down syndrome. The same study added that the child's age greatly influenced

parental attitudes towards inclusive practices and this was also evident in this study. The context and prevailing attitudes within each school environment influenced the operation of special classes in this study and is supported in the literature (Banks et al., 2016). The attitudes and support of members of the community is critical to the success of inclusive practices in schools, as evidenced in this study and literature (UNESCO, 1994). Many teachers commented on the positive impact the special class for pupils with autism was having on the attitudes toward disabilities in general. The minimal accounts of bullying reported in this study is at variance with previous research in this area (Humphrey, 2008) and could be attributable to these improved attitudes. However, in light of the aforementioned changing attitudes and difficulties that pupils can experience as they become older, school policies and practices must recognise that pupils with autism are at a greater risk of experiencing bullying, particularly in post-primary school (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Humphrey & Hebron, 2014).

5.3 The Role of Government

Despite acknowledging their satisfaction with many aspects of ongoing inclusive practices in schools, most parents highlighted their discontent and frustration with systemic barriers and challenges that were impacting negatively on existing practices in schools. Similar frustrations were echoed in this study by professionals across each school and have been identified in the literature (Daly et al., 2016; Rose et al, 2015). It is evident from

this study and pertinent literature, that challenges have remained constant for a significant time, as illustrated in the following extract:

Many of the challenges and difficulties experienced by schools relate to the lack of support services and lack of planning by the Department of Education and Science regarding the establishment of such classes. Schools were of the view that they should not have to lobby for basic support services from therapists, from health boards and for basic facilities. Schools felt very much left on their own, with many of them citing lack of support as a main concern. (INTO, 2002, p.34)

Most parents were dissatisfied and angered at the lack of political impetus to resolve the difficulties with accessing supports for pupils with autism including: long waiting times for clinical assessments; the subsequent delays in accessing supports; and the inordinate expense of privately funded assessments and therapies. It is noteworthy that a private assessment does not in itself guarantee access to the provision of supports and was an additional source of frustration for some parents.

During 2008-2013, the pursuance of austere policies by successive Irish Governments and the intervening recessionary years resulted in a reduction in public funding and a subsequent deterioration in education and health services. Evidence presented by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC, 2015a) indicated that "poverty and deprivation rates have risen for both adults and children, and austerity policies have impacted, in

particular, on marginalised, vulnerable and migrant groups" (p.8). It was apparent that the lack of investment, the recruitment embargo in the public service and reduced staff numbers have contributed to a decline in the satisfactory provision of education supports and clinical services for most parents and their children with autism. It is accepted that "specialised instruction, interventions and supports are key components of high-quality inclusion and, where necessary, are essential in reaching desired outcomes for children" with disabilities and their families (NCSE, 2015, p.29). However, cutbacks to these essential services that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable members of society are unjust and this was articulated by the majority of stakeholders in this study.

Although it has been acknowledged that "there is a legislative commitment to inclusive education" in Ireland, challenges remain on the implementation of legislated policies that will improve the academic and social outcomes for pupils with autism in practice (MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007, p.299). It is evident from this research that there is a disconnect between policy and practice in the provision of an equitable system of educational and care supports that is responsive to the changing learning and social needs for children with autism. This policy-practice disconnect is supported nationally (Day & Prunty, 2015; McCarthy & Shevlin, 2017; Shevlin, Winter & Flynn, 2013) and internationally (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2011; Rose, 2017; Slee,

2013) in the literature. The Government has committed to undertake a consultation process that will ascertain the views of relevant "stakeholders to see how best to progress sections of the EPSEN Act that were introduced on a non-statutory basis" (DES, 2016a, p.59). The immediate implementation of the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) and the enactment of the Autism Spectrum Disorder Bill (Government of Ireland, 2017) would be indicative of the Government's commitments to improving future outcomes for all pupils with autism. Findings from this research—as demonstrated by the responses from the majority of stakeholders—support the view that the "provision of special educational needs services to the children that need them is not an optional extra; it is a basic right that must be vindicated by the State even in times of recession" (Children's Rights Alliance, 2014, p.36).

5.4 Education and Training for Teachers

Most principals raised the difficulties associated with the appointment of teachers to special classes. The evidence conveyed by principals suggests there is reluctance on the part of some teachers to take up special class teaching positions. The teaching experience of many teachers was primarily gained within mainstream class settings, with only a few teachers having learning support or resource teaching experience. It should be noted that three quarters of teachers (n=15) stated during phase three they had no qualifications or training in the provision of supports for pupils

with ALN. The reluctance of more senior teachers in taking up special class appointments may explain why younger and inexperienced teachers were being appointed, with just under one-third of teachers surveyed stating they had been teaching for five years or less. Few teachers felt professionally ill-prepared for teaching in a special class for pupils on the autism spectrum, and this could be linked to having no pre-service training opportunities in a special class setting. These findings are supported by Banks et al. (2016) as they reported a lack of clarity among teachers who were unsure of their expected roles and responsibilities in special classes. It also highlights that further training opportunities are required for teachers who have reported feeling "they had been thrown in at the deep end" in special class teaching positions (Banks et al., 2016, p.93).

The publication of policy advice from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) regarding the provision of supports for pupils on the autism spectrum acknowledged that "professional development is necessary to ensure that practitioners acquire the knowledge, skills and ongoing supports needed to implement inclusion effectively" (NCSE, 2015, p.29). The importance of teachers and principals having access to relevant continuous professional development (CPD) programmes to accommodate all pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) has been widely acknowledged in the literature (Bond et al., 2016a; Daly et al., 2016; DCYA, 2014; DES, 2001; Rose et al., 2015). The

inadequacy of training opportunities for teachers was also cited many years previously (McGee, 2004). The pilot study for the new model of supports for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) reported that schools had a high degree of satisfaction "with the manner in which teachers' professional development in SEN was supported during the pilot" (DES, 2016b, p.27). Despite providing "a high level of support for the pilot schools to assist with teachers' continuing professional development in the areas of differentiation, target setting and monitoring of students' progress", the report ironically accepted "it will be a challenge to provide this level of support, as requested by education partners, to all schools as the model is introduced nationally" (DES, 2016b, p.32). It should be noted that "this pilot was also constrained by the fact that the complex-educational-needs aspect of school profiles was calculated from each school's existing allocation of resource-teaching hours from the NCSE" (DES, 2016b, p.8). Feedback highlighting the concerns of stakeholders during this pilot process maybe justified, as it is presently debatable whether this new model will achieve its intended outcomes, if schools experience a reduction to their existing allocation of supports.

The Report of the Task Force on Autism (DES, 2001) recommended "that special classes specifically developed for children with an ASD aged five and under, be established in mainstream and some special schools, and that these be differentiated on the basis of need and level of functioning"

(p.356). Having access to an eclectic range of interventions and supports for pupils with autism—as recommended in this report—has yet to be firmly established in practice (Parsons et al., 2009a). Recent figures have confirmed that sixty per cent of special classes in primary schools are designated for pupils with autism, and this represents "the dominant form of provision for students with such needs, particularly in recent years" (McCoy et al., 2014a, p.4). Special classes for pupils with autism account for less than twenty per cent of the overall special class provision at post-primary level (McCoy et al., 2014a). The numbers of pupils with autism in 2014 with access to resource teaching hours in primary and post primary schools were 5,784 and 2,941 respectively (NCSE, 2015). Additional challenges with special class provision maybe encountered at post-primary level due to the increased numbers of pupils with autism transferring to post-primary schools. According to Squires, Kalambouka and Bragg (2016) "it is possible that over time this will change the profile of post-primary special classes as children in these special primary classes move through the educational system" (p.25).

Based on the evidence presented from this study and extant literature, it is argued that pre-training opportunities for teaching in a special class environment should be incorporated as part of the mandatory training requirements for trainee teachers. In addition, existing teachers should have access to appropriate and relevant

training programmes, to accommodate the diverse needs of an increasingly growing population in Irish schools.

5.5 Economics of Autism

Ireland's expenditure on the provision of supports for pupils with ALN has increased from €468 million in 2004 to €1.3 billion in 2011 (NCSE, 2013a). During 2011-2017, expenditure in this area increased by thirty eight per cent to €1.68 billion and represents nearly one-fifth of the gross funds allocated to the Department of Education and Skills (DES) (Department of Public Expenditure & Reform [DPER], 2017, p.2). Despite these increases in expenditure, challenges and barriers to inclusive practices in schools remain as evidenced in the literature (Daly et al., 2016) and findings in this study.

The failure of successive governments to fund appropriate professional development and training programmes for teachers due to financial constraints has been previously noted (McGee, 2004; O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010). Despite the plethora of national reports and studies acknowledging the importance of training, it was previously noted that the roll out of a national programme of training for teachers in the areas of differentiation, target setting and monitoring of pupils' progression will be difficult to achieve (DES, 2016b). It is argued that the lack of professional development opportunities afforded to teachers signifies a lack of commitment on behalf of successive governments to provide them with the necessary skill set, so that all pupils with a disability can

experience equality of access to a rights-based education in Irish schools (Meegan & MacPhail, 2006; MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007). Targeted financial resourcing of supports is required to ensure all pupils on the autism spectrum have access to an eclectic range of educational supports and clinical interventions that is responsive to their changing needs (DES, 2001).

During 2001-2017, expenditure on the provision of special needs assistants (SNAs) increased by 1,287% (DPER, 2017). At times when economic resources are constrained, it is timely and financially prudent to assess the economic benefits and opportunity costs associated with the political decisions taken on educational expenditures (DES, 2011b; DPER, 2017). The findings from this study suggest that these systemic barriers need to be addressed to ensure that principals and teachers become better equipped to meet the changing needs of pupils with autism in each school environment. Failure to address these systemic issues with continued political inertia (Dolan, 2017) will inhibit the development and effective implementation of an authentic system of inclusive education in Ireland for pupils on the autism spectrum (Lynch & Irvine, 2009; O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010).

Within Ireland, it has been argued that "an inclusive social system is dependent on an inclusive economic system" that ensures an equal redistribution of the nation's wealth and resources to every citizen (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009, p.661). The same study suggested that an inclusive system of education is inextricably linked to its

evolving social development. One of the main fears identified by most parents in this study was the poor outlook they had regarding their child's future. It has been acknowledged that individuals with a disability are more likely to experience "poorer post-school outcomes" including labour market exclusion, and higher rates of unemployment when compared to individuals without a disability (Watson, Banks & Lyons, 2015, p.4). Chen et al. (2014) specifically reported poor employment prospects for adults with autism. Cutbacks to essential supports and services for pupils with ALN were implemented in Ireland (Drudy, 2011) following an unprecedented period of rapid economic growth from the early 1990s to 2007 (Honohan, 2009; Kelly, 2009). Despite the increases in investment in the provision of supports in recent years (DPER, 2017), many pupils with disabilities are still more likely to be less qualified, economically disadvantaged and dependent on state disability payments when they leave school (Cullinan, 2015; Watson, Banks & Lyons, 2015). This has serious implications for policy makers as a significant number of pupils on the autism spectrum will transfer over the coming years, from compulsory schooling to tertiary education and the labour market.

In the UK, it is estimated that the annual costs to the exchequer in supporting pupils with autism is c.£2.7 billion, compared to c.£25 billion for supporting adults with autism (Knapp, Romeo & Beecham, 2007). In the United States of America (USA), the estimated annual costs of caring for

individuals with autism in 2015 was c.\$268 billion and is projected to rise to c.\$461 billion by 2025 (Leigh & Du, 2015). The same study indicated that these costs will exceed the costs associated with ADHD and diabetes by 2025, if the current prevalence of autism continues to rise. At present, there are no equivalent statistics available in Ireland. However, Ireland is currently participating in a three year trans-European programme on autism funded by the European Commission (EC) (asdeu, n.d.) that will analyse, inter alia, the economic and social costs of autism for individuals, families and wider society across EU member states. This will improve the limited evidence base regarding the societal and lifetime impacts of autism (Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman, 2013).

Autism has been identified as a public health issue in recent discourse and debate (Buescher et al., 2014; Fuentes, 2015; Ganz, 2007; WHO, 2013). As previously discussed, a diagnosis of autism impacted significantly on the individual and on the lives of their respective families who participated in this study. Mental health and well-being of pupils with autism and their families were recurring themes in this study, with similar findings also mirrored in the literature (Murphy & Tierney, 2005). It was reported that three pupils with autism and one parent had experienced suicidal ideation, and some parents spoke of the benefits of giving their child prescribed medication to improve their child's behaviours. Pupils with autism having suicidal thoughts at a young age

highlights the importance of encouraging and improving their positive mental health and well-being, and this has been identified as a significant part of an inclusive school culture (Daly et al., 2016). Cusack et al. (2016) reported that individuals with autism die younger, are at an increased risk of experiencing mental health difficulties, and are nine times more likely to commit suicide when compared to individuals without autism.

The importance of early educational and clinical intervention to improve future outcomes and opportunities for children on the autism spectrum has been well documented in the literature (DfES, 2004b; Hegarty, 1993; Jones et al., 2008; NCSE, 2015; Parsons et al., 2009a). The characteristics of high quality and effective early intervention (EI) to improve the development of pre-school children on the autism spectrum include: a multidisciplinary collaborative approach to assessment; exposure to interventions in natural environments with children of similar abilities and needs; and highly structured and supportive teaching environment that incorporates a focus on daily routines (NCSE, 2015, p.5).

Based on the findings in this study and extant literature, there is a strong economic argument for legislators to provide adequate provision of supports—in particular for EI to services for young pupils with autism—to reduce the lifetime and societal costs of autism in the future. The educational and social arguments have been provided by every stakeholder through their communicated experiences and participation in this study. A coordinated approach

at policy level is required to improve services for individuals with autism, to ensure lifelong equality of access to all services in their community including education, health, housing and employment (Fuentes, 2015). The expenditure and funding of interventions and supports should reflect the spectrum of needs that individuals with autism present with, to ensure maximum return is achieved with taxpayers' resources (Buescher et al., 2014). The importance of EI has been cited, as Horlin et al. (2014) reported "a delay in diagnosis was associated with an indirect increased financial burden to families. Early and appropriate access to early intervention is known to improve a child's long-term outcomes and reduce lifetime costs to the individual, family and society" (p.1). This analysis provides a timely reminder to policy makers, by raising awareness in society that "autistic children do in fact grow into autistic adults" (Blackburn, 2000, p.13). By removing these systemic barriers associated with insufficient levels of funding, it is argued that the economic and social benefits of investing in pupils with autism today, will far outweigh any costs associated with caring for young people and adults with autism in the future.

5.6 The Provision of Special Classes

There was consensus among all stakeholders that the current operation of special classes—with pupils of mixed abilities and needs—are not viable in its present form. The perception was conveyed throughout this study that pupils with mild, moderate and severe needs—ranging from high-functioning (HFA) to low

functioning (LFA) on the autism spectrum—should not be placed together in one class setting. Findings from this study are supported in the NCSE's policy advice (NCSE, 2015) on supporting pupils with autism in schools:

We found confusion in the system about the purpose and role of special classes for students with ASD, with some schools appearing to believe that the classes are resourced only to cater for the more able students with ASD. We are concerned that some students may be inappropriately placed or retained in mainstream or special classes when they might be more appropriately placed in a different setting. (p.6)

These findings recommend that access to special schools should be accessible to pupils with complex needs. The majority of stakeholders in this study agreed that special schools should be accessible to those pupils on the autism spectrum wishing to avail of this provision. The learning and social experiences for pupils on the autism spectrum are unique to each child, and greatly influenced by their "level of impairment and presence or absence of co-occurring difficulties" (Bond et al., 2016a, p.2). It is evident from this research that the spectrum of needs, abilities, ages and behaviours impact to varying degrees on the teaching, learning and social experiences for all pupils with autism. Findings from this study highlighting variations in special class practices are supported in the literature (McCoy et al., 2014a). Another national report on the provision of special classes identified "some variation in the purpose of the special class across schools particularly

according to the severity of need of the students in the class" (Banks et al., 2016, p.4). The reported variation in practices and ambiguity surrounding the role and function of special class provision, prompted calls in the literature for special class operational guidelines regarding inter alia, its aims and objectives, the initial set up phases, and eligibility criteria for schools (McCoy et al., 2014, p.6) that have since been addressed (NCSE, 2016b). Within this context of schools being unclear of intended policy aims, findings from this research will contribute to the discussion and debate to some degree "around the role and purpose of special classes in Irish schools within the context of inclusive education" (Banks et al., 2016, p.6).

All four principals—and the majority of parents—from the in-depth case study schools criticised the Irish Government for the inequitable and inadequate system of supports. According to Stevens and O'Moore (2009) "the special class model of provision has been neglected, in terms of reviews being heavily overshadowed by the move towards mainstream class inclusion in the same national schools in which they operate" (p.52). They were also critical of previous research that predominantly focused on the provision of special schools "with little reference to issues specifically of concern to special classes, their pupils or their teachers" (Stevens & O'Moore, 2009, p.52).

The process of accommodating the diverse needs of pupils with autism is challenging on many levels in any school context.

Daly et al. (2016) reported teachers experiencing difficulties "in differentiating curriculum access for children with more complex needs" (p.75). Similar challenges were identified by Banks et al. (2016) as "one teacher in an ASD class also found that the special class setting was not suitable for some children with more severe needs, particularly when staff at the class were not trained" (p.27). It was also reported that principals experienced difficulties "in maintaining a balance in facilitating the inclusion of children with ASD in the mainstream classes where class teachers had large class numbers" and in dual class environments (Daly et al., 2016, p.85). Pupils on the autism spectrum can lack basic social skills that make it difficult for them to engage socially and interact with their peers and teachers (Bond et al., 2016a; Jones et al., 2008). This may explain why they are at an increased risk of experiencing bullying and being excluded from schools, and perceived to be more difficult to teach (Humphrey, 2008). According to Banks et al. (2016) certain "trade-offs were being made between social and academic achievement for the students. While some teachers felt that the students could benefit socially from being integrated in mainstream classes, it is less clear that this had a positive effect on learning and achievement" (p.46). This is consistent with the findings from this study, as learning experiences for each pupil on the autism spectrum varied considerably across each school.

Two principals raised specific concerns regarding the new model of supports for pupils with ALN—that is due to be

introduced in 2017 (DES, 2017a)—surrounding complex needs. Confusion and uncertainty prevailed regarding the diagnostic criteria for pupils' complex needs, as the criteria and the individuals responsible for carrying out these assessments were hitherto unclear and ill-defined. These concerns were echoed by the partners in education during the pilot review process (DES, 2016b). Principals in this study were sceptical that these changes would improve the future provision of supports for pupils with autism. A comprehensive review of supports for pupils with ALN in Ireland stated the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) "still represented the most effective blueprint for delivering resources" to pupils with ALN and "recommended the full implementation of the Act as soon as resources permitted" (NCSE, 2014a, p.3).

Evidence from this study and germane literature highlight the varied experiences and ongoing challenges associated with pupils on the autism spectrum and their levels of engagement in learning (Rose et al., 2015; Ware et al., 2009). The Criteria for the Admission of Pupils to Special Classes in National Schools (Circular 23/77, Department of Education, 1977 as cited in Ware et al., 2009) acknowledged the importance of an evaluation process, as "placement in a special class should be looked upon as a serious educational intervention and should be regularly reviewed by the principal and special class teacher. The child should be reassessed if there is a doubt concerning the suitability of his placement" (p.57). Further research is particularly required in special classes at

post-primary level as "the model of provision for post-primary students with ASD needs some refinement" (NCSE, 2015, p.6). Similar concerns about post-primary provision for pupils with ALN were reported by Kinsella (2009) regarding the challenges of mixed ability teaching and learning. These challenges illustrate the "possible conflicting tension between the need to maintain and, where possible, raise standards and, at the same time, cater for an increasing diversity of student within mainstream schools" (Kinsella, 2009, p.86). Based on the evidence presented, it is argued that the provision of special classes—in both primary and post-primary schools—should be evaluated regularly to ensure continuity of supports and to assess its suitability for each pupil on the autism spectrum.

5.7 Dilemma of School Placement

The dilemma of having to choose between special schools, special classes or mainstream schools was an ongoing struggle for many parents. There was widespread consensus among parents and professionals on the importance of having special school access for a minority of pupils with more complex needs (NCSE, 2015; Parsons et al., 2009a; UNESCO, 1994). Most parents in this study wanted a choice when it comes to decision-making about schooling. The importance of parents having authentic choices surrounding the provision of schooling was supported by every parent in this study and has been identified in the literature (DES, 1993; NCSE, 2013a; Slee & Allan, 2001). The SERC Report (DES,

1993) stated the needs of certain pupils with ALN cannot be met in mainstream schools and continued placement in this setting could be detrimental to the child and other pupils. Parents of children with ALN have struggled with the dilemma of placement for many years, alongside additional dilemmas including: the curriculum dilemma; the parent-professional dilemma; and labelling dilemma (Norwich, 1993). Reduced schooling options for parents of children with autism have been previously cited (Jones et al., 2008).

Many parents struggled with the limited options available to them in securing a suitable school for their child (Flatman Watson, 2005). This finding is consistent with Rose et al. (2015) as they indicated that "some parents had experienced difficulties in accessing the school of their choice for their child" (p.30). Similar difficulties of finding appropriate provision of schooling for pupils with ALN have been reported in the United Kingdom (UK) (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014). One parent in this study was dissatisfied that their child had to always conform to the mainstream standards that were stressful for her child, with similar findings previously cited in the literature (Jones et al., 2008).

These difficulties were exacerbated for many parents who had to avail of transportation services, as the school was located outside their community. While transportation is necessary for pupils on the autism spectrum to attend school, it can also act as a barrier to inclusive practices. Two pupils in this study were excluded from school for an extended period of time caused by

delays in accessing transportation services. In addition, many parents in this study reported their children travelling long distances that resulted in reduced opportunities to connect with peers in their respective schools and local communities. The challenges associated with long journeys and attending schools outside the local community have been acknowledged in the literature for pupils with ALN (NCSE, 2013a) and for pupils with autism (NCSE, 2015; Shevlin et al., 2008). Findings from this study are consistent with the literature that confirm the long distances travelled by pupils adversely impact on their "learning because of fatigue and in social and emotional terms because the child is leaving his/her community" (NCSE, 2013a, p.148). These findings challenge the notion that special classes can facilitate pupils receiving their education in their locality (Banks et al., 2016; Ware et al., 2009). One principle guiding national policy on the future provision of supports to pupils with ALN in schools states that all children are entitled to enrol in their local school (NCSE, 2013a). However, many parents and pupils on the autism spectrum did not have access to a special class in their community as evidenced by findings in this study. Many parents were excluded from attending their local school and this is supported in the literature (Flatman Watson, 2005). A recurring theme among the majority of parents in this study was the importance of living near the school (Jones et al., 2008).

All parents were aware of the importance of having their child diagnosed with autism, as the diagnosis increased their possibilities of accessing essential support services. Parents also raised concerns about the potential stigma—in the school and wider community—associated with their child having a labelled disability and this has been confirmed in the literature (NCSE, 2015). Most parents raised some concerns about the potential of bullying, and in particular when their child transfers to post primary school. These parental concerns are valid, as Humphrey and Hebron (2014) found that pupils on the autism spectrum are at an increased risk of experiencing bullying, when compared to other pupils with and without additional learning needs (ALN).

These findings could benefit schools with their planning and implementation of support structures to facilitate better experiences for this vulnerable group of pupils during their transfer from primary to post-primary school. A reduction in the experiences of bullying may improve the retention rates, as pupils on the autism spectrum are also at an increased risk of being excluded or permanently dropping out of school (Barnard et al., 2000; Humphrey, 2008). The experiences raised by many parents in this study emphasise the importance of professionals communicating with parents. The dissemination of appropriate information and advice from relevant state bodies regarding the "multiplicity of approaches to inclusion" is important for all stakeholders (Meijer, Soriano & Watkins, 2003, p.7). Every parent

in this study wanted more information, support and advice at various stages regarding their child's provision of schooling. Moreover, parents need to be made aware of the potential complexities and challenges that some pupils with autism may experience during mainstream placements (Daly et al., 2016; Jones et al, 2008). The legislative responsibility to include all pupils with ALN (Government of Ireland, 2004) and the potential threat of litigation (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007; Rix et al., 2013) may preclude schools informing parents of these issues. The significance of open dialogue and information sharing between parents and professionals have been acknowledged as "the more information parents have about the range of provision and supports available, the better their choice is likely to be" (NCSE, 2013c, p.8). Greater clarity is required on the purpose of special classes. Guidance and continued advice is also required on the respective roles and responsibilities that are expected of stakeholders in each school community, with the collective aim of improving the learning and social outcomes for pupils with autism. It is posited that this would reduce the possibility of any mismatch between parental expectations and the capacity of schools to improve outcomes for pupils with autism that is currently evident in post-primary schools in Ireland (Daly et al., 2016). Prunty (2011) reported the challenges posed to teachers regarding the "unrealistic expectations or unrealistic goals" set by parents for their child (p.36) and this was a common theme raised by many teachers in this study. Discussions

between parents and teachers should address the potential challenges of attending mainstream schools, whilst taking into account the realistic expectations for each child with autism based on their respective level of ability.

Based on the evidence presented, it is argued that greater channels of communication should be fostered between government departments, state agencies and relevant stakeholders in the school community. This would make it easier for parents to access relevant and appropriate information regarding education, health services, therapeutic interventions and entitlements for their child with autism. The importance of early intervention (EI) was cited by most parents and these findings have been confirmed in the literature over many years (DES, 1993, 2017a; NCSE, 2015; Parsons et al., 2009a). A centralised information system would ensure that parents could make more informed decisions about the educational and care needs of their child. This would make parents more confident in the decisions taken, particularly regarding the placement of their child to schools they feel are sufficiently resourced and best suited to successfully meet their child's needs.

5.8 Evolving Parental Attitudes

It was evident that children experienced more challenges and difficulties as they progressed through school. Difficulties experienced by individuals with autism at various time points in their lives have been established for some time (Andersson, Miniscalco & Gillberg, 2014; Kasari et al., 1999; Lynch & Irvine,

2009; Roux et al., 2015; Shivers, Krisova & Lee, 2017). These experiences impacted negatively on the attitudes of most parents in this study, with the broad perception that the education system was failing to meet their child's needs. There was a sense of continuous frustration among parents as they encountered a myriad of struggles trying to access appropriate supports for their child. Findings from this study are supported by Rose et al. (2015) as they reported "while parents were positive about school provision a few were aware their children faced ongoing challenges in progressing through primary school" (p.110).

It is widely accepted that a diagnosis of autism has a major impact on the life of the individual and on their families (DES, 2001; Howlin & Moore, 1997; Jones et al., 2014; Roux et al., 2015). The HSE (2012) previously acknowledged the "unrelenting care giving demand" regarding the difficulties encountered by parents in rearing a child with autism (p.36). A highly stressed family environment may explain why divorce rates are high among parents of children with autism (Andersson, Miniscalco & Gillberg, 2014). It was evident that the well-being of all parents and families in this study were affected to varying degrees by having a family member with autism. These findings are supported by Karst and Van Hecke (2012) who also established that parents of children with autism experience: high stress levels; psychological and physical problems; a deterioration in parental capabilities; increased prevalence of divorce; and the subsequent "lower overall

family well-being highlight the burden that having a child with an ASD can place on families" (p.247).

These difficulties are exacerbated for parents due to inadequate support services from the time of the initial assessment to the period following the diagnosis of their child with autism. Many of the difficulties raised were generally overcome through private assessment and support services. Moore et al. (1999) reported "it was not uncommon for diagnosis to be provided 'in a vacuum', with no structured advice and follow-up support" (p.11) and this was a recurring theme described by some parents in this study. The experiences identified by Crane et al. (2016) also resonated with the experiences of parents from this study who were broadly dissatisfied with the overall diagnostic process. Some parents from this study described having particularly negative experiences with professionals, regarding their perfunctory manner and clinical communication of their child's diagnosis of autism. Parents felt intimidated and overwhelmed, as they described their difficulties of feeling judged by the disproportionate number of professionals involved in the assessment process. This is consistent with Connolly and Gersch (2016) who reported that "parents can find the experience of dealing with professionals intimidating and unnerving" (p.257).

After the initial shock of receiving their child's diagnosis of autism combined with the realisation that little support or guidance were available, feelings of loneliness and isolation were

commonly experienced by parents. Difficulties experienced by parents in this study were identified by Jones et al. (2014) as they acknowledged that "receiving a diagnosis was a difficult experience for a number of people, and being left without any formal support after receiving such potentially life-changing information led some people to feel alone and unsure about the future" (p.3042). Diagnostic delays and the lack of subsequent supports have been reported for many years (DES, 2001; Glazzard & Overall, 2012; Howlin & Moore, 1997; McGee, 2004; NCSE, 2016a, 2016b). It should be noted that difficulties with delayed diagnosis of autism can also present challenges as children transfer to: primary school (Connolly & Gersch, 2016); to post-primary school (Dann, 2011); and to adulthood (Lewis, 2017).

Information and knowledge deficits were reported in this study that prevented parents making informed decisions on appropriate educational and care interventions required to assist their child's overall development. Most parents felt they had to repeatedly battle for access to supports for their child with autism. Colm would like more efficient access to appropriate, early interventions so that his son Seán would not always be playing catch-up in a system, with resources being provided too late to make any real impact on his learning and social development. This perspective was supported by Andersson, Miniscalco and Gillberg (2014) whose findings encouraged "further development of early detection and diagnosis, and early interventions" (p.3401). These

difficulties were compounded by the continuous challenge of accessing ongoing educational and care supports, as evidence in this study indicates that the supply of educational and clinical services is unable to cope with the current demand of children's changing presentation of needs. The constant experience of parents fighting for the right to access supports is symptomatic of a broken system that does not have the capacity presently to change the status quo.

The benefit of having a model of "effective partnership between home and school" was acknowledged Frederickson and Cline (2002) as it generally results in "the enhancement of student learning" (p.15). The Report of the Task Force on Autism (DES, 2001) supported this by acknowledging "that the cooperation and confidence of parents is crucial to the success of all intervention undertaken by teachers, clinicians and therapists, as students are influenced tremendously by parental attitudes and belief systems" (p.43). The importance of parental confidence was also acknowledged in the UK with the publication of the Lamb Inquiry (DCSF, 2009). The disconnect between policy and practice regarding parental input has been previously highlighted by Hegarty (1993) as he suggested "there is a lot of rhetoric about taking account of parents' views but in practice they are often ignored" (p.17). Similar findings on the "rhetoric of partnership" were reported by Winter and O'Raw (2010) as they established "that parents of pupils with special educational needs often report

that their relationships with school personnel and other professionals are characterised by stress, frustration and alienation" (p.76). Most parents in this study highlighted the need for improving the channels of communication with schools and information sharing regarding autism and related services. This could be based on a national, centralised forum that was previously recommended "to facilitate the dissemination of information and the exchange of views between parents and professionals" (DES, 2001, p.42).

In order to improve the diagnostic experience for the child, it is evident from this study and confirmed by Andersson, Miniscalco and Gillberg (2014) that "both parents and teachers receive good information about the results of the clinical evaluation and how they might best meet the child's needs" (p.3401). The positive experiences of three parents on the Early Bird Programme—a course run by the Health Service Executive (HSE) for parents of children on the autism spectrum—suggest that this programme could be developed so that all parents could access nationwide. It should be noted that not all parents participating in this study were aware of or had access to this programme. This system of support for parents could be expanded to ease the pressures and stresses experienced by parents at the time of receiving their child's diagnosis, as Siklos and Kerns (2007) suggest:

Parents' receiving a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder should be offered counselling or put in touch with

community support groups to help them deal with the stressful diagnosis. Helping these parents with their initial reactions may result in decreased pressure on an already saturated service delivery system. (p.20)

The Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA)—a centre for excellence for children on the autism spectrum located in Northern Ireland—reported on the significance of parent and professional partnerships (PPP) (MCA, 2015). The importance of professionals fostering positive relationships and working in partnership with parents was also emphasised in the Warnock Report (DES, 1978):

It is a partnership, and ideally an equal one. For although we tend to dwell upon the dependence of many parents on professional support, we are well aware that professional help cannot be wholly effective—if at all so—unless it builds upon the parents' own understanding of their children's needs and upon the parents' capacity to be involved. (p.151)

Price (2012) reported that increased collaboration and greater "contact between parents and professionals is essential in creating confidence, empowerment and involvement" (as cited in MCA, 2015, p.33). This is supported by Blue-Banning et al. (2004) as parents and professionals "generated comments about the importance of communication, commitment, equality, skills, respect, and trust for successful relationships to occur" (p.180). Evidence of collaborative programmes is also emerging in the literature (Preece et al., 2017).

Based on the evidence presented from this study and germane literature, it is argued that continuity of supports and services is required for parents as their child on the autism spectrum progresses through school. This provides an acknowledgement of the critical role of parents in assisting the capacity of schools in meeting the learning and social needs of their children. Findings from this study are consistent with extant literature that supports the requirement for developing training programmes for families of children on the autism spectrum (NCSE, 2015). These programmes could be extended to collaborative training exercises and education programmes that would involve all family members and professionals (MCA, 2015; Preece et al., 2017). It is argued that increasing access to such programmes would improve the experiences of pupils with autism in their respective home, school and community environments.

5.9 Pupil Voice

Findings from this study show that most pupils on the autism spectrum enjoy school and have had many positive experiences across each school environment. Varied reports have emerged from the literature reporting the positive (Rose et al., 2015) and negative schooling experiences (McCoy & Banks, 2012) of pupils with ALN. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) informed the subsequent direction of policy documents (DES, 2016a; Department of Health & Children, 2000) and legislation (Government of Ireland, 2012) in Ireland that uphold the

principle of giving children a voice in matters that affect them. Despite these positive developments, challenges remain with the implementation of these principles in practice (Prunty, DuPont & McDaid, 2012; Shevlin & Rose, 2008). For example, there appeared to be limited pupil involvement in the planning and development of individual education plans (IEPs). Similar findings were reported by Prunty (2011) within the IEP process where inconsistencies in practice have been previously cited (Rose et al., 2012).

The importance of listening to pupils to inform educational policy and practice has been well documented in both national (Daly., et al., 2016; DES, 2001; Greene et al., 2010a, 2010b; NCSE, 2015; Rose et al., 2015) and international literature (Beresford et al., 2007; DfES, 2004a; Jones et al., 2008; Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman, 2014). Pupils are now seen as partners in education who can make a valuable contribution to providing a greater understanding of their lived experiences (Christensen & James, 2008; O'Kane, 2008; Shevlin & Rose, 2008; Shier, 2001). New findings from from this study suggest that many pupils with autism can make positive contributions about their learning and social experiences, through the use of age appropriate and child centred methodologies that were employed in this study (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Burke & Grosvenor, 2003; Clark & Moss, 2011; MacBeath et al., 2003; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). The different methodologies employed in this study worked well with the

majority of pupils with autism, as they generally found them engaging and enjoyable to complete. The ideal school for pupils with autism in this study would: facilitate connections with peers; create opportunities for friendship; and make learning fun and challenging. It was evident from the feedback received from pupils that they enjoy playing, having fun, being active and happy.

Two parents were particularly surprised at the positive contributions and feedback received from their children. The use of child centred methodologies incorporating the use of visual and written activities have been previously cited as an acceptable method to elicit the views of pupils with autism (Beresford et al., 2004; Daly et al., 2016; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Lewis, Parsons & Robertson, 2007) and provided a rationale for their use in this study.

Eliciting the views of pupils with autism provided a platform for significant issues to be raised. For example, the reported experiences of suicidal ideation in this study highlight the importance of listening to pupils with autism to safeguard and protect their long-term mental health and well-being. Cusack et al. (2016) conveyed the difficulties experienced by adults with autism relating to mental health, suicide and early death. It should be acknowledged that few pupils with autism struggled to complete some of the activities and engage in meaningful conversation. Findings from this study are consistent with studies that highlight the challenges of eliciting the opinions of some pupils with autism

(Preece & Jordan, 2009) that have been identified as being a difficult group to reach (Beresford et al., 2004). These challenges must be overcome through varied methodologies, to ensure the voices of all pupils on the autism spectrum can be heard (Preece, 2002). The principles within the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health & Children, 2000) espoused a vision to provide the impetus for change at both local and national levels. This vision was underpinned by three main objectives that strived "to listen to, to think about, and to act more effectively for children" (Department of Health & Children, 2000, p.4). Based on the findings from this study and extant literature, researchers, practitioners and policymakers must continue to provide additional opportunities to all children with varied needs to voice their opinions and insights, that enables them to play an active role in all matters affecting them (Cook-Sather, 2006; Prunty, DuPont & McDaid, 2012).

5.10 Strengths and Limitations of Research

The progression of this study was determined by the number of schools who chose to participate and granted the researcher access to the school for the undertaking of this study. The researcher encountered difficulty from the beginning of the research to secure access to a number of potential schools who declined or failed to respond to numerous requests to participate. Significant time was lost during this recruitment period which

could have been used more productively in schools had access been granted at an earlier stage.

It was considered to provide a more in-depth analysis of all eight schools at the outset of this research. A case study is an empirical in-depth investigation on a phenomenon in any given context (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009). However, it is important for case study research to remain bounded and focused (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1978; Yin, 2009). By widening the scope and breadth of this study, this could have compromised the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the research findings in the context of each school (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011a). The multicase in-depth analysis of four schools is consistent with current research on case studies (Stake, 2006).

The undertaking of this small scale study undertaken by a sole researcher should not detract from the research findings. The uniqueness of each case allows the researcher to compare and contrast data across multiple-case study sites (Miles & Huberman, 1994). While they acknowledge that these findings maybe mildly comparable in different contexts, Miles and Huberman (1994) indicate that these comparisons and tests allow "us to make some general statements about the core processes and determinants at work" (p.31). The main aim of this research "is to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization)" (Yin, 2009, p.15).

It is posited that the richness of qualitative data collected in this study will increase our awareness and understanding of two fairly recent phenomena in the context of Irish education, namely autism and inclusive practices. Denzin, Lincoln and Giardina (2006) establish that "critical, interpretive qualitative research creates the power for positive, ethical, communitarian change, and the new practitioners entering this field deeply desire to use the power of the university to make such change" (p.779). It is argued that research driven by relevant stakeholders in the educational community is crucial to widening the knowledge base and to inform future best practices in schools for pupils with autism.

5.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a discussion and analysis of the key findings emanating from this research in the context of current literature. Many interrelated factors at a macro-level and micro-level were identified that facilitate and inhibit mainstream, inclusive school practices for pupils with autism. The concluding chapter will present an overview of the key findings in the context of the research questions posed at the outset of this study. The implications for policy and practice and areas identified for further research will also be considered.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

Following the publication of the Salamanca Report (UNESCO, 1994), many countries around the world have committed to the principle of establishing inclusive learning environments in mainstream schools for all children (Meijer et al., 2003; OECD, 2017). These commitments have had a major impact on the number of pupils with autism attending mainstream schools in Ireland. By 2016, the number of pupils with autism in receipt of resource teaching in primary and post-primary schools were 6,487 and 3,341 respectively (NCSE, 2017). Despite many improvements, challenges persist with the educational provision for the increased number of pupils with autism attending mainstream schools in Ireland (Daly et al. 2016; NCSE, 2015; Parsons et al., 2009a).

This chapter will present a discussion of the key findings in the context of the research questions posed in chapter one. Implications for Policy and Practice will be referred to in the appropriate sections. This chapter will be presented under the following sub-headings:

- Stakeholders' Experiences of Inclusive Practices.
- What Facilitates Inclusive Practices?
- What are the Barriers to Inclusive Practices?
- Stakeholders' Experiences of Transition and Transfer.
- Ideal School for Pupils with Autism.
- Areas Identified for Future Research.

6.2 Stakeholders' Experiences of Inclusive Practices

Findings from this study highlighted inconsistencies in practice and varied experiences across each school environment regarding the educational provision for pupils with autism. Although schools were working within an environment of limited resources, most parents were broadly satisfied with the efforts made by schools to accommodate the needs of their child. There was broad consensus on the positive roles played by school staff, including the teacher, the principal and special needs assistants (SNAs). This was echoed in the whole school evaluation (WSE) reports carried out by the Department of Education and Science (DES) that acknowledged the positive work carried out by professionals in each school. Home-school relations were positively viewed by the majority of parents, with few parents having contrasting experiences after their child's transfer to different school settings.

It was important for most parents that teachers had high expectations for their children. They wanted their children to work in challenging learning environments where they can progress and develop to their maximum potential. The social outcomes were reportedly more important to most parents in comparison to academic outcomes for their child. Increased challenges were experienced by most parents as their child progressed through school and this adversely impacted on their own attitudes of the education system. Findings from this study suggest it is important

that parental expectations are reflective of the realities of mainstream provision and limited availability of supports.

6.3 What Facilitates Inclusive Practices?

A number of factors were presented in this study that greatly influenced the outcomes of inclusive practices in each school. These included inter alia: the quality of school management and the role of the principal; the ethos of the school; collaborative work practices; the teaching and support staff; and positive parental involvement. It was evident throughout this study that the staff in each school were committed to improve the learning and social experiences for all pupils with autism.

Findings from this study supported the view that quality learning is facilitated through quality leadership. It was evident throughout this study that the principal sets the foundations for inculcating a climate that: facilitates positive working practices; fosters more positive attitudes and relationships among staff, parents and professionals; and actively encourages greater acceptance of difference and diversity in the school community. Formal and informal methods of communication are important, emphasising the importance of positive home-school relations for pupils with autism. Most parents reported an information deficit regarding available supports, appropriate interventions and entitlements for their child. Regular dissemination of information is therefore required from a centralised government agency, to

provide parents with ongoing information and guidance as required from the time their child receives a diagnosis of autism.

The role of the teacher is pivotal to achieving improved outcomes for pupils with autism, as evidenced in this study. The successful implementation of strategies to assist pupils' learning and social experiences included: buddy systems; reverse inclusion; peer support systems; positive classroom management; and the effective use of visual supports and thematic displays. The successful implementation of these strategies are dependent on the teacher's requisite levels of professional expertise, knowledge and confidence. Similar levels of expertise are required for differentiated teaching, learning and assessment strategies employed in the classroom. This ensures that all pupils with autism can access the curriculum in line with their ability, with their progress monitored and regularly reviewed. Social programmes were working well and welcomed by all parents in each school as they encouraged the development of social skills for pupils with autism by using facilities in each school and local community. The varied experiences reported in this study highlight the requirement for greater clarity on the roles and functions of special classes and the expected outcomes for pupils with autism attending these classes.

A range of supports enhanced the learning and social experiences of pupils with autism. Access to a quiet space in the school yard and classroom was important to pupils with autism in

this study. Popular facilities in schools included the school garden and a soft surface area where pupils could walk, play board games and relax. Access to therapeutic rooms were positively viewed in each school, as they were used to incentivise positive behaviours and facilitate movement breaks during the school day. Few teachers incorporated structured play activities as part of their daily pedagogical practice. The strategies employed by teachers here would be worthy of further exploration and analysis, as each special class teacher stressed the importance of play in the teaching of pupils with autism.

Inconsistent practices were reported regarding the development and application of individual education plans (IEPs) in each school. IEPs and the support provided by SNAs in schools were viewed favourably by most parents in this study. The levels of parental involvement and communication of IEP targets and reviews varied across each primary school. Difficulties with the IEPs were raised as pupils transferred to different schools including the transfer to post-primary school. There was little evidence in this study of SNA or pupil involvement in the IEP process. The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) should be enacted in full, to ensure consistency of best practice is achieved in both primary and post-primary schools. This will positively impact on the planning and development of IEPs in each sector. It is argued that a collaborative approach to the IEP process, with input from all stakeholders—including pupils and SNAs—would

positively contribute to the learning and social experiences for each pupil on the autism spectrum (DES, 2012). More consistent approaches are required to plan, implement and review IEPs in schools. There is scope for schools to provide for more consistent opportunities for parental and pupil involvement with regular communication of agreed targets in the IEP planning and review process. Varied practices were also reported regarding the assessment of learning in each school. These issues could be addressed during the ongoing DES self-evaluation process of teaching and learning in each school (DES, 2012).

Cluster support groups were in operation for teachers and principals that enabled professionals from various settings to collaborate and to provide support on autism and special class provision. There is scope to expand this process as not all professionals were aware or had access to these support groups. There was broad consensus among parents and professionals on the importance of pupils with autism having access to special needs assistants (SNAs) in schools. Special class teachers cited they would not be able to carry out their teaching duties within special class settings without the support of SNAs. The roles and responsibilities of SNAs were varied, with many SNAs undertaking many duties beyond their remit and included teaching and learning. Findings from this study suggest that clarification on the roles is required to ensure optimum levels of adult support is provided in the classroom for pupils with autism. The current

minimum standard of qualifications required to qualify as an SNA would assist this process and needs to be revised accordingly.

The child centred methodologies employed in this study emphasised the benefits of listening to pupils with autism. The evidence illustrated that the school environment, connecting with peers, friendship, having fun and being happy were important issues for most pupils on the autism spectrum. In addition, the reported experiences of suicidal ideation in this study highlight the importance of listening to pupils with autism to safeguard and protect their long-term mental health and future well-being.

6.4 What are the Barriers to Inclusive Practices?

The inability of parents to access adequate, clinical supports for their child with autism is making it increasingly difficult for schools to meet their learning and social needs. Evidence in this study has shown that parents still experience long delays for clinical assessments and access to therapeutic services, resulting in many parents having to avail of these services privately. The lack of communication and coordinated systems of support across government departments and agencies were reported consistently throughout this study. The recurring themes in this study highlighted the continued failure on the part on government to provide adequate resources to schools and clinical supports to pupils on the autism spectrum. In addition, the failure of the Irish Government to ratify the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) in full and to ratify the United Nations Convention on the

Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) confirms the perception of many parents and professionals in this study, that successive Irish Governments have failed in their remit to advance their legislative commitments into practice.

The ethos in each school was underpinned by the principles of equality of access and participation for all children, that recognises the important role and contribution of parents. However, a number of exclusionary clauses identified in the enrolment policies of schools are at variance with these principles, that can potentially restrict access to an appropriate education for any child with autism. This increased the dilemmas experienced by many parents in deciding on an appropriate school placement for their child. It is envisaged that the Admissions to Schools Bill (Government of Ireland, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c) will resolve many of these issues to provide equitable access to schools for each child on the autism spectrum.

The majority of stakeholders in this study were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the role of Government. There was an apparent disconnect between the aims of national policies and inclusive practices in each school. There appeared to be limited knowledge and awareness across each school community regarding the aims and content of inclusive policies both locally and nationally. Greater dissemination of policies is required at both local, regional and national level to address these issues. Evidence from this study highlights the requirement for ongoing reviews that

must be carried out on the entire education infrastructure of supporting pupils with additional learning needs (ALN). This will ensure greater levels of accountability among all stakeholders and provide a clear system to access services that prevents any barriers arising due to bureaucratic oversights or systemic failures. In light of this, a medium term review is recommended to assess whether the new model for supporting pupils with ALN in schools has been successful in its primary aims and objectives (DES, 2017e). Strong leadership is required from policy-makers to ensure they implement their legislated commitments, to ensure inclusive learning environments and communities become commonplace nationwide.

Many parents were critical and frustrated with the lack of ongoing support received from their local Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO). Most special class teachers reported having limited contact from their respective SENOs. The limited communication and guidance from SENOs was problematic for parents, particularly at the time of their child's transfer to a different school setting. Most parents felt isolated at this time and relied on the anecdotal experiences of other parents to assist with decision-making process on important issues which included school choice and placement options. Communication between SENOs and parents must be ameliorated to ensure that all children with autism are placed in appropriate educational settings in accordance with their abilities.

Initial teacher training (ITT) and professional development opportunities must be improved to ensure that all teachers are equipped with the necessary skill set to meet the diverse needs of pupils on the autism spectrum. The process of accommodating these diverse needs was raised as particularly challenging for most teachers in this study. Many teachers in this study had no training in supporting pupils with autism or ALN. These challenges were reportedly exacerbated for teachers when pupils with autism presented with more complex needs. The challenges of teaching in special classes could explain why principals regularly experienced difficulties with the appointment of teachers to special classes. This research supports the proposed national framework for teacher education on autism and teaching standards, that would enhance the capacity of professionals in schools to meet the needs of pupils with autism (NCSE, 2015). Collaborative training programmes could be extended for both parents and teachers to augment the knowledge base, understanding and awareness of autism in each school community.

Most parents and professionals agreed that the mixed ability special classes—that enrol pupils with high and low functioning autism—are unviable in its present form. It was evident in this study that the spectrum of pupils' abilities, ages and behaviours greatly impacted on the learning and social experiences for all pupils with autism. The challenging behaviours exhibited by some pupils with autism is a great source of stress in schools, with many

teachers and SNAs intermittently experiencing a range of minor assaults and serious injuries. Increased supports are required for schools who have difficulty accommodating the needs of pupils on the autism spectrum with more complex needs. Greater clarity is required on the role of special classes, so that schools can provide a safe and happy working and learning environment to improve outcomes for all pupils on the autism spectrum.

Attitudes towards disability can greatly influence the experiences for pupils with autism in their school and local community. Findings from this study have shown that the introduction of special classes had positively impacted on the attitudes of peers in each school environment. The majority of parents communicated the difficulties associated with autism, experiencing negative attitudes in the community as their child's disability can be at times difficult to discern. Increased awareness of autism and disabilities in general is required, to improve the general levels of understanding regarding the many challenges that individuals and families encounter in schools and society on a daily basis.

Findings relating to transportation presented an anomaly in the system, as it paradoxically contributed to the experiences of inclusion and exclusion for pupils on the autism spectrum. While transportation was pivotal for school access, it resulted in many pupils with autism having reduced opportunities for social interactions in school and in their locality. Long distances and

travel times were reportedly common experiences for pupils with autism. Transportation also precluded some pupils engaging in extracurricular activities after school. It is argued that school inclusion is contributing to a form of social exclusion for many pupils with autism, as special class provision is not an option in every community as evidenced in this study.

6.5 Stakeholders' Experiences of Transition and Transfer

Children on the autism spectrum experienced increased difficulties as they progressed through school, especially as the learning content became more challenging making it more difficult to keep up with their peers. Most parents regularly voiced concerns at the potential challenges associated with their child transferring to post-primary school. These difficulties were magnified as pupils progressed towards their final years in primary school.

Difficulties with transfer were also encountered by parents of children with autism who were attending junior primary schools. The continuity of access to special class provision was not always an option for parents between junior and senior primary schools as evidenced in this study. Many parents were angered and fearful at the potential loss of supports when transferring to schools without special class provision. Every parent wanted options regarding access to mainstream and specialised educational placements for their child. There was overwhelming

agreement among parents and professionals on the importance of having continued access to special schools for some pupils with more complex needs on the autism spectrum. Parents require ongoing advice, information and supports during the decision-making process, to ensure their child's needs can be accommodated in their chosen school placement. This is particularly important for pupils transferring from special classes in junior schools to senior primary schools, to ensure continuity of supports is provided to all pupils with autism and their parents, for the entirety of their primary school placement. It is argued that these supports must be in place to provide these pupils with every opportunity to succeed at post-primary level.

6.6 Ideal School for Pupils with Autism

Most parents and professionals would like to see a system that provided continuity of access and consistency of supports to meet the changing presentation of needs of pupils on the autism spectrum. Many parents would like to have access to clinical supports on the same site as the school, but acknowledged this was unlikely due to the government's fiscal constraints and potential costs involved. An interesting idea was proffered by one principal, who suggested that clinical teams could be established to provide roving supports and advice to pupils with autism and schools within particular geographical catchments around the country. These teams could consist of a range of therapists and psychologists, providing support on a rotational basis between

schools over a specific time period. The principal also acknowledged the financial barriers and the potentially high costs that would preclude the implementation of this proposed system. However, findings from this study have posited that increased investment in early intervention and support programmes outlined above would benefit pupils with autism and wider society. Having access to a more responsive support system from a young age, it is argued that these children with autism will have a greater chance to develop the skills required for independent living during adulthood. This would effectively reduce the overall annual costs to the national exchequer for the provision of services to adults with autism. In addition, every parent was concerned about future uncertainties, in particular regarding the question of care and support for their child should they become incapacitated or decease.

Effective liaison and communication would be required among various government agencies for the successful implementation of the proposed system. The SENO could provide the necessary link for this support system to become a viable option for schools, parents and pupils with autism. The implementation of an inclusive educational system is consistent with the principles espoused within international treaties and conventions (UN, 1948, 1989, 2006) and can positively contribute to a more inclusive and tolerant society in the long term. It is argued that an inclusive system of education that responds to the

diverse needs of all pupils, requires appropriate levels of government funding and investment. It is incumbent upon policy makers to ensure that the current levels of investment outlined in this study is sufficiently providing the most appropriate levels of support that will enhance the long-term outcomes and opportunities for young children with autism.

6.7 Areas Identified for Future Research

According to Kasari and Smith (2013) "research that increases diversity in research samples, addresses the daily challenges children face in school, and assists school staff in implementing effective and personalized interventions should lead to better outcomes for children with autism" (p.265). It is important that more collaborative studies are undertaken that actively involve all stakeholders in community, to ensure their voices are heard and to inform current and future best practices in the educational provision for pupils with autism.

Parsons et al. (2009a) identified a dearth of empirical evidence that examined the views of stakeholders—and particularly young children—on inclusive practices in Irish schools for pupils on the autism spectrum. The perspectives of pupils with autism and relevant stakeholders were subsequently elicited in a national report that evaluated the educational provision for pupils on the autism spectrum (Daly et al., 2016). Despite this publication, there is still an acknowledged gap in research studies that have failed to provide opportunities for the involvement of children with autism (Bond et

al., 2016a). The limited evidence base on transition and of studies generating qualitative data is significant, as Bond et al. (2016a) emphasise these studies "will enable understanding of the experiences of those delivering and receiving interventions; their perceptions of effectiveness of interventions and the facilitators and barriers to effective implementation" (p.99). Further studies could track the experiences of primary pupils with autism nationally to ascertain their experiences of transfer to secondary school, tertiary education and employment. This investigation could concurrently analyse the experiences of transition within each phase as previously discussed. Two parents specifically cited the benefits of having access to an assistance dog for autism to their child with autism and their entire family. Parents were unsure on the overall impact of having an assistance dog and its direct influence on improved child behaviours. Further research could explore the long term benefits to children with autism and their families with access to assistance dogs and the potential of other animals including horses. The mental health and well-being of young people with autism and their family members were identified in this study as potential areas of difficulty, especially as children progress through school. Autism is a lifelong condition that presents a series of experiences, challenges and costs to the individuals, their families and members of the community that extend beyond children's years in school into adulthood (Buescher et al., 2014; Ganz, 2007; Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman, 2013). Insufficient data are

currently available regarding the lifetime impact of autism on individuals and their family members. Consequently, further research could provide a cost benefit analysis to ascertain the lifetime and societal costs, and the overall impact of autism on individuals, their families and members of the community. This could form part of the overall compilation of data proposed in the new Autism Bill (Government of Ireland, 2017) regarding, inter alia, access to health, education, employment and public services for individuals on the autism spectrum.

6.8 Thesis Conclusion

A descriptive analysis of the experiences of pupils with autism and key stakeholders was presented and discussed. Many interrelated factors at a micro-level and at a macro-level were presented within the overarching research themes of policy, provision, experiences and outcomes. Evidence in this study highlighted mixed experiences and varied inclusive practices for pupils with autism attending mainstream schools. Despite the improvements made in recent years, the government must now legislate in recognition "that people with SEN and special education advocates no longer accept that this entitlement be based on another 'charity ball for the disabled'" (Ó'Murchú & Shevlin cited in Meegan & MacPhail, 2006, p.60).

New findings from this study dispute the recommendation put forward by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) that this act should be implemented "as soon as resources

permitted" (NCSE, 2014a, p.3). The imprescriptible right of all children to have access to primary education is enshrined in the Constitution of Ireland (Government of Ireland, 1937). Decisions regarding educational expenditure are an important policy choice for any government, which require further strategic investment in protecting the most vulnerable sections of society, particularly during economic downturns (Drudy, 2011). According to Kinsella and Senior (2008) "if the resources, expertise and structures are addressed in a vacuum, without attending to the underlying processes of communication and collaboration, it is likely that the response to pupils with additional needs will be narrow, parochial and separatist" (p.656). It is posited that the inconsistencies and variances in practices in participating schools in this research is largely attributable to the policy vacuum that schools have been operating within for some time (Children's Rights Alliance, 2015; Rose et al., 2015). Based on the evidence presented in this study and germane literature, this study supports the full and immediate implementation of the Epsen Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) to improve the learning and social experiences of pupils with autism and ALN (Meegan & MacPhail, 2006; NCSE, 2014a; O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010; Rose et al., 2015). Moreover, this would give a clear message of the government's commitment to implementing a truly inclusive system of education irrespective of financial constraints, by guaranteeing equality of access and automatic entitlement to supports for all pupils on the autism spectrum.

Hodkinson (2010) posited "if educational policy is to achieve an inclusive consciousness, it must ensure that the views of children, their families and educational professionals are listened to, and that inclusion is by the choice of the pupils and their parents and not by compulsion" (p.61). Parents ultimately want an eclectic range of placement options regarding school placement, as evidenced in this study and extant literature (Barnard, 2000). Robson (2002) suggests "all enquiry is concerned with contributing to knowledge" and establishes that "real world enquiry also commonly seeks a potential usefulness in relation to policy and practice" (p.61). This research can contribute to the debate on what constitutes appropriate educational provision for pupils with autism, by describing the experiences of pupils and relevant stakeholders. These new and different perspectives could form the basis for collaborative discussions among stakeholders in the community, that would guide future policy and practice in this area.

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Appendix A: Data Collection Instruments

Parents' Questionnaire (Phase 3)

Thank you for taking part in this questionnaire. It should take no more than 30 minutes.

Confidentiality

I would like to remind all participants that every effort will be made to protect the identity of all individuals and schools participating in this research. No participant or school will be individually named at any stage. Respect, anonymity and confidentiality will be of paramount importance throughout this research.

PS PA

Terms of Reference for this Questionnaire

Inclusion: "Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children" (UNESCO, 2005, p.13)

Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD): "Autism spectrum disorder is an umbrella term introduced by Lorna Wing in 1996 (Wing, 1996) to encompass different subgroups within the autistic spectrum including autism and Asperger syndrome. The three main areas of difficulty which all people with autism share are known as the "triad of impairments" which are difficulties in three areas of development relating to social and emotional understanding, communication and flexibility of thinking and behaviour" (NCSE, 2009, p.26-27)

Section 1: Inclusion in Your Child's School

(Adapted from Booth & Ainscow (2011) Index for Inclusion)

1=Agree; 2=Unsure; 3=Disagree; 4=Need more information

Please tick the box the best reflects your opinion

		1	2	3	4
1.	My child looks forward to coming to school.				
2.	My child has good friends at school.				
3.	I feel part of the school community.				
4.	The school keeps me well informed about what is going on.				
5.	Adults are kind to the children at school.				
6.	I am happy with the quality of teaching in school.				
7.	I think this is the best school in the area for my child's needs.				
8.	The school environment is very welcoming.				
9.	The children get on well together.				
10.	Adults and children get on well together.				
11.	Teachers and parents get on well together.				
12.	All families are equally important to the teachers.				
13.	I have friends among the other parents.				
14.	I like the teachers.				
15.	The teachers are interested in what I tell them about my child.				
16.	It's good to have children with various abilities at the school.				
17.	If I have a problem, I can approach the school for help.				
18.	Just by being at the school, my child learns how to get on with people.				
19.	Teachers are receptive to my concerns.				
20.	When my child started at this school there was an effort to make me feel involved.				
21.	Having a good relationship with school is critical to achieving successful outcomes for my child.				
22.	Every child is treated with respect.				
23.	Disabled children are accepted and respected at the school.				
24.	Bullying in any form is not tolerated.				
25.	Bullying is dealt with effectively.				

		1	2	3	4
26.	My child's special needs assistant (SNA) is very helpful.				
27.	I am happy with the support my child receives.				
28.	The school has a good system for supporting children when they have a problem.				
29.	My child knows how to get help with his or her work.				
30.	The school is a place where people really listen to each other's ideas.				
31.	My child always understands what to do in class.				
32.	My child learns a lot at this school.				
33.	The school values parental feedback.				
34.	I am happy with the school's communication protocols.				
35.	The school only contacts me when my child breaks the rules.				
36.	Homework is completed every night without difficulty.				
37.	My child is consistently challenged academically.				
38.	At lunchtimes my child joins in activities with other students.				
39.	In school, my child has the same opportunity to participate like all other students.				
40.	Mainstream education is helping my child to achieve his / her potential.				
41.	I have been consulted by the school in developing an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for my child.				
42.	I am happy with the IEP process in the school.				
43.	The IEP for my child is reviewed annually.				
44.	I am happy with the work carried out by the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO).				
45.	I am satisfied with the state's support services.				

What three things do you like about this school? _____

What three things do you dislike about this school? _____

What three things would you change at this school? _____

Q1. How many children are in your household?
 Number (Please specify)

Q2. Could you please outline the *age* and *gender* of your children and indicate if they have *special educational needs*?

	AGE	GENDER	SEN(tick if appropriate)
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Q3. What is your relationship to the child with ASD?
 Please tick *one* box only

Mother	<input type="checkbox"/>
Father	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mother and father	<input type="checkbox"/>
Guardian/carer	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q4. Could you please indicate the gender of your child with ASD?
 Please tick *one* box only

Male	<input type="checkbox"/>
Female	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q5. Could you please tell us the age of your child with ASD?
 Years old

Q6a. Does your child with ASD attend a special class in this school?		
Please tick <i>one</i> box only		
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	(go to Q6b)
No	<input type="checkbox"/>	(go to Q7a)
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>	(go to Q7a)

Q6b. Is this on a full or part time basis?	
Please tick <i>one</i> box only	
Full-time	<input type="checkbox"/>
Part-time	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q7a. In your view, is your child in the right type of school for his / her needs?	
Please tick <i>one</i> box only	
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Q7b. Could you explain why?	

Section 2: School Access

Q1. How would you describe your experience of finding a school placement?				
Please tick <i>one</i> box only				
Very easy	Quite easy	Neither/ nor	Quite difficult	Very difficult
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q2a. Does your child receive any support in relation to transport?		
Please tick <i>one</i> box only		
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	(go to Q2b)
No	<input type="checkbox"/>	(go to Section 3)

Q2b. Which of the following supports does your child receive?	
Please tick <i>all</i> that apply	
Bus	<input type="checkbox"/>
Taxi	<input type="checkbox"/>
Grant towards the cost of transport	<input type="checkbox"/>
An escort	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q2c. How satisfied are you with the transport provided for your child?				
Please tick <i>one</i> box only				
Very satisfied	Quite satisfied	Neither/ nor	Quite dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section 3: Assessment of Needs

Q1. At what age was your child diagnosed with ASD?	
<input type="text"/>	Years old

Q2. Who carried out this assessment?	
Please tick <i>relevant</i> boxes	
Educational Psychologist	<input type="checkbox"/>
Clinical Psychologist	<input type="checkbox"/>
Speech and Language Therapist	<input type="checkbox"/>
Occupational Therapist	<input type="checkbox"/>
Medical Doctor	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ophthalmologist	<input type="checkbox"/>
Audiologist	<input type="checkbox"/>
Psychiatrist	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Q3b. Why do you say that?

Q4. How satisfied are you with the following aspects of support for children with special educational needs in your child's school?

Please tick **one** box in each row

	Very satisfied	Quite satisfied	Neither/nor	Not very satisfied	Not at all satisfied	Don't Know
How satisfied are you with...?						
Knowledge of teachers						
Admission policy						
School's Curriculum						
Suitability of supports						
School Funding						
School culture						

Section 5: School Relations and Communication

Q1. Does your child have an Individual Education Plan (IEP)?

Please tick **one** box only

Yes	
No	
Don't know	

Q2. If your child has an Individual Education Plan (IEP), to what extent did you feel that the school involved you in the development of this plan?

Please tick **one** box only

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	N/A

Q3. Is the Individual Education Plan (IEP) regularly reviewed?

Please tick **one** box only

Yes		(go to Q4)
No		(go to Q5)
Don't know		(go to Q5)

Q4. How satisfied are you with your involvement in this ongoing review?

Please tick **one** box only

Very satisfied	Quite satisfied	Neither/nor	Quite dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable

Q5. Is what your child learning at school appropriate to his/her needs?

Please tick **one** box only

Very appropriate	Quite appropriate	Neither/nor	Quite inappropriate	Very inappropriate

Q6. Do you consider that your child is making progress according to their ability?

Please tick **one** box only

Very good progress	Good progress	Neither/nor	Not very good progress	No progress at all

Q7. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about school?						
Please tick <i>one</i> box in each row						
	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't Know
My child is welcomed						
My child is included						
My child is encouraged to make friends						
My child is prepared for life after school e.g. work						
My views are sought						
My child is prepared for life outside school e.g. social						

Q8. Please rate your satisfaction with the following statements.						
Please tick <i>one</i> box in each row						
	Very Satisfied	Quite Satisfied	Unsure	Not very satisfied	Not at all satisfied	Don't Know
How satisfied are you with...?						
Contact with your child's teacher(s)						
How the school tells you about your child's needs						
How the school tells you about your child's progress						
Your child's education						

Section 6: Contact with your Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO)

Q1. Have you met with or spoken to the SENO for your area?	
Please tick <i>one</i> box only	
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q2. How aware are you, of the role of the SENO?				
Please tick <i>one</i> box only				
Very aware	Quite aware	Neither/ nor	Not very aware	Not at all aware
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q3. Please rate the extent of your satisfaction with your child's SENO.						
Please tick <i>one</i> box in each row						
	Very Satisfied	Quite Satisfied	Neither/ nor	Not very satisfied	Not at all satisfied	Don't Know
How satisfied are you with...?						
Relationship with your SENO						
Knowledge of your child's needs						
Access to SENO						

Section 7: Overall satisfaction with the support provided for your child

Q1a. How satisfied are you with the ways your child's special educational needs are met by his or her school?				
Please tick <i>one</i> box only				
Very satisfied	Quite satisfied	Neither/ nor	Quite dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied

Q1b. Please explain your answer.

Q2. Did you ever complain about the support that your child receives?		
Please tick <i>one</i> box only		
Yes		(Go to Q3)
No		(Go to Q6)
Don't know		(Go to Q6)

Q3. Who did you complain to?	
Please tick <i>all</i> that apply	
Teacher	
Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO)	
Principal	
Special Needs Assistant	
The National Council for Special Education Head Office	
The National Educational Psychology Service	
Other (please specify)	

Q4. What was your complaint about?	
Please tick <i>all</i> that apply	
The time taken to get an assessment	
Nature of the assessment process	
The results of the assessment process	
The time taken to get the results from the assessment	
The cost of the assessment process	
Access to a Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO)	
The special educational support provided to your child	
How your child was being taught in school	
Other (please specify)	

Q5. Overall, how satisfied were you with the response to your complaint?				
Very satisfied	Quite satisfied	Neither/ nor	Quite dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied

Q6. Are there any other comments you would like to make in relation to the inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream schools?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Teachers' Questionnaire (Phase 3)

Demographics

Q1. Please state your gender.	
Please tick <i>one</i> box only	
Male	<input type="checkbox"/>
Female	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q2. Please state your age category.								
Please tick <i>one</i> box only								
Age Category	21-30	<input type="checkbox"/>	31-40	<input type="checkbox"/>	41-50	<input type="checkbox"/>	51-65	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q3. Please tick the relevant boxes to describe the class you teach & your role in school			
Class Group	✓	Teaching Capacity	✓
Junior Infants	<input type="checkbox"/>	Principal	<input type="checkbox"/>
Senior Infants	<input type="checkbox"/>	Multigrade mainstream teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>
First Class	<input type="checkbox"/>	Single grade mainstream teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>
Second Class	<input type="checkbox"/>	Learning Support	<input type="checkbox"/>
Third Class	<input type="checkbox"/>	Resource Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fourth Class	<input type="checkbox"/>	English Language Support	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fifth Class	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sixth Class	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>

Q3a. If you ticked other, please describe your position:

Teaching Experience

Q4. Please state how many years you have been teaching.

Q5. Your teaching experience is mainly in:	
Please tick <i>one</i> box only	
Mainstream Junior (Junior Infants to 1 st Class)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mainstream Senior (2 nd to 6 th Class)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learning Support / Resource	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q6. Please tick your highest qualification to date.	
Please tick <i>one</i> box only	
Bachelor's / Undergraduate Degree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Postgraduate Certificate	<input type="checkbox"/>
Postgraduate Diploma	<input type="checkbox"/>
Postgraduate Degree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Master's Degree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doctoral / PhD	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q7. Do you have a Learning Support / Special Educational Needs Qualification?	
Please tick <i>one</i> box only	
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q7a. If you ticked yes, please state the qualification and course duration.

<i>INCLUSION IN YOUR SCHOOL</i>					
<i>(Adapted from Booth & Ainscow (2011) Index for Inclusion)</i>					
<i>1=Agree; 2=Unsure; 3=Disagree; 4=Need more information</i>					
<i>Please tick the box the best reflects your opinion</i>					
		1	2	3	4
CREATING INCLUSIVE CULTURES					
8.	Everyone is welcomed in school				
9.	Staff work effectively together				
10.	Students help each other				
11.	Staff and students respect one another				
12.	Staff and parents/guardians collaborate				
13.	The staff and management work well together				
14.	The school is a model of democratic citizenship				
15.	There are positive relations between home and school				
16.	The students work effectively together				
17.	Staff respect each other				
18.	Staff link home and school life				
PRODUCING INCLUSIVE POLICIES					
19.	The school has a participatory development process				
20.	The school has an inclusive approach to leadership				
21.	Appointments and promotions are fair				
22.	Staff expertise is known and used				
23.	All new staff are helped to settle into the school				
24.	The school seeks to admit all students locally				
25.	All new students are helped to settle into the school				
26.	Teaching and learning groups are arranged fairly to support all students' learning				
27.	Students are well prepared for moving on to other settings				
28.	The school makes its buildings physically accessible to all people				
29.	The buildings and grounds are developed to support participation of all				
30.	All forms of support are co-ordinated				
31.	Professional development activities help staff to respond to diversity				
32.	The school ensures that policies about 'special educational needs' support inclusion				
33.	The behaviour policy is linked to learning and curriculum development				
34.	Every effort is made by staff to keep students in school				
35.	Inclusion has resulted in improved school attendance				
36.	Bullying is minimised amongst students				
EVOLVING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES					
37.	Every student is challenged academically				
38.	Students with ASD are actively engaged in the learning process				
39.	Students with ASD take part in all academic activities				
40.	Involving parents in school events is important				
41.	Individual Education Plans (IEP) are regularly reviewed.				
42.	I am happy with the IEP process in my school.				
43.	Students with ASD participate in extra-curricular activities in school				
44.	Students with ASD are benefitting socially from being in mainstream school.				
45.	During break, students with ASD join in activities with their peers in the yard				
46.	Time is given to liaise with support teachers.				
47.	Learning activities are planned with all students in mind				
48.	Learning activities encourage the participation of all students				
49.	Students are encouraged to be confident critical thinkers				
50.	Students learn from each other				
51.	Lessons develop an understanding of the similarities and differences between people				
52.	Assessments encourage the achievements of all students				

53.	Discipline is based on mutual respect				
54.	Staff plan, teach and review together				
55.	Staff develop shared resources to support learning				
56.	Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) support the learning and participation of all students				
57.	Homework is set so that it contributes to every student's learning				
58.	Activities outside formal lessons are made available for all students				
59.	The school has good resources to support students with ASD				
60.	I know the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) for my school				
61.	I am happy with the work carried out by the SENO				
62.	I am satisfied with the state's support services				

63. List three things you like about this school? _____

64. List three things you dislike about this school? _____

65. List three things you would change at this school? _____

Experience and Knowledge of Autism

Q66. Do you feel you have the skills to teach a student with ASD?

Please tick *one* box only

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q67. Having taught students with ASD, how would you describe the extent of their ASD?

Please tick *one* box only

Mild	<input type="checkbox"/>
Moderate	<input type="checkbox"/>
Severe	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q68. If training about ASD was available, how likely would you be to attend?

Please tick *one* box only

Very likely	Likely	Unlikely	Very unlikely
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q69. ASDs are characterised by a 'triad of impairments': the absence or impairment of *socialisation, communication, and imagination*. List these 3 in order you would anticipate causing the most problems (1= most problematic, 3= least problematic)

Please list below

1.	<input type="text"/>
2.	<input type="text"/>
3.	<input type="text"/>

Q69a. Please explain your answers. _____

Q70. Do you have access to a Special Needs Assistant (SNA)?

Please tick *one* box only

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q70a. If yes, does SNA support assist you to include students with ASD?

Please explain your answer. _____

Successful Inclusion of Students with Autism

Please tick the box that best reflects your opinion with each of the following statements.					
Please tick <i>one</i> box in each row					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
71. Where possible, all students with ASD should be included in mainstream schools					
72. Successful inclusion of students with ASD depends entirely on SNA support					
73. Successful inclusion depends on the academic ability of the student					
74. Successful inclusion depends on the degree of ASD					
75. Successful inclusion depends on the student's personality					
76. Successful inclusion depends on the attitudes of the staff					
77. A minority of able students with ASD should be in mainstream school					
78. Students with ASD are accessing the curriculum					
79. Academic inclusion for students with ASD is easy to achieve					
80. Social inclusion for students with ASD is easy to achieve					
81. Successful inclusion depends on access to additional resources					
82. Teacher training is critical if inclusion is to be achieved in schools					
83. There are many opportunities for teachers to upskill on ASD					
84. Differentiation of lessons enables students to access the curriculum.					
85. I vary my teaching strategies to include students in lessons					
86. I am happy differentiating lessons for all my students					
87. An individual Education Plan (IEP) is important for students with ASD					
88. I am happy to participate in the IEP process for my students					
89. I am satisfied with the IEP procedures in my school.					
90. Assessment is an important aspect of inclusion.					
91. I am comfortable assessing the needs of students with ASD					

Behaviours on the Autism Spectrum

Below is a list of behaviours sometimes displayed by students with ASD. Please circle a number according to how well you think you could cope with them in your class.

Please circle **one** number in each row

(1 = could cope easily and 5 = could not cope at all)

92. Need for rigid routine	1	2	3	4	5
93. Poor motor skills	1	2	3	4	5
94. Special interests on a particular topic e.g. maths	1	2	3	4	5
95. Rigid/literal thinking e.g. not understanding metaphors, jokes etc.	1	2	3	4	5
96. Lack of social understanding e.g. unable to read facial Expressions, body language etc.	1	2	3	4	5
97. Lack of eye contact	1	2	3	4	5
98. Poor turn taking skills	1	2	3	4	5
99. Preference to working / playing alone	1	2	3	4	5
100. High levels of anxiety	1	2	3	4	5
101. Displaying inappropriate emotions e.g. outbursts in class	1	2	3	4	5
102. Language problems	1	2	3	4	5
103. Aggression towards self/others	1	2	3	4	5

Open Questions

Q104. What *benefits* does a student with ASD gain if included in a mainstream school?

Please explain your answer.

Q105. What *problems* do you think a student with ASD may encounter if included in a mainstream school?

Please explain your answer.

Q106. What *benefits* do you think students in mainstream schools may gain when a student with ASD is included in a mainstream school?

Please explain your answer.

Q107. What *problems* do you think students in mainstream schools may encounter when a student with ASD is included in a mainstream school?

Please explain your answer.

Q108. In your opinion, what are the *barriers or challenges* you experience when trying to include students with ASD in your daily practice?

Please explain your answer.

Q109. Thinking about your daily practice at a school and at a class level, how do you attempt to *overcome* the barriers and challenges that you have outlined above?

Please explain your answer.

Q110. Can you think of any strategies or initiatives that could be implemented at a *school* level to better promote the inclusion of students with ASD in your school and in your class?

Please explain your answer.

Q111. Can you think of any strategies or initiatives that could be implemented at a *class* level to better promote the inclusion of students with ASD in your school and in your class?

Please explain your answer.

Q112. Any other comments relating to inclusion and ASD.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Parent Interview Guide (Phase 4)

Section 1: Warm-up

1. Can you tell me a little about **[Insert student's name here]**? (*strengths, personal qualities, interests / hobbies*)

Section 2: Policy

2. Have you heard about the EPSEN Act?
3. Can you outline any policies in your *school* that contribute to the successful inclusion of pupils with ASD?

Section 3: Provision

4. What is your understanding of inclusion & the characteristics of an inclusive school?
5. How accessible is the school for your child?
6. What supports does your child currently receive in school?
7. Is there an Individual Educational Plans (IEP) for **[Insert student's name here]**?
8. How does the school work with the SENO?
9. Tell me about your child's experiences of transition between classes / transfer to another school (delete as appropriate).

Section 4: Experiences

10. Can you describe how inclusion works in this class / school for your child?
11. How is your child progressing in school?
12. Does your child participate in extra-curricular activities in school?
13. Are there any areas you feel the school could be improved?

Section 5: Outcomes

14. How do you know about your child's progress in school?
15. Do you feel the school is doing a good job in meeting the needs of your child?
16. What kind of reports do you get to monitor your child's progress and development in school?

Section 6: Future

17. The title of this project is called *My Ideal School*. Could you describe your ideal school for students with ASD?
18. If I returned in two years, what changes would you like to have seen introduced in your school that you feel would benefit your child? i.e. future aspirations.
Have you any other comments? Thank you for your time

Teacher Interview Guide (Phase 4)

Section 1: Warm-up

1. Can you tell me a little about **[Insert student's name here]**? What is **[he/she]** like to work with?
2. What is your understanding of inclusion & the characteristics of an inclusive school?

Section 2: Experiences

3. Can you describe how inclusion works in this class / school?
4. Are there any areas you feel the school could be improved?
5. Are there any pupils with ASD that you feel this school is not suited to meeting their individual needs?

Section 3: Policy

6. Can you outline any policies in your *school* that contribute to the successful inclusion of pupils with ASD?

Section 4: Provision

7. How many students are in your class? with ASD? other SEN?
8. How do you feel about having **[Insert student's name here]** in your class?
9. Can you describe any teaching strategies / programmes that have worked well for including students with ASD in your class?
10. What *support systems* do you have in place to meet the needs of **[Insert student's name here]** in your class?
11. Is there an Individual Educational Plans (IEP) for **[Insert student's name here]**?
12. Have the staff in your school been offered *training* in relation to pupils with ASD?
13. What's your opinion of the overall work carried out by the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO)?

Section 5: Outcomes

14. How do you define success in terms of *academic* and *social* outcomes for students with ASD in your class?
15. How are these outcomes measured, assessed and monitored in your class / school?

Section 6: Future

16. The title of this project is called *My Ideal School*. Could you describe your ideal school for students with ASD?
17. If I returned in two years, what changes would you like to have seen introduced in your school that you feel would benefit the inclusion of pupils with ASD? i.e. future aspirations.

Have you any other comments? Thank you for your time

Special Needs Assistant (SNA) Interview Guide (Phase 4)

1. Can you tell me a little about your work with **[Insert student's name here]**?
What is **[he/she]** like to work with?
2. Can you describe briefly a typical working day with **[Insert student's name here]**?
3. In your opinion, what is **[Insert student's name here]** strengths & weaknesses in school?
4. What is your understanding of inclusion & the characteristics of an inclusive school?
5. How does **[Insert student's name here]** feel about having an SNA?
6. Are you happy working as an SNA in this school?
7. Do teachers guide you in your daily work with **[Insert student's name here]**?
8. Do you collaborate in planning with teachers?
9. In your opinion, what works well / does not work well for the inclusion of students with ASD in this school?
10. Do you think this school could be improved in any way?
11. What training have you undertaken for this job (past / current)?
12. The title of this project is called *My Ideal School*. Could you describe your ideal school for students with ASD?
13. If I returned in two years, what changes would you like to have seen introduced in this school that you feel would benefit the inclusion of pupils with ASD? i.e. future aspirations.
 - what will inclusion look like?
14. Have you any other comments that you feel may add to this research?
Thank you for your time

Pupil Interview Guide (Phase 6)

Please answer as many questions as you can

Inclusion is about feeling that you are a respected member of your school and that you belong in your school. It also means that you have the same opportunities to learn and participate in class and whole school activities as all other students.



PS_PU

Personal Information

I am a boy girl
 I am in _____ class.
 I am _____ years old.

I think all children should feel valued and that they belong in our school (tick one box)

Agree 😊

Don't know 😐

Disagree ☹️

Do you agree or disagree? Please put a line on the face that shows what you think

😊 = agree

😐 = not sure

☹️ = disagree

1.	I am happy at school.	😊	😐	☹️
2.	I like the way school looks.	😊	😐	☹️
3.	I have good friends at school.	😊	😐	☹️
4.	Children are kind to each other at school.	😊	😐	☹️
5.	Adults are kind to the children at school.	😊	😐	☹️
6.	I like my teachers.	😊	😐	☹️
7.	I like my special needs assistants.	😊	😐	☹️
8.	I eat a healthy lunch every day at school.	😊	😐	☹️
9.	I like to tell my family what I have done at school.	😊	😐	☹️
10.	Boys and girls get on well together.	😊	😐	☹️
11.	I am able to participate in school activities like all other students.	😊	😐	☹️
12.	I find it easy to make friends in school.	😊	😐	☹️
13.	Children do not get hit at school.	😊	😐	☹️
14.	Children do not get called hurtful names at school.	😊	😐	☹️
15.	I feel safe in the yard during break-times.	😊	😐	☹️
16.	Teachers encourage me to always try my best.	😊	😐	☹️
17.	Children often help each other in lessons.	😊	😐	☹️
18.	If I have a problem, I can ask an adult for help.	😊	😐	☹️
19.	I learn all sorts of interesting things at school.	😊	😐	☹️
20.	Teachers are interested in listening to my ideas.	😊	😐	☹️
21.	I always know what to do in my lessons.	😊	😐	☹️
22.	I have no difficulty completing exercises my teacher gives me in class.	😊	😐	☹️
23.	I feel that I am a respected member of my school.	😊	😐	☹️
24.	It is ok to make a mistake in school.	😊	😐	☹️
25.	I feel that I belong at school.	😊	😐	☹️
26.	I have many opportunities in school to achieve and experience success.	😊	😐	☹️
27.	I am accepted for who I am in school.	😊	😐	☹️

WHAT I THINK OF SCHOOL (in words)

The things I like best about school are:

The things I don't like about school are:

The things that I am good at in school are:

The other students in my school are:

The teachers in my school are:

The special needs assistants in my school are:

I would like my school better if:

WHAT I THINK OF SCHOOL.

(Draw some pictures to show what you think of school.
These can be happy 😊 or sad ☹ pictures.)

Draw a picture or write a sentence

Students can make things better in our school by



Teachers can make things better in our school by.....



The principal can make things better in our school by



Other people can make things better in our school by



Thank you for taking part 😊

Focus Group Interview Guide for Parents (Phase 7)

Section 1: Warm-up

1. Can you tell everyone a little bit about your child / your child's school?

Section 2: Experiences

2. Can you describe how inclusion works in this class / school for your child?
3. How would you describe the involvement of parents in your schools?
4. Do you feel the school is doing a good job in meeting the needs of your child?
5. How would you describe public attitudes towards disability- esp. ASD?

Section 3: Policy

6. Are you happy with the current definition of Inclusion?
7. Do school policies positively contribute to the successful inclusion of pupils with ASD?

Section 4: Provision

8. How would you describe your experiences in accessing supports for your child?
9. Are there additional financial costs associated with having a child with ASD?
10. Are you currently satisfied with the work carried out by the SENO?
11. Tell me about your experiences of transition between classes / transfer to senior schools for your child.

Section 5: Outcomes

Outcome for students with SEN as per EPSEN Act (2004)

"leave school with the skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives" (EPSEN Act, 2004, P.5)

12. Do you think this policy will achieve its aims for your child in the future?

Section 6: My Ideal School

13. The title of this project is called *My Ideal School*. Could you describe your ideal school for students with ASD?

Have you any other comments? Thank you for your time

Appendix B Coding Framework

An overview of the first and second level codes devised for the purposes of this research

	<u>COP</u>	<u>SCH</u>	<u>SYS</u>		<u>CMTY</u>	<u>SV</u>	<u>SV</u>	<u>SV</u>	
Second Level Codes									
	<u>PLY</u>	<u>MLA</u>	<u>NOS</u>	<u>ASCP</u>		<u>PSEN</u>	<u>PV</u>	<u>ASCE</u>	<u>FH</u>
	4	7	6	11		6	2	8	3
1	EPSN	ACC	SIS	ASS	TRNF	LAN	PAR	AEXP	AO
2	GAM	CS	SOS	IEP	D-CRIT	ASC	PST	SEXP	FE
3	GOV	CUR	ST	PL	GAEL	ODC		FEXP	REC
4	SPOL	IP	EL	SLOC		SEN		INC	
5		INT	COM	JP		KAS		EXC	
6		SET	REL	T		ATT		RRB	
7		CPD		ECON				MH	
8				TRNS				MN	

2nd Level Codes :

	Code	Meaning
1	PLY	Policy
2	MLA	Making Learning Accessible
3	NOS	Network of Supports
4	ASCP	Autism Spectrum Conditions Procedures
5	PSEN	Perceptions of Special Educational Needs
6	PV	Parental variables
7	ASCE	Autism-Spectrum Conditions Experiences
8	FH	Future Horizons

Focus Abbreviations:

- School = SCH
- System= SYS
- Community = CMTY
- Stakeholder Voice = SV
- Codes of Practice (policy documents, legislation, guidelines)= COP

		Code Name	1st Level Code Incorporated	Codes
P O L I C Y	1	Policy	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) (EPSN)	PLY
			General Allocation Model (GAM)	
			Government (GOV)	
			School Policies (SPOL)	
P R O V I S I O N S	2	Making Learning Accessible	Access (ACC)	MLA
			Class size (CS)	
			Curriculum (CUR)	
			Inclusive practice (IP)	
			Intervention (INT)	
			School ethos (SET)	
			Continuous Professional Development (CPD)	
	3	Network of Supports	Supports in school (SIS)	NOS
			Supports outside school (SOS)	
			Staff turnover (ST)	
			External links (EL)	
			Communication (COM)	
			Relationships (REL)	
			4	
	Individual Education Plan (IEP)			
	Placement (PL)			
School location (SLOC)				
July Provision (JP)				
Therapy (T)				
Economics (ECON)				
Transition (TRNS)				
Transfer (TRNF)				
E X P E R I E N C E S	5	Perceptions of Special Educational Needs	Language of SEN (LAN)	PSEN
			Autism-spectrum conditions (ASC)	
			Other Diagnosed condition (ODC)	
			Special educational need (SEN)	
			Knowledge of Autism-spectrum (KAS)	
	Attitudes (ATT)			
	6	Parental Variables	Parents (PAR)	PV
			Parental stress (PST)	
	7	Autism-Spectrum Conditions Experiences	Academic experiences (AEXP)	ASCE
			Social experiences (SEXP)	
Family experiences (FEXP)				
Inclusion (INC)				
Exclusion (EXC)				
Restrictive Repetitive Behaviours (RRB)				
Mental health (MH)				
Medical needs (MN)				
O U T C O M E S	8	Future Horizons	Assessment of outcomes (AO)	FH
			Future expectations (FE)	
			Recommendations (REC)	

Appendix C Ethics

Part One

	Yes	No
1. Does the study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent (for example, children with special difficulties)?	Yes	
2. Will the study require the co-operation of an advocate for initial access to the groups or individuals (for example, children with disabilities; adults with a dementia)?		No
3. Could the research induce psychological stress or anxiety, cause harm or have negative consequences for the participants (beyond the risks encountered in their normal lifestyles?)		No
4. Will deception of participants be necessary during the study (for example, covert observation of people)?		No
5. Will the study involve discussion of topics which the participants would find sensitive (for example, sexual activity, drug use)?		No
6. Will the study involve prolonged or repetitive testing or physical testing (for example, the use of sports equipment such as a treadmill), and will a health questionnaire be needed?		No
7. Will the research involve medical procedures (for example, are drugs, placebos or other substances such as foods, vitamins to be administered to the participants or will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind)?		No
8. Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses or compensation for time) be offered to participants?		No
9. Will you be able to obtain permission from the school and parents to involve children under sixteen in the study? Please also seek children's permission.	Yes	
10. Are there problems with participants' right to remain anonymous or to have the information they give not identifiable as theirs?		No
11. Is the right to freely withdraw from the study at any time made explicit?	Yes	

Part Two

For YES answers, please summarise the issue and action to be taken.

1. Informed consent will be required from the parents or legal guardians of students participating in this research. Informed consent will also be required from the students and each participant will be able to withdraw their consent to participate at any stage of the research. Informed consent means "the information given by your participants should be done so freely on the basis that they know and understand 1) the purpose of your research, 2) who is undertaking it, 3) why it is being undertaken and 4) who is sponsoring it - if at all" (*TCD, School of Education, Handbook for Postgraduate Students, 2012, p.27*). I will adhere to the Ethical Guidelines set down by the School of Education.

9. Informed consent will be required from all participants—the parents or legal guardians of students participating in this research, the students, their teachers, the principals, and special needs assistants. Each participant will be able to withdraw their consent to participate at any stage of the research. I will adhere to the Ethical Guidelines set down by the School of Education in Trinity College Dublin. Respect, anonymity and confidentiality will be of paramount importance throughout this research.

II. Informed consent will be required from all participants—the parents or legal guardians of students participating in this research, the students, their teachers, the principals, special needs assistants—and each participant will be able to withdraw their consent to participate at any stage of the research. Informed consent and the right to withdraw from the research at any stage will be explicitly stated in a letter circulated to each participant at the outset of this research. This letter will also provide details of the research aims, the proposed methodologies and expected impact of this research. Informed consent will not be taken for granted, and will be subject to re-negotiation at various junctures of the research. I will also inform each participant that they can reject the use of data-gathering devices, for example, tape recorders. I will adhere to the Ethical Guidelines set down by the School of Education in Trinity College Dublin

Signed:



(Researcher/Student) Date: 28/09/12

Emailed correspondence on 24th October 2012 confirming successful ethical approval—in line with School of Education Ethical Regulations at this time—for this study, from Dr. Aidan Seery, Director of Research, Trinity College Dublin.

from: Aidan Seery <SEERYA@tcd.ie>
to: Colin McElroy <mcelroye@tcd.ie>
date: 24 October 2012 at 09:56

Dear Colin,

I have your application here in front of me and Michael Shevlin has signed off indicating 'no further action needed' on October 1st.

I wish you every success with your project.

Kind regards,

Aidan

Appendix D: Letters of Correspondence

Dear Principal,

My name is Colin McElroy and I am a primary school teacher from Dublin. I am currently working on my Ph.D. in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, under the supervision of Dr. Michael Shevlin. This research will focus on the educational and social experiences of students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) in mainstream primary schools.

Research Questions:

The main aims of this research are:

1. to investigate the views and experiences of inclusion of students with ASD, their parents, their teachers and support staff in mainstream primary schools;
2. to describe what the current policy of inclusion means to stakeholders and outline their attitudes and experiences of this policy in relation to their school;
3. to analyse how schools are meeting the academic & social needs of students with ASD and highlight factors which may facilitate or prevent inclusion in schools;
4. to identify models of best practice in mainstream primary schools that cater for diversity of need and embrace inclusive practices for students with ASD.

Research Methodologies

Eliciting the experiences and viewpoints of the key stakeholders will be integral to the successful completion of this study. The proposed methodologies will include questionnaires and interviews with stakeholders. In addition to these, documentary analysis of school policies, students' progress reports and a selection of students' work will be undertaken. The duration of this research will be 18 months, commencing in January 2013.

Confidentiality and Consent

I would like to assure all participants that every effort will be made to protect the identity of all individuals and schools participating in this research. Respect, anonymity and confidentiality will be of paramount importance throughout this research. Informed consent will be required from all participants and each individual will be able to withdraw their consent at any stage of the research. I will adhere to the Ethical Guidelines set down by the School of Education in Trinity College Dublin.

Your participation in this research provides an opportunity to celebrate and highlight elements of best practice in your school. This research also has the potential to inform policy and practice in developing inclusive learning environments, by sharing elements of best practice with the wider community. I do hope you will consider collaborating in this project.

I will be in contact with you to discuss the possibility of participating in this study and what this would involve for your school. In the meantime if you have further questions please contact me on XXXXXXXX.

Many thanks for your time and consideration in this matter.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colin McElroy', written in a cursive style.

Dear Chairperson,

My name is Colin McElroy and I am a primary school teacher from Dublin. I am currently working on my Ph.D. in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, under the supervision of Dr. Michael Shevlin. This research will focus on the educational and social experiences of students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) in mainstream primary schools. I am writing to request permission to include your school in this research project.

Research Questions:

The main aims of this research are:

1. to investigate the views and experiences of inclusion of students with ASD, their parents, their teachers and support staff in mainstream primary schools;
2. to describe what the current policy of inclusion means to stakeholders and outline their attitudes and experiences of this policy in relation to their school;
3. to analyse how schools are meeting the academic & social needs of students with ASD and highlight factors which may facilitate or prevent inclusion in schools;
4. to identify models of best practice in mainstream primary schools that cater for diversity of need and embrace inclusive practices for students with ASD.

Research Methodologies

Eliciting the experiences and viewpoints of the key stakeholders will be integral to the successful completion of this study. The proposed methodologies will include questionnaires and interviews with relevant stakeholders. In addition to these, documentary analysis of school policies, students' progress reports and a selection of students' work will be undertaken. The duration of this research will be 18 months, commencing in January 2013.

Confidentiality and Consent

I would like to assure all participants that every effort will be made to protect the identity of all individuals and schools participating in this research. Respect, anonymity and confidentiality will be of paramount importance throughout this research. Informed consent will be required from all participants and each individual will be able to withdraw their consent at any stage of the research. I will adhere to the Ethical Guidelines set down by the School of Education in Trinity College Dublin.

Your participation in this research provides an opportunity to celebrate and highlight elements of best practice in your school. This research also has the potential to inform policy and practice in developing inclusive learning environments, by sharing elements of best practice with the wider community. I do hope you will consider collaborating in this project.

I will be in contact with you to discuss the possibility of participating in this study and what this would involve for your school. In the meantime if you have any further questions please don't hesitate to contact me on XXXXX. Many thanks for your time and consideration in this matter.

Yours faithfully,



Dear Parent / Guardian,

My name is Colin McElroy and I am a primary school teacher from Dublin. I am currently working on my Ph.D. in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, under the supervision of Dr. Michael Shevlin. This research will focus on the educational and social experiences of students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) in mainstream primary schools.

Focus of Research

This research will investigate the views and experiences of inclusion in mainstream primary schools of students with ASD, their parents, their teachers and support staff. The importance of the pupils' perspective will be highlighted, by inviting them to contribute pictures, poetry, and/or stories relating to their learning experiences. Questionnaires and interviews will be conducted with each participant. Interviews will take place at a time and venue at your convenience. In addition, students' progress reports and a selection of students' work will be researched. These contributions will be collected with the co-operation of school staff and will be based around the theme – *'My Ideal School'*. The duration of this research will be 18 months, commencing in January 2013.

Confidentiality

I would like to assure all participants that every effort will be made to protect the identity of all individuals and schools participating in this research. No participant or school will be individually named at any stage. Respect, anonymity and confidentiality will be of paramount importance throughout this research.

Consent

Informed consent will be required from all participants and each individual will be able to withdraw their consent at any stage of the research. If you are willing to participate and to allow your child participate, please complete the section below and return it to me (or the class teacher) at your convenience. I will also be asking your child for their consent, and it is only when both you and your child have granted permission that work will commence on this project.

Your participation in this research provides an opportunity to celebrate and highlight elements of best practice in your school. This research also has the potential to inform educational policy and practice in developing inclusive learning environments. I do hope you will consider collaborating in this project. In the meantime, if you have any further questions please contact me on XXX.

Many thanks for your time and consideration in this matter.

Yours faithfully,



-----x-----

I give consent for my child to participate in the research on *'My Ideal School'*. I understand that I can withdraw from this project at any stage of the research.

Name (block capitals): _____ Signed: _____