



Making Children Visible: Using Student Voice to Shape Inclusive Practice in Mainstream Post-Primary Schools in Ireland.

By

Nicola Mannion

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Supervisors: Dr Johanna Fitzgerald and Dr Fionnuala Tynan

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ABSTRACT

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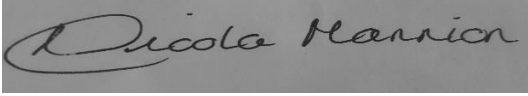
Ratification of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 initiated academic, political and community interest and commitment to advancing advocacy and support for children, their rights, their voice and their participation in all decisions which affect them (Jones and Marks 2017). Accordingly, children's policy developments in national and international contexts centered on listening to the voices of children and young people to achieve better outcomes for all. However, the voices of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are rarely consulted (Alderson and Morrow 2020). Children with SEND tend to be the end users of policies and practices developed and implemented in their name without their consultation or participation (Kilkelly *et al.* 2004; Lundy *et al.* 2014; Moloney *et al.* 2021). This is evident in education policy. With an increasing number of students with SEND in mainstream schools and with the National Council of Special Education (NCSE) recommending a progressive realisation towards an inclusive education system (NCSE 2024), it is timely that we listen to the voices of children with SEND to examine what is working well and what needs to change to enhance inclusive practice in our schools.

Consequently, this research set out to explore the experiences and perspectives of 13 students with intellectual disabilities (ID) in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. It aimed to understand if these experiences were barriers or facilitators to participation in the life of the school, including decision making. Framed within the transformative paradigm this research situated children with ID as co-researchers and agents of change. However, research with children, particularly children with disabilities, can pose methodological and ethical challenges (Keenan 2016). Consequently, Photovoice as a participatory visual research method was chosen to support students to voice their experiences. Its use operationalised Lundy's Model of Participation (2007), which served as the theoretical and methodological framework for this study by providing space, voice, audience and influence which are necessary for children as right-bearing citizens to express their views and have their voices heard in an ethical inclusive manner.

Findings highlight the complexity of the lived experience of students with ID in mainstream schools, as they navigate places, spaces and people who challenge and support them in their school journey. Barriers and facilitators which influence the participation of students with ID, including their participation in decision making, emphasise the complexity of inclusive practice. Findings stress tensions and dilemmas between the voices of students with ID, the voices of adults, and national and international policy. These tensions call for a reimagining of support structures which address individual needs, not categories of disabilities. This has implications for policy and practice and emphasises the necessity to listen to the voices of students with ID to enhance inclusive practice in our schools.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, by me or any other person, for the purpose of obtaining any other qualification.

Signed: 

Nicola Mannion

Date: 10th May 2024

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Table of Contents

LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
LIST OF ACRONYMS	xiv
Chapter One	1
Introduction.....	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Research Rationale and Positionality	3
1.3 Research Context	6
1.4 Situating the Research.....	7
1.4.1 Contextual Factors in Ireland	7
1.4.2 Evolution of Inclusive Education: Historical Perspectives	8
1.5 Authors Conceptual Understanding of Inclusive Education.....	12
1.6 Order of Presentation	13
1.7 Conclusion	14
Chapter Two	16
Literature Review: Inclusive Education	16
2.1 Introduction.....	16
2.2 Literature Search	17
2.3 Conceptualisation of Inclusive Education	20
2.4 Defining Inclusion	21
2.5 Inclusive Pedagogy	25
2.6 Universal Design for Learning (UDL).....	30
2.7 Dilemmas of Difference: The Problem of Labelling.....	34
2.7.1 The Effect of Labels on Teacher Efficacy	36
2.8 Development of Inclusive Education in Ireland	37
2.9 Curricular Reform	44
2.9.1 Early Childhood and Primary Education.....	44
2.9.2 Post-Primary Education.....	46
2.9.3 The Push Towards Full Inclusion	48
2.9.4 Role of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) in Schools	54
2.9.5 Special Class Provision in Ireland.....	58
2.9.6 Influence of United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) (UNCRC) on Inclusive Policy in Ireland	63
2.10 Inclusive Special Education as a Model of Inclusion	72
2.11 Conclusion	74

Chapter Three.....	77
Literature Review: Student Voice.....	77
3.1 Introduction.....	77
3.2 Making Children Visible: The Development of Children’s Rights.....	78
3.2.1 United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).....	81
3.2.2 UNCRC: Rights of Children with Disabilities	85
3.2.3 Compliance with the UNCRC	87
3.2.3 Article 12 of the UNCRC: Voice; Participation; Influence; Power and Inclusion ..	88
3.3 Developments in Response to the UNCRC: The Irish Context	92
3.3.1 Current Irish Context: Overview of Policy	92
3.3.2 Overview of Legislation	95
3.4 Conceptualising Article 12: Lundy’s Model of Participation	100
3.5 Voice is Not Enough: Children’s Participation as an Emerging Discourse in Irish Education.....	104
3.5.1 Student Voice Policy Discourse in Ireland	109
3.5.2 Student Voice in the Curriculum	115
3.6 Students Have a Voice but Not a Say: The Absence of Power	117
3.7 Conclusion	121
Chapter Four.....	123
Methodology.....	123
4.1 Introduction.....	123
4.2 Research Aims and Questions	123
4.3 Research Paradigm.....	125
4.3.1 Axiology, Ontology and Epistemology.....	128
4.4 Theoretical Lens	131
4.5 Research Design	132
4.6 Children’s Participation: Research Informing Practice.....	134
4.6.1 Ethical Considerations: Researching with Children.....	136
4.7 Data Collection	146
4.7.1 Critique of Photovoice As a Method to Include All	146
4.8 Sampling	155
4.8.1. Access to Schools.....	155
4.8.2 Sampling Strategy.....	156
4.8.3 Sample size	158
4.9 Profile of Schools and Student Participants	158
4.10 Data Collection	164

4.10.1 Photovoice Method.....	164
4.10.2 Reflexive Research Journal.....	175
4.10.3 Field Notes.....	176
4.10.4 Focus Group Interview	177
4.11 Data Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis.....	178
4.11.1 Phase One Familiarisation and Writing Familiarisation Notes.....	179
4.11.2 Phase Two Systematic Data Coding	181
4.11.3 Phase Three Generating Initial Themes from Coded and Collated Data	183
4.11.4 Phase Four Developing and Reviewing Themes.....	185
4.11.5 Phase Five Defining and Naming Themes	187
4.11.6 Phase Six Writing the Report.....	191
4.12 Trustworthiness.....	191
4.13 Credibility	193
4.13.1 Prolonged and Persistent Engagement	193
4.13.2 Member Checking	193
4.13.3 Triangulation	194
4.14. Transferability	195
4.14.1 Rich Descriptions	195
4.15. Dependability and Confirmability	195
4.15.1 Audit Trail	195
4.16. Reflexivity	195
4.17 Limitations.....	196
4.18 Conclusion	196
Chapter Five	198
Findings: Voices of Students	198
5.1 Introduction.....	198
5.2 Presentation of Findings (Voices of Students)	199
5.3 Theme One: Students’ Lived Experience of School: Spaces, Places and People as Mediators of Sentiment.	201
5.3.1 (i) Students’ Perceptions of Support	203
5.3.2 (ii) Challenges Encountered.....	212
5.4.1 Theme Two: Student Participation in Mainstream School A Festival of Complexities.	220
5.4.2 (i) Facilitators Which Influence Student Participation	221
5.5 Theme Three: Students’ Role in Decision Making: A Lost Opportunity?	241
5.5.1 (i) Opportunities for Success	241

5.5.2 (ii) Lost Opportunity	247
5.6 Conclusion	250
Chapter Six	252
Findings: Voices of Teachers	252
6.1 Introduction.....	252
6.2 Presentation of Findings (Voices of Teachers).....	252
6.3 Theme Two: Student Participation in Mainstream School: A Festival of Complexities.	253
6.3.1 Barriers which Influence the Participation of Students with Intellectual Disabilities: (Teacher Perspectives).....	253
6.4 Theme Three: Students Role in Decision Making: A Lost Opportunity?	260
6.4.1 Teachers Perceptions of Barriers to Supporting Students in Decision Making..	260
6.5 Conclusion	262
Chapter Seven	263
Discussion	263
7.1 Introduction.....	263
7.2 How do students with ID describe their educational experiences in mainstream post- primary schools in Ireland?	267
7.3 What are the barriers and facilitators which influence students' participation in mainstream post-primary schools?.....	272
What insights can students with ID give to enhance the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools?.....	272
7.4 What are the barriers and facilitators which influence students' participation in decision making in mainstream post-primary schools?	281
What insights can students with ID give to enhance the participation of students in decision making with ID in mainstream post-primary schools?	281
7.5 Conclusion	288
Chapter Eight.....	290
Conclusion	290
8.1 Introduction.....	290
8.2 Revisiting the Research Questions and Aims of Study	290
8.3 Conclusions.....	299
8.4 Implications for Policy	299
8.5 Implications for Practice.....	303
8.6 Reflections and Recommendations for Research	305
8.7 Revisiting Limitations	309
8.8 Further Research	311

8.9 Dissemination Plan	312
8.10 Personal Reflections	315
8.9 Conclusion	317
References	318
Appendices	361
Appendix A- Child Safeguarding Statement	361
Appendix B- Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)	365
Appendix C- MIREC Ethical Approval	376
Appendix D- Invitation to Participate (Schools)	378
Appendix E- Letter of Informed Consent (Principal)	382
Appendix F- Letter of Information Parents	384
Appendix G- Letter of Information for Students	387
Appendix H- Letter of Informed Consent Parents.....	389
Appendix I - Informed Assent Students.....	391
Appendix J- Break Card.....	392
Appendix K- Semi-Structured Interview Students (Demographic Details).....	393
Appendix L- Rules and Guidance for Taking Photographs	394
Appendix M- Prompts for Taking Photographs.....	396
Appendix N- All About Me in School	397
Appendix O- Children and Young people’s Feedback Form (for individuals).....	400
Appendix P- Semi-Structured Interview (Meeting Two Narration).....	401
Appendix Q- Sentence Starters	402
Appendix R- Photograph Release Form	408
Appendix S Photo Exhibition Survey	410
Appendix T- Field Notes Structured Format.....	412
Appendix U- MIREC Ethical Approval Focus Group Interview	413
Appendix V- Focus Group Interview (Guiding Questions).....	415
Appendix W - Phase Two Codebook (Initial Coding).....	416
Appendix X- Phase Three Codebook (Generating Initial Themes)	421
Appendix Y- Phase Four Codebook (Developing and Reviewing Themes).....	429
Appendix Z- Phase Five Codebook (Defining Refining and Naming Themes)	431
Appendix AA- Sample of Memo	434

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1.	Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria
Table 2.2.	Definitions of Inclusive Education
Table 2.3.	Inclusive Pedagogical Approach Framework: Assumptions and Associated Concepts/Actions
Table 2.4.	Interconnections Along the Education Curriculum
Table 2.5.	SET Allocation Model Comparative Revision 2017 and 2024
Table 2.6.	Numbers of Special Education Teachers and Special Needs Assistants in Mainstream School in Ireland
Table 3.1.	Development of Children’s Rights: The International Context
Table 3.2.	Developments in Response to the UNCRC: The Irish Context
Table 3.3.	Evaluating the Conditions for Student Voice
Table 4.1.	Research Aims and Questions
Table 4.2.	Steps involved in Photovoice Projects
Table 4.3.	Profile of Participating Schools
Table 4.4.	Data Collection Photovoice Method
Table 4.5.	Sample for Prompts Suitable Photographs
Table 4.6.	Adaptation of PHOTO
Table 4.7.	Six Recursive Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis
Table 4.8.	Quality Indicators in Qualitative and Quantitative Research
Table 5.1	Category of Disability and Provision of Support
Table 8.1.	Research Aims and Questions
Table 8.2.	Dissemination of Research Plan

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 2.1. Literature Map
- Figure 2.2. Evolution of Inclusive Education
- Figure 2.3. Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2 (graphic organiser)
- Figure 2.4. Inclusive International Policy and Legislative Developments
- Figure 2.5. Framework for Junior Cycle
- Figure 2.6. NEPS Continuum of Support
- Figure 3.1. Rights of Children in UNCRC
- Figure 3.2. The Four Ps of the UNCRC
- Figure 3.3. Lundy's Conceptualisation of Article 12
- Figure 3.4. Language and Terminology Used to Describe Student Voice
- Figure 4.1. Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) applied to the research design process
- Figure 4.2. Overview of Research Design Processes
- Figure 4.3. Sample of Guidance and Rules for Taking Photograph
- Figure 4.4. Sample Questions from All About Me Booklet
- Figure 4.5. Sample of Placemat Graphic Organiser with Sentence Starters
- Figure 4.6. Student Grouping Pictures into Categories with Common Themes to Create Visual
- Figure 4.7. Visuals illustrating What's Working for Students in Schools and What's Not Working in the context of the school
- Figure 4.8. The Research Journey
- Figure 4.9. Excerpt of Semi-Structured Interview Transcript with Initial Reflections and Comments

- Figure 4.10. Codes with Descriptors
- Figure 4.11. Sample from Phase Two Codebook
- Figure 4.12. Clustering Codes with NVivo
- Figure 4.13. Sample from Phase Three Codebook
- Figure 4.14. Manual Exploration of Candidate Themes
- Figure 4.15. Phase Four Developing and Reviewing Themes
- Figure 4.16. Sample from Phase Four Codebook
- Figure 4.17. Matching Data Extracts to Codes and Themes in Microsoft Word
- Figure 4.18. Defining and Naming Themes
- Figure 4.19. Thematic Map of Findings
- Figure 4.20. Sample from Phase Five Codebook
- Figure 4.21. Methodological Triangulation
- Figure 5.1. Presentation of Findings (Voices of Students)
- Figure 5.2. Thematic Map of Findings
- Figure 5.3. Wheelchair Accessible Facilities in School
- Figure 5.4. School Food Company and Library
- Figure 5.5. Photographs of the Special Class representing students' favourite place
- Figure 5.6. Photograph of a Clock: Used to Illustrate Difficulty with Time Management
- Figure 5.7. Pin Cushion Made in Home Economics
- Figure 5.8. Photograph of a Hallway in School
- Figure 5.9. "The Dreaded Staircase"
- Figure 5.10. The Stairs

- Figure 5.11. The Lift is for Wheelchairs
- Figure 5.12. Fire Alarm and Extinguisher “It’s a Very Sensory Thing”
- Figure 5.13. Wet Floor Sign
- Figure 5.14. Bags in the Way
- Figure 5.15. Slides from PowerPoint Presentation for Sam’s Show and Tell
- Figure 5.16. Open Door to the Staff Room
- Figure 5.17. Photograph of a Classroom Used to Represent a Teacher
- Figure 5.18. School Building Used to Represent a Teacher
- Figure 5.19. Principal’s and Caretakers Office
- Figure 5.20. Special Class
- Figure 5.21. Games Area in Special Class
- Figure 5.22. Sample of Photographs of Individual Work Stations
- Figure 5.23. Project-based learning
- Figure 5.24. Woodwork Room
- Figure 5.25. Visual to Support Students Brushing Teeth
- Figure 5.26. Home Economics Key Words
- Figure 5.27. Tom Playing Hurling
- Figure 5.28. Sensory Supports
- Figure 6.1. Presentation of Findings (Voices of Teachers)
- Figure 7.1 Themes from Data Analysis
- Figure 7.2. Before and After Photovoice Project
- Figure 8.1. Lundy’s Model of Participation Situated Within a Wider Ethical Framework

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
ASC	Autism Support Class
ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland
AT	Assistive Technology
BOM	Board of Management
CAST	Centre for Applied Special Technology
CoP	Community of Practice
CoS	Continuum of Support
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSPE	Civic Social Political Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCYA	Department of Child and Youth Affairs
DE	Department of Education
DES	Department of Education and Science
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
EBD	Emotional Behavior Disorder
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
EHA	Education for All Handicapped Children Act
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Education Needs
ERB	Education About Religions and Beliefs

FAPE	Free and Appropriate Public Education
GAM	General Allocation Model
HSE	Health Service Executive
ID	Intellectual Disabilities
IEP	Individual Education Plan
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals Network
IRIS	Inclusive Research in Irish Schools
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
JCT	Junior Cycle for Teachers
L1LP	Level One Learning Programme
L2LP	Level Two Learning Programme
LCA	Leaving Cert Applied
LCVP	Leaving Cert Vocational Programme
LOAS	Looking at our Schools
LRE	Least Restrictive Environment
MFL	Modern Foreign Languages
MGLD	Mild General Learning Disabilities
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
MIREC	Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council of Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Society
NICCY	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
PA	Participatory Appraisal
PE	Physical Education
PEI	Photo Elicitation Interview
PLC	Primary Language Curriculum
P-POD	Post-Primary Online Database

PPT	PowerPoint
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
RACE	Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SEBD	Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Education Needs Co-ordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SENO	Special Education Needs Organiser
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
SESS	Special Education Support Service
SET	Special Education Teacher
SETAM	Special Education Teacher Allocation Model
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SNAWDU	Special Needs Assistants Workforce Development Unit
SPHE	Social Personal and Health Education
SPOTLITE	Student Perspectives on Teaching and Learning in The Educational Space
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
SSI	Semi-Structured Interview
SSP	Student Support Plan
TED	Transforming Education Through Dialogue
TY	Transition Year
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

UNSDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Goal
USA	United States of America
WHO	World Health Organisation
WSE	Whole-School Evaluation
WTE	Whole Time Equivalent

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the context and rationale for undertaking this research which explores the experiences and perspectives of students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. It situates the study in relation to current provision for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in Ireland, and within broader historical developments, which resulted in the move towards inclusive education. It presents my conceptual understanding of inclusive special education, which is underpinned by Hornby's Model of Inclusive Special Education (2015). Finally, it concludes with the order of presentation for this thesis.

The focus of this study is on the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. As the primary focus is on students with ID, this term will be adopted throughout when referring to student participants. However, when speaking more broadly about inclusive special education provision, the term special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) will be used. The evolution of inclusive special education provision (Section 1.4.2) had implications for the language we currently use in regard to disability. Language is contentious, powerful and personal, as a result no universally agreed definition exists on which terminology to use in relation to disability. At present, the debate centers on the use of person-first versus identity-first approach to language. Person-first places the identity of the person before reference to the disability, for example, person with autism, or person with an ID. This approach is favoured by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD 2006) and with persons with and ID (National Disability Authority (NDA) 2022). Whereas, the identity-first approach, recognises that the person is disabled by barriers within society, the term autistic person is favoured by AsIAm, Ireland's leading autism advocacy group (AsIAm 2021). As a result, when referring to student participants in this study a person-first approach is adopted. However, the language of disability also includes terms such as special needs and special education. Comparable to the person-first versus identity-first

debate these terms are also contentious. The term 'special' can be considered patronising, it can result in exclusionary practices (Byrne 2013) and can have implications for teacher efficacy (Section 2.7). The term special education was first introduced in the Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People (1978) in the United Kingdom (UK), commonly known as the Warnock Report (See Section 1.4.2.3), to define support needed to overcome learning obstacles in education. This correlated special education to individualised support. Since then, no consensus regarding an alternative for word 'special' has been accepted in an education context (NDA 2022). According to leading academics (Hornby and Kaufmann) special education cannot be equated with other forms of disability and as such, need a specialised and individualised response (Section 2.1). This has resulted in the continued use of this term. In Ireland our legislation, (Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (2004) (Section 2.8), policy (Special Education Teacher Allocation Model 2017;2024) (Section 2.9.3) and support structures (National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (Section 2.8) adopt the terms special needs and special education. The decision to use SEND throughout this thesis when referring to inclusive special education provision, is reflective of national policy, legislation, practice and personal experience. I do acknowledge that this term and other terms used in relation to disability are problematic and need further consideration and consultation with those they impact most.

In Ireland post-primary schools cater for students between the ages of 12 and 18, and students typically spend five years in post-primary education. This consists of a three-year Junior Cycle, followed by a two-year Senior Cycle. Recent curricular developments, outlined in Chapter Two, Section 2.7, outline reform which resulted in the Junior Cycle Programme being available at three levels. Level One Learning Programme (L1LP) and Level Two Learning Programme (L2LP) are designed to cater for the needs of students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, and mild to moderate intellectual disabilities respectively. Level Three is the traditional programme for students at Junior Cycle. Senior Cycle lasts two years, there is an option available in most schools, for an additional one-year Transition Year

programme, followed by a choice of three Leaving Certificate programmes; the establish Leaving Certificate, The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). None of these senior cycle programmes are designed to meet the needs of students with SEND in schools.

Within this context, this study aims to explore the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools. Research has repeatedly highlighted the differences between students' and teachers' views on various aspects of schooling (Cefai and Cooper 2010). Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the barriers and facilitators which influence the participation of students with ID in the life of the school, including their participation in decision making, from the perspectives of students. Initially, this research planned to ascertain only students' perspectives, however, the necessity to understand contextual factors, which influence the participation of students with ID in schools, resulted in the perspectives of Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Special Education Co-ordinators (SENCOs) being ascertained through a focus group. A further aim of this research was to work with students as co-creators of meaning to develop insights for post-primary schools to enhance the participation of students in the life of the school, including decision making. Students in Ireland have low perceived levels of influence on decision-making in schools (Cosgrove and Gileece 2012; McCormack *et al.* 2019), and there appears to be little evidence of the involvement of students with SEND in decision-making process in schools. It is hoped that findings may inform practice within schools, at a local level, but more importantly inform policy at a national level, to enhance inclusive special education provision, which is informed by the voices of students with ID.

1.2 Research Rationale and Positionality

The rationale for undertaking this research stems from both personal experience and developments in inclusive special education and children's rights over the past two decades, both nationally and internationally which have influenced my positionality in this research. In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument of inquiry and who the researcher is, in terms of background, professional experience, training and education matters (Patton 2015). Researchers, according to Cohen, Manion and

Morrison (2018) are not neutral, they have their own values, experiences, world views and biases which influence the lens through which they approach each step of the research process.

Prior to my current role as a teacher educator, I was a SET in a variety of settings, including post-primary schools, alternative education settings, such as Youthreach and special school settings, for students with Mild General Learning Difficulties (MGLD) and Complex Needs. This influenced how I viewed and understood inclusion. This was further supported by Hornby's Model of Inclusive Special Education (2015) (Section 2.10) which developed and informed my conceptual understanding of inclusive special education provision. Through these experiences, I found that students with SEND had no voice, no agency, no ownership or understanding of their own role in education. Education, for many, was something that was done to them, and not something they could be actively engaged in or have any control over. Students in schools were end-users of policies and practices made in their names without any of their input (Kilkelly 2007; Lundy *et al.* 2014; Moloney *et al.* 2021). These early experiences shaped my interest in children's rights, particularly their right to participate in all decisions affecting them, including education. Undertaking research in the form of a Master of Education in Special Education Needs (M.Ed SEN), during the academic year 2016-2017, focused my attention on eliciting the voices of students to inform my teaching. Findings from this small-scale action research project, found that listening to, and acting upon, students' perspectives on how they like to learn enabled me the teacher to adapt, change and modify teaching methodologies in response to student feedback (Mannion 2017; Mannion and Fitzgerald 2018).

Indeed, the original concept for this PhD research emerged from my M.Ed research, the focus of which was the explicit teacher of wellbeing for wellbeing to support students' behaviour in a special school setting. My original PhD proposal focused on wellbeing and inclusive education. Early research 'a priori' questions included: How can schools engage with student voice to enhance teaching, learning and assessment strategies that support wellbeing and; to what extent can student voice be utilised to support inclusive pedagogies? Through engagement with the literature (Section

2.2) a gap appeared. This indicated the necessity to explore the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. Further research coupled with previous teaching experience, grounded in a burgeoning understanding of children's rights, identified the necessity of utilising a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach (Section 2.6), incorporating participatory research methods to support student engagement.

Research on eliciting the voices of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools, using a participatory approach in the Irish context, is scarce. While Rose *et al.* (2015) conducted a large-scale longitudinal study on the experiences of, and outcomes for, pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in Irish schools, a participatory approach to all aspects of their study design did not inform their study. Additionally, developments in the Irish educational landscape, due to the Irish Governments' ratification of the United National Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018, placed a spotlight on education provision for students with SEND. Adoption of the UNCRPD (2006) places our current multi-track approach (NCSE 2016; Kenny *et al.* 2020; Sheehan 2023) to provision, using special classes and special schools to support students with complex needs, in breach of Article 24, where inclusion is interpreted to mean mainstream. Therefore, a model of full inclusion which protects the rights of children with SEND, under Article 24 is proposed as the way forward. This has resulted in much debate, as Article 24 and a model of full inclusion is not without its critics. Dissenting voices have emerged from teachers, school leaders, and leading academics which cast doubt on the possibility, feasibility and morality of full inclusion, where All means All (Kaufmann and Badar 2014; Hornby 2015; Kauffman and Hornby 2020; Hornby and Kaufmann 2023). The existence of rights-based vision to inclusive education as outlined in Article 24 of the UNCRPD does not necessarily mean it is morally right (Hornby 2015) or in the best interests of the child (Warnock cited in Terzi 2010).

As noted above, throughout this debate, there is a notable absence of the voices of children with SEND. Therefore, the need to ascertain their experiences and perspectives is evident. The right of children to express their views and have their voices heard in all matters concerning them, is outlined in Article 12 UNCRC (1989)

and more specifically, Article 7 (3) of the UNCRPD (2006). Consequently, understanding students' perceptions of school, the barriers and facilitators to their participation in the life of the school, including their participation in decision making, must be prioritised, if we are to understand what inclusion should mean, and what inclusive practice should look like in our society.

As previously documented, my previous experience, education and training shaped the trajectory of this research. This personal connection can be perceived as bias. However, by consciously and deliberately acknowledging the impact of these experiences and influences on my understanding of inclusive special education provision a reflexive approach is adopted. Acknowledging these biases and placing mitigating measures to reduce the impact of this bias is essential. In this study, risk was mitigated by supervisory support. Regular discussions and briefings with supervisors provided the opportunity for my thoughts, choices and decision making to be challenged. This was further supported by discussion and debates with colleagues, many of whom are experienced researchers. Furthermore, the use of a reflexive journal (Section 4.10.2) provided me with an opportunity to reflect, develop, enhance, question and examine research questions and ideas. Presentation at conferences were also used to critique approaches adopted in this research.

1.3 Research Context

Thirteen students with ID and four SETs/SENCOs, from four mainstream post-primary schools across Ireland participated in this study, during the academic year 2022/2023. A profile of participating schools and students is presented in Chapter Four. Underpinned by a transformative paradigm, and Lundy's Model of Participation (2007), a participatory approach using Photovoice as the main method of data collection was utilised. Employing Photovoice provided the necessary space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy 2007) for participating students, as right bearing citizens, to express their views and have their voices heard as mandated under Article 12 UNCRC (1989) and Article 7 (3) UNCRPD (2006).

1.4 Situating the Research

1.4.1 Contextual Factors in Ireland

A study of the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream schools is particularly timely, as Irish and International policies clash and collide, in their understanding of appropriate educational provision for students with SEND. Currently in Ireland, children with SEND, in mainstream schools are supported using the Continuum of Support Framework (CoS)(NEPS 2007) (Chapter Two, Section 2.7) through in-class support or withdrawal, or through placement in a special class, designated for a particular disability. In the period between 2013 and 2023, there has been over a 600% increase in special classes in Ireland (Travers 2023), despite limited research on the role of the special class or the efficacy of this support model (NCSE 2016; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021; Shevlin and Banks 2021). Although this change may be the result of an increase in the number of students identified as having a disability (Kenny *et al.* 2020), a closer examination of figures from the National Council of Special Education (NCSE) (2023) reveals this growth is due to significant expansion of autism support classes (ASC) in mainstream schools. ASCs now account for 89 per cent of all special classes in mainstream schools in Ireland (Travers 2023). At the same time, special class provision for other categories of disabilities, such as Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD) has reduced, and no new special class designated as MGLD has opened in Ireland since 2018 (NCSE 2023). In the absence of a special class designated as MGLD, students with MGLD are supported through the CoS Framework (NEPS 2007), and class/subject teachers have the ‘primary responsibility for the progress and care of all students in the classroom, including students with special educational needs’ (DES 2017, p,5). Schools are supported in this process, through the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) Scheme (DES 2014). SNAs support the care needs of students with SEND. Accordingly, SNAs are not sanctioned to support the needs of students with ID or specific learning difficulties in the classroom (Griffin and Blatchford 2021). However, NCSE commissioned research (2010; 2015; 2019; 2024) highlights difficulties with inclusive education provision in the Irish context. Moreover, the inclusion of students with complex needs in post-primary schools has been identified as particularly challenging (Fitzgerald *et al.*

2021). Barriers, such as the structure and organisation of post-primary schools, teacher knowledge and expertise, limited access to therapeutic services, inflexible and discrete approaches to learning, teaching and assessment and the performativity agenda have all proved challenging for the inclusion of students with SEND (NCSE 2015; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021). Furthermore, ratification of the UNCRPD by the Government of Ireland in 2018, placed national policy in direct contrast to the obligations mandated under this international convention. Undoubtedly, the evolution of inclusive education in Ireland is underpinned by international legislation (UNCRC 1989; UNCRPD 2006) and international developments, which is outlined next.

1.4.2 Evolution of Inclusive Education: Historical Perspectives

The journey towards inclusion has been marred by fear (Watson 1998; Braddock and Parish 2001), ridicule (Bogdan 1986; Rothfels 1996; Thomson 1997 cited in Braddock and Parish 2001), misunderstanding and control (Griffin and Shevlin 2011). The path toward inclusive education has involved stages of exclusion, segregation, integration and more recently inclusion (Griffin and Shevlin 2011). Each stage was shaped by social, economic and political developments of the time which in turn informed legislation, policy and practice.

1.4.2.1 Medical Model of Disability

Throughout history, people with disabilities have 'occupied a position on the margins of society' (Griffin and Shevlin 2011, p.11); they have been cast as subjects (Christensen and Proust 2002), dependents (Watson 1998) and property (Bogdan 1998 cited in Braddock and Parish 2001). In the nineteenth century, the increasing involvement of the medical profession resulted in the medical treatment of people with intellectual and mental health difficulties. Their involvement resulted in the placement of individuals in large over-crowded institutions where abuse and neglect became the norm (Griffin and Shevlin 2011). Treatment took on a one-dimensional approach focusing on within-child/person impairment which focused on the deficit, rather than wants or rights (Rix *et al.* 2013). This medical model advocated the classification and segregation of people with disabilities based on impairment. The 'detection, avoidance, elimination, treatment and classification' (Thomas 2002, p.40)

of impairments were of primary concern in the medical model. Classification coupled with the language used to describe people with disabilities such as 'crippled', 'suffering', 'idiots', 'moron', 'imbecile' and 'feeble-minded' sought to support, enhance and reinforce negative attitudes towards human difference (Braddock and Parish 2001). Labels according to Griffin and Shevlin (2011) served to reflect one's position in society and can 'evoke feelings of dominance and dependence' (p.14) and can become associated with negative stereotypes. They are often conferred by those positions of power and authority (Swain, French and Camerson 2003). Power and authority can be used to subjugate the rights of people to adequate support and education. Hence, the medical model pathologised deficit and focused on medical treatment, not education or teaching, as children in this model were deemed 'uneducable' (O'Brien 2020, p.2).

1.4.2.2 Social Model of Disability

The social model emerged from the narrow constraints of the medical model and placed the responsibility on society for creating barriers to participation (Lo Bianco and Sheppard-Jones 2007). The social model made an important distinction between impairment and disability (Oliver 1996). The former was identified as 'the functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment', the latter as 'the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers' (Barnes 1991 cited in Anastasiou and Kauffman 2013, p.442). Disability in the social model is 'not a product of bodily pathology' (Anastasiou and Kauffman 2013, p.442), but because society is not organised in ways that takes needs into account (Tregakis and Goodley 2004). This results in oppression and exclusion of people with SEND from full participation in mainstream activities (Oliver, 1990, 1993, 1996 cited in Anastasiou and Kauffman 2013). However, criticism of the social model has emerged. Warnock and Norwich (cited in Terzi 2010) and Russell and Norwich (2012) claim that over-emphasising the role of society denigrates the physiological and psychological impact an impairment can have on a child and their carers (Hornby 2015).

1.4.2.3 Early Legislative and Policy Developments

The concept of rights and inclusive practices emerged from the societal push towards Civil Rights (Florian 2014). The Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America in the 1950s and 1960s pushed the development from segregated to integrated education systems. Although the focus of this was on civil liberties and freedoms, court cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) highlighted the need for a change in practice (Egan 2013). This resulted in the US Supreme Court declaring that education must be made available to all children on equal terms, thus rejecting the earlier notion of education as separate but equal (US Supreme Court *Plessy v Ferguson* 1896). The emergence of the rights-based movement and the awareness of society's obligation to adapt gave voice to those who were previously marginalised. This necessitated a change in policy and practice on an international level.

Early legislative and policy developments such as the Educational for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) (1975) (subsequently amended as the Individuals with Disabilities Act 1990, 1997) (NCSE 2010) in United States and the Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People in the United Kingdom (1978) firmly rooted integration rather than segregation in the policy and legislative discourse. The EHA Act (1975) promoted the right to free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students with disabilities. It promoted and mandated the concept of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Kauffman *et al.* 2018). This act further mandated that all students with disabilities should have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) which outlines how students' specific needs can be catered for and the subsequent placement arrangements in the LRE (Kauffman *et al.* 2018).

The Warnock Report and the subsequent Education Act (1981) adopted an official policy of integration; this marked a watershed in inclusive education provision. Following this, children with SEND could be educated in mainstream schools as long as they received appropriate provision, and the education of others was not interrupted due to the integration (Norwich 2008). The Warnock Report introduced the term special education and defined it as extra help and support needed to

overcome learning obstacles (Warnock 1979). This replaced the previous term handicapped, which according to O'Brien (2020) promoted the model of within-child deficit. Recommendations from this report challenged perceptions of students with SEND which were based on terminology and language used at the time to support policies of segregation. The Warnock Report reconceptualised future educational policies and practices and advocated integration and education for all (Warnock 1979). Furthermore, it identified what a mixed model of provision (Norwich 2008) along a continuum of need could and should look like (O'Brien 2020). Importantly, and reflecting the emerging inclusive rights discourse, it proposed that education should take place whenever possible in mainstream schools or 'wherever they learn best' (Warnock 2010, p.14) and broadly have the same aims for everyone (O'Brien 2020). This shift in thinking moved the idea of integration as location or place as advocated through the LRE to a more child focused integration which was based on strengths and needs. However, over thirty years later Warnock called for a radical review of special needs education (Terzi 2005) which addressed the tensions and dilemmas of difference (Norwich 2008) (Chapter Two, Section 2.7) in special inclusive education. The tension and dilemmas which had emerged over the decades, highlighted the 'contradiction in the intention to treat all learners the same and that of responding adequately to the needs arising from their individual differences' (Warnock 2005, p. 11). This philosophical practice debate later saw Warnock refer to full inclusion as unattainable 'political ideology' (Warnock 2010, p.13). Importantly, Warnock (2010) and more recently Hornby and Kaufmann (2023) advocate for a child's right to an appropriate education in an appropriate setting. Inclusion is not simply a matter of geographical location but rather is where a child feels they belong (Warnock 2010; Goodall 2020). The commonality principle, whereby teachers and schools treat all children the same, is problematic for many. Warnock (2010), Hornby and Kaufmann (2023) argue that there are genuine differences in SENDs and one cannot assume that the needs of all children with special needs are the same. This has resulted in a more recent call for dedicated spaces of provision (Hornby and Kaufmann 2023) to address the needs of students with SEND.

1.5 Authors Conceptual Understanding of Inclusive Education

My conceptual understanding of inclusion and inclusive education is theoretically underpinned by Hornby's Model of Inclusive Special Education (2015) (Section 2.10) Hornby's model marries two divergent views on how to support students with SEND in our education systems. The first; inclusion, argues that mainstream education is a right, and as such should be available and accessible to everyone regardless of diversity and the second; special education, suggests that SEND may require specific, individualised strategies to support students' needs. Historically special education required separate provision to that which was provided in mainstream classrooms. However, recently the debate has centered on the basic human right of all children to be educated alongside their peers. This has resulted in a call to end special education provision as it situates the place of instruction in mainstream schools as central, rather than understanding that inclusion can happen in any setting, mainstream or otherwise. My training and experience as a SET informs my belief in the importance of using individualised assessment to inform teaching. This teaching must be rooted in evidence-based practices which may require intensive, goal-directed instruction outside of the general education classroom. This places the emphasis on the instruction rather than the place.

Although inclusion may be enshrined as a human right, questions remain about whether full inclusion is morally right (Hornby 2015). While inclusion is a human right it may not be in the child's best interest and may disadvantage the child (Hyatt and Hornby 2017). The goal of Hornby's Model of Inclusive Special Education (2015) is to ensure children with SEND are effectively educated, which, according to Hornby is in their best interest and therefore makes it morally right. Effective education focuses on instruction, regardless of where this takes place. Effective instruction brings about inclusion and participation (Hornby 2015). Despite the adoption of the principles of inclusion and inclusive practice across nations, the conceptualisation and implementation of these concepts remain problematic (Hyatt and Hornby 2017). It is necessary, therefore, for us to fully understand what inclusive practice means and how we can enact it; we must listen to the voices of students for whom these concepts affect most. This includes students with SEND. Lundy's Model of

Participation (2007) informs my conceptual understanding of the rights of the child to participate in all decisions affecting them, including educational provision. Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) identifies four conditions; space, voice, audience and influence which must be in place for students be to express their views and have their voices heard as mandated in Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) and Article 7 (3) UNCRPD (2006). This is the right of all children. Therefore, to understand inclusion we must authentically listen to students. In doing so, we may gain a clearer understanding as to what inclusion can mean and what can be evidenced as good practice. Consequentially, the concept of inclusion must be informed by students with SEND and the practice of inclusion must provide the space, voice, audience and influence for them to meaningfully participate. This may require a reconceptualising of inclusion and inclusive practice in our schools.

Framed within this conceptual understanding of inclusion, the literature review (Chapter Two) in this thesis interrogates the concept of inclusion, exploring competing definitions, perspectives and frameworks for understanding. It will chart the evolution of inclusive education both internationally and nationally. Finally, it will present Hornby's Model of Inclusive Special Education (2015) as way to combine important elements of both philosophies while respecting the right of students to a quality education. The definitional stance of this thesis is grounded in Hornby's perspective.

1.6 Order of Presentation

This study is presented over eight chapters. Many of the concepts discussed above are further elaborated in the literature on Inclusive Education in Chapter Two.

Chapter Three traces the developments of the concept of children's rights and student voice, through international developments, such as the UNCRC (1989). The notion of voice in the context of inclusive education is interrogated and the relationship between student voice, teacher education and inclusive practice is examined, through the lens of Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) and Hornby's Model of Inclusive Special Education (2015).

Chapter Four continues the discussion of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of this study which were introduced in Chapter Three. A critique of Photovoice as a data collection tool provides the rationale for its use in this study. The research aims and research questions are outlined and a detailed account of how Photovoice was adapted to support students to participate as co-researchers in this study is provided. The ethical demands, and the benefits and challenges of involving children in the research process are explored and a two-step approach to data analysis is outlined.

Chapter Five presents the findings from the voices of students with ID which emerged from the Photovoice process. This chapter is organised around three themes which were derived from systematic engagement with Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022).

Chapter Six presents the findings from the voices of participating SETs and SENCOs which emerged from focus group interviews. Findings are presented and analysed thematically in both Chapter Five and Six.

The purpose of Chapter Seven is to discuss and interpret what has been revealed about the perspectives of students with ID and participating SETs and SENCOs in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland and how this relates to current literature and the philosophical understanding of Inclusive Special Education.

The concluding chapter, Chapter Eight, provides a summary of the findings and how they address the research aims and answer the research questions. It discusses the implications for policy and practice particularly in the Irish context. It also provides a reflection and recommendations for those who wish to use Photovoice as a data collection tool. It outlines the researcher's vision for situating Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) within a wider ethical framework, when researching with children. Finally, it outlines, limitations inherent in the study and discusses the possibilities for future research.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter provided the rationale for undertaking this research. It situates this research within an evolving policy and legislative framework which aims to provide

an appropriate education for students with SEND. This research stems from my own previous experience as a Special Education Teacher and now Teacher Educator who recognises the absence of the voices of children with SEND as problematic to our understanding of inclusive special education provision. This research was driven by a desire to research with students in an ethical, inclusive, participatory manner, to use their voices to inform policy and practice both within their own school and on a national level.

Chapter Two

Literature Review: Inclusive Education

‘Nothing About Us Without Us’

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will present an overview and conceptualisation of inclusive education as it relates to special education and disability. It shares my conceptual understanding of inclusion which identifies the absence of the voice of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) as problematic in creating and understanding inclusive practice. My conceptual understanding of inclusion and inclusive education is theoretically underpinned by Hornby’s Model of Inclusive Special Education (2015) (Section 2.10). Framed within this conceptual understanding of inclusion, the literature review will interrogate the concept of inclusion, exploring definitions, perspectives and theoretical frameworks for understanding and evidencing inclusive practice in educational settings. It will identify the challenges and barriers with the enactment of inclusive policy and will examine the recent discourse of those who call for a more temperate, moderate approach to inclusive education. Hornby’s Model of Inclusive Special Education (2015) is presented as a pathway to combine important elements of both philosophies, while respecting the right of students to quality effective education.

As such, in the second theme of this literature review (Chapter Three: Student Voice) the notion of voice in the context of inclusive education will be interrogated and the relationship between student voice, teacher education and inclusive practice will be examined. Research on the impact of student participation and the benefits for teaching, learning and assessment and overall student wellbeing have been highlighted as critical for teachers and students alike (Macbeth *et al.* 2001; Davis 2005; Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Cefai and Cooper 2010; Kubiak 2015; Mannion 2017; Cook-Sather 2020). The challenge then is to support students to meaningfully participate in research so they can express their views and have their voices heard. Research with students is often coined as participatory research; questions remain

as to how inclusive participatory research is, particularly when data collection techniques, which claim to capture the voice of students, can be seen to discriminate on grounds of language, literacy and cognitive ability (Cluley 2016). The questions then remain; who is speaking for whom? and for what purpose? With the trend for inclusive practice and full inclusion being firmly established as a priority for governments, understanding students' perceptions of their school experience must be prioritised if we are to avoid the illusion of inclusion in our society.

2.2 Literature Search

A detailed literature search was undertaken to understand key concepts, theories, and influences in the field of inclusive special education, student voice, and children's rights. A literature search typically begins with broad ideas (Mertens 2010). As such, questions which guided the literature search included; What is known in the literature about the inclusion and participation of children with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) in schools; and What is known in the literature about the development of children's rights? These questions formed the foundations of the initial literature search. Electronic databases such as Summon 2.0, Sage, and Google Scholar were employed to undertake this traditional, narrative, thematic review. As this research focused on the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream schools, terms such as, 'inclusion in schools' 'student voice in schools' and 'development of children's rights', were used to identify relevant literature on these topics. While this initial literature search enabled the research to acquire the 'big picture' (Mertens 2020, p.98) of what is known on the topic, it also had a snowballing effect, this further enabled the researcher to explore new and 'innovative perspectives on how to conceptualise the research topic and guiding research questions' (Ravitch and Mittenfener Carl 2021, p.77). This had particular relevance to the research design, including the researcher's theoretical framework and research methods chosen. Therefore, a more focused literature search was undertaken using terms such as 'participatory research', 'inclusive research' 'research with children'.

Furthermore, to understand and examine previous and current national and international legislation and policy relating to inclusive special education and

children’s rights, internet websites such as, the Government of Ireland, Department of Education (www.education.ie), the National Council for Special Education in Ireland (www.ncse.ie), the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (www.ohchr.org), and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (<https://www.unesco.org/en>), were all examined. Table 2.1 outlines the inclusion criteria which guided this literature search.

Table 2.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria
<p>Empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals.</p> <p>Primary research with qualitative, mixed methods design.</p> <p>Related to children and young peoples’ participation in research, ethical approaches to research, student voice in schools, inclusive education, special education provision, children’s rights.</p> <p>Policy briefs, books, book chapters, editorials, commentaries and published or unpublished reports from governments and other agencies.</p> <p>Unpublished theses.</p>
Exclusion Criteria
<p>Primary research with a quantitative design.</p> <p>Related to pre-school/ kindergarten years or third level education.</p> <p>Papers published/available but not available in English.</p>

Themes which developed through extensive engagement with literature were organised through a literature map (Figure 2.1).

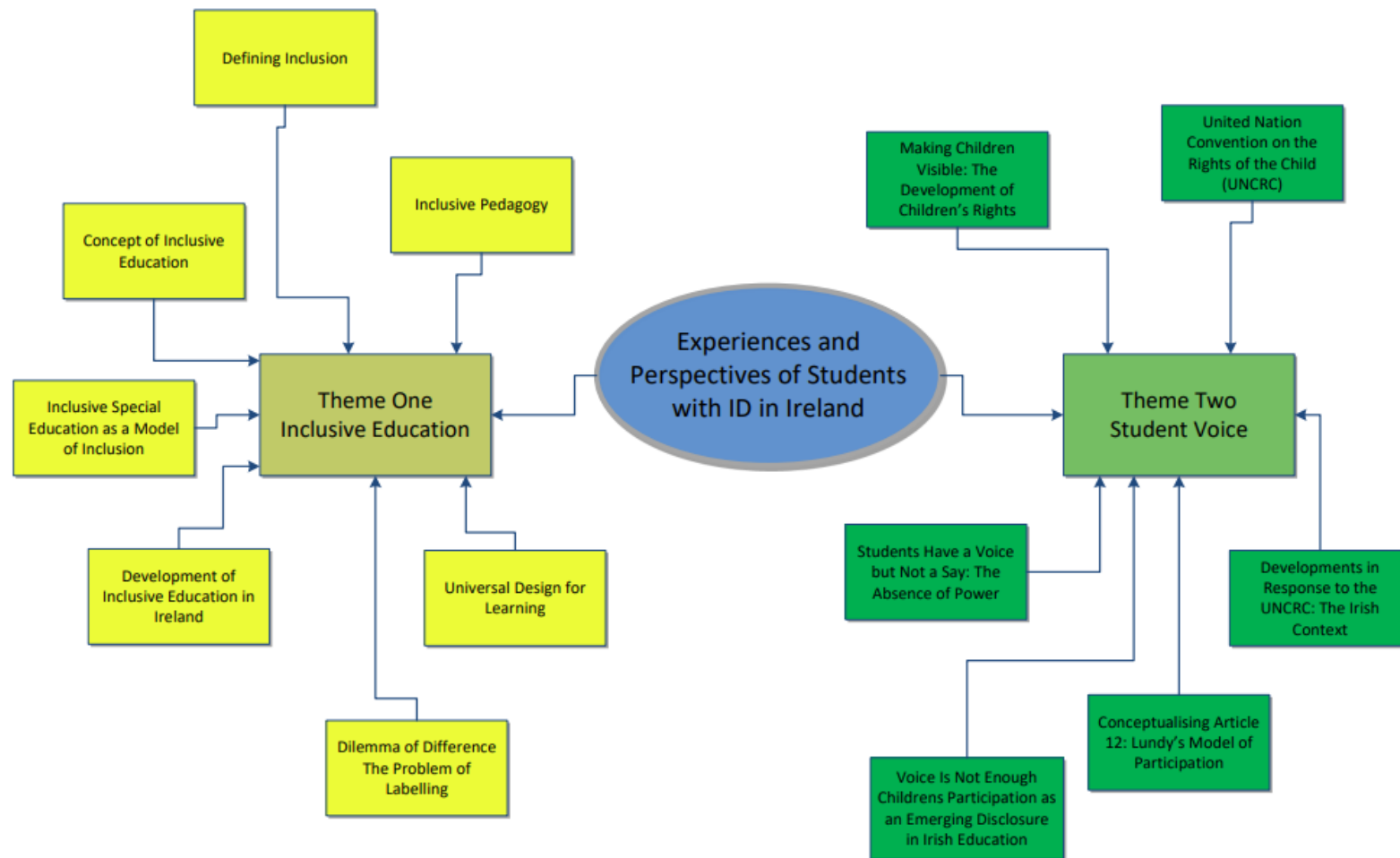


Figure 2.1 Literature Map

2.3 Conceptualisation of Inclusive Education

The educational landscape has changed significantly for students with SEND over recent decades. Inclusive education is now central to contemporary education both nationally and internationally. Originally conceived as an alternative to special education, inclusive education has its roots firmly established in the field of special education and disability (Florian 2014). However, the idea has broadened to include all learners who may be excluded or marginalised in the education arena (Spratt and Florian 2015; Strum 2019; Rose and Shevlin 2020). Therefore, a broader conceptual understanding of what constitutes inclusion is necessary. Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021) remind us that inclusion relates not only to diversity of ability, but includes all students and diversities, including gender and cultural background, and the ways schools' structure and address these diversities.

Society, and by default schools as microcosms, are now more pluralised and less homogenous spaces than in previous decades. Increased globalisation has resulted in shifting demographic profiles of students in school populations that are now more multicultural and multilingual than ever before (Florian 2015; Hannigan *et al.* 2021). Along with these shifting demographic profiles, increased diversity and hyper-connectivity have resulted in the reshaping and redevelopment of new identities (Forsight 2013; Shirley and Hargreaves 2023). The concept of identity is in flux with social (relationships, friendships, members of a community and attachment to place), biographical (ethnicity, national identity, religious beliefs and professional or financial status) and biometric (physiological structure and genetics) identities (Forsight 2013) overlapping and intertwining to reveal the complexities that form and shape individuality (Florian 2015; 2020; Shirley and Hargreaves 2023). The interaction of these identities (intersectionality) (Shirley and Hargreaves 2023), grounded in a sociocultural consciousness necessitates a change in thinking to understand and respond to children effectively (Florian 2015; 2020). This causes issues for defining inclusion.

2.4 Defining Inclusion

Despite the convergence of national and international policy and legislation around inclusion, challenges continue in identifying and defining what inclusion really means (Clough and Corbett 2000; Thomas and Vaughan 2004; Ainscow, Booth and Dyson 2006; NCSE 2010; Hornby 2015; Nilholm 2020; O'Brien 2020). Policy makers, educationalists, parents, and advocacy groups have debated the meaning and principles of inclusion for decades (Sundeen and Banerjee 2023). Thus, defining and theorising inclusive education from its earliest conceptualisations has been problematic and has not developed evenly across and between nations (Hernández-Torrano *et al.* 2020). Inclusion is complex (Nilholm 2020), elusive (Ainscow 1999; Slee 2000; NCSE 2010), multidimensional (Hornby 2015), multi-positional (O'Brien 2020), and multi-faceted (Nilholm and Göransson 2017; Kaufmann *et al.* 2018). The fact that no universally agreed definition has emerged since early foundations 'reflects its complex and contested nature' (Florian 1998 cited in NCSE 2010, p.12). This lack of agreement has resulted in schools and policy makers around the world interpreting how best to implement inclusive practice (Sundeen and Banerjee 2023). This has led to a call for new theories to understand inclusion and inclusive practice (Nilholm 2020), for unless inclusion can be defined it becomes meaningless (Hornby 2015); 'everything and nothing at the same time' (Armstrong *et al.* 2011, p.31). Twenty years ago, Florian (2014) suggested that this lack of definition was problematic and suggested that the literature on inclusive education holds the answer and as such needs to be mined. This literature on the foundations of inclusive education details stages of exclusion, segregation, integration and the more recent evolution of inclusion (Griffin and Shevlin 2011) and teaching to diversity. Figure 2.2 illustrates this evolution and the major influences/models which shaped the development of inclusive education from the last century. These early influences, such as the medical model and social model of disability helped shape our current understanding of inclusive education and were discussed in Chapter One.

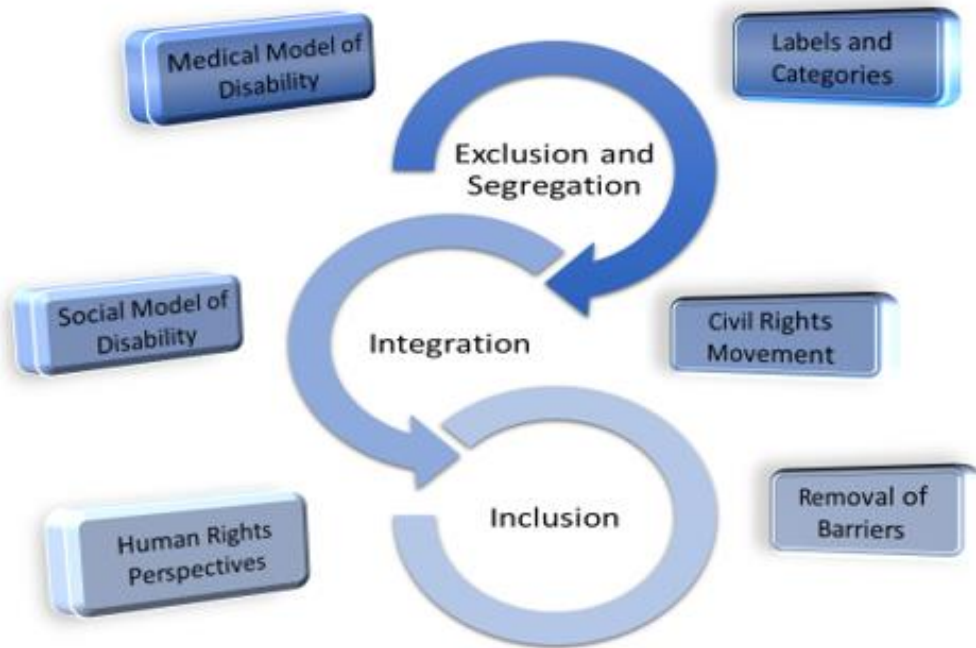


Figure 2.2 Evolution of Inclusive Education

In addressing the complexities of defining inclusive education, Florian (2005) traced the development of various definitions each reflecting societal, economics and political developments of the time which informed legislation, policy and practice. The definitions outlined in Table 2.2 represent the development of the concept of inclusion from an early view of inclusion for students with disabilities (Florian 2015), as a form of integration (being with one another, (Forest and Pearpoint 1992) to inclusion as acceptance in the broader concept of diversity (schools that are accepting of all children (Thomas 1997). These definitions were reflective of a developing change in philosophy that inclusion should mean more than the physical placement of children in schools and classrooms, rather, more importantly children would belong and become part of the wider community and societal systems (Odom *et al.* 2011). For Slee (2019) the principles and practices of belonging must be at the heart of inclusion. This involves increasing students' participation (Saravi *et al.* 2020).

Table 2.2 Definitions of Inclusive Education (Florian 2005, p.31)

Definition	Source
Being with one another, how we deal with adversity, how we deal with difference.	Forest and Pearpoint 1992
A set of principles which ensures that the student with a disability is viewed as a valued and needed member of the school community in every respect.	Uditsky 1993
A move towards extending the scope of 'ordinary' schools so they can include a greater diversity of children.	Clarke 1995
Schools that deliver a curriculum to students through organisational arrangements that are different from those used in schools that exclude some students from their regular classrooms.	Ballard 1995
Schools that are diverse problem-solving organisations with a common mission that emphasises learning for all students.	Rouse and Florian 1996
Full membership of an age-appropriate class in your local school doing the same lessons as the other pupils and it mattering if you are not there. Plus, you have friends who spend time with you outside of school.	Hall 1996
The process by which a school attempts to respond to all pupils as individuals by reconsidering its curricula, organisation and provision.	Sebba 1996
Schools that are accepting of all children.	Thomas 1997

As a result, subsequent definitions of inclusion focused on participation, active involvement and choice, which shifted the focus from the child to the school (Florian 2005; Winter and O'Raw 2010). Highlighting the importance of participation in inclusive practice, the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth and Ainscow 2002), which was designed as a resource to support the inclusive development of schools defined inclusion as, 'the processes of increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the cultures, curricula and communities of local schools' (Booth and Ainscow 2002, p.3). The focus on participation in schools and society continued in the ensuing years. Nutbrown *et al.* (2013) defined inclusion as the 'unified drive towards maximal participation in and minimal exclusion from early years settings, from schools and from society' (p.8). Participation requires active involvement, collaboration and having a say in matters of concern. On a deeper level,

‘participation is about being recognised, accepted and valued’ (Booth and Ainscow 2002, p.3). It may be associated with belonging, being visible and being welcomed (Dunne *et al.* 2018). Therefore, inclusion is not just an education issue (Rose and Shevlin 2020). Questions of human rights, equality, social justice and diversity are concerns for society as a whole and underpin the concept of inclusion (Hornby 2015; Ainscow 2020). Inclusive education therefore is aligned and ‘underpinned by a broader rights-based concept of inclusion’ (Fitzgerald 2020, p.5) and:

‘includes the celebration and valuing of difference and diversity, consideration of human rights, social justice and equity issues, as well as a social model of disability and a socio-economic model of education.’

(Hornby 2015, p.235)

This rights-based focus on inclusive education, positions the place of instruction, that being mainstream as a fundamental principle of inclusion. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) (2015) calls for all children to be educated alongside their peers and friends in their local community. This necessitates a paradigm shift (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (2017) and a ‘transformational cultural reform and radical realignment within systems, schools, communities and societies that create barrier-free equality of opportunity for all’ (O’Brien 2020, p. 301). Consequently, inclusive education must be,

‘an on-going process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectation of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination’

(United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2008, p.3)

Research on inclusive education has identified it as a process (Booth and Ainscow 2002; UNESCO 2018; Ainscow 2020; O’Brien 2020) and an approach (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson 2006) that requires considerable effort, leadership and commitment (Ainscow 2006; 2020) to avoid the repetition of exclusion (Slee 2010) and to increase participation. Participation necessitates a reform of educational systems including,

‘reforming the content, teaching methods, approaches and structures and strategies in education so all students are provided with an equitable and participatory learning experience’

(General Comment No.4 The United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD 2006).

This system change (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Hornby 2015) must be contextually sensitive (Ainscow 2020). Teachers must be supported and challenged to create new effective ways to respond to the diverse range of learning needs in the classroom.

With ideological and political support evident over recent decades, the principle of inclusion appears to be uncontested. However, the debate about how these principles are enacted in practice continues to be more challenging (Winter and O’Raw 2010; Shevlin Winter and Flynn 2013; Haug 2017; Ainscow 2020). Inclusion continues to be subjective (Armstrong *et al.* 2010) and can ‘mean different things to different people, or all things to all people’ (Hornby 2015 p.235). Furthermore, as inclusion is dependent on context (Florian 2014; Ainscow 2020), school ethos and professional development (Shevlin, Winter and Flynn 2013; OECD 2020) are key factors in implementing inclusive practice. Significantly however, despite policy developments, research and guidance over the decades, a knowledge practice gap continues to remain as teachers struggle to create inclusive learning environments, indicating a need to focus on supporting teachers to enact inclusive pedagogy (Brennan, King and Travers 2019). My definition and understanding of inclusion, in the context of education, is informed by conceptual understanding of children’s rights, and inclusive special education provision, and stems from my experience as a SET, and now teacher educator. For me, inclusion is a negotiated, flexible process between all stakeholders, based on the individual strengths and needs of the child, which creates a sense of belonging, and facilitates meaningful participation in teaching, learning and assessment.

2.5 Inclusive Pedagogy

The complexity of defining inclusive education is a result of its place (schools and classrooms), which according to Florian (2014) is at the mercy of larger educational reforms. These reforms promote the marketisation of education, where success and

effectiveness are intricately linked with standards and accountability which are in direct contrast to the moral imperative of inclusion (Florian 2014; O'Brien 2020). Inclusive pedagogy can be understood as the knowledge and beliefs underpinning inclusive teaching practices (Timus *et al.* 2023). Inclusive pedagogy values diversity and challenges deterministic assumptions, it advocates choice and collaboration, and views a child's potential to learn as open-ended rather than fixed (Spratt and Florian 2015). Inclusive education requires that children are not merely present, but have opportunities to meaningfully participate (Nutbrown *et al.* 2013; Kauffmann *et al.* 2018; Ainscow 2020; O'Brien 2020). This participation is underpinned both by an understanding of how children learn, but also by the teacher's philosophical assumptions of social justice which shape the choices which they make to enact inclusive practices in their classrooms (Florian and Spratt 2013). Therefore, a framework to evidence inclusive practice is necessary to strip back the shroud of bureaucracy to identify what inclusive education looks like and identify how teachers in classrooms can respond to differences between individual students without perpetuating the marginalisation that occurs when some are treated differently from others (Spratt and Florian 2015).

The Inclusive Pedagogical Approach emerged from research into the craft knowledge of teachers in two Scottish primary schools which were committed to the principles of inclusive education while maintaining high standards of academic attainment (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011). Teachers' craft knowledge is the tacit, schematic and intuitive thinking in which the complex reality of classroom teaching is embedded (McIntyre 2005). It is the knowledge that teachers develop through reflection and problem solving in their individual contexts and is therefore highly personal (McIntyre 2005). Inclusive Pedagogical Approach views differences and variabilities in ability (Florian 2020) as learning opportunities for teachers, it does not deny differences rather seeks ways to accommodate diversity where schools and teachers must adapt and change their practices (Kinsella and Senior 2008). Table 2.3 outlines the Framework which identifies the key assumptions and associated concepts/actions which are deemed essential for developing inclusive practice.

Table 2.3. Inclusive Pedagogical Approach Framework: Assumptions and Associated Concepts/ Actions (Florian 2014. p. 290)

Assumptions	Associated concepts/actions
Difference is accounted for as an essential aspect of human development in a conceptualisation of learning.	Replacing deterministic views of ability with those that view learning potential as open-ended. Acceptance that differences are part of human condition. Rejecting the idea that the presence of some will hold back the progress of others. Believing that all children can make progress.
Teachers must believe that they are qualified/capable of teaching all children.	Demonstrating how the difficulties students experience in learning can be considered dilemmas for teaching rather than problems within students. Commitment to the support of all learners. Belief in own capacity to promote learning for all children.
Teachers continually develop creative new ways of working with others.	Willingness to work (creatively) with and through others. Modelling (creative new) ways of working.

While acknowledging the individuality and uniqueness of children, the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach recognises that children have much more in common with each other (Alexander 2004) and values collaboration with others to provide meaningful learning opportunities. Inclusive pedagogy was developed in response to questions about how students can receive extra support without treating them differently from others (Florian Black-Hawkins 2011). It ‘does not reject specialist support but encourages its delivery to be more sensitive to the associated unintended, negative outcomes’ (Florian and Spratt 2013, p.122). Hick *et al.* (2019) emphasise the importance of planning for inclusive teaching that involves approaches aimed at the whole class not constrained by differentiation practices that require identifying particular students as different, thereby avoiding the

repetition of exclusion (Allen 2006; Slee 2010). This was also the approach underpinning the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth and Ainscow 2002) and formed the conceptual basis of the *Profile of Inclusive Teachers*, wherein core values and areas of competence include: valuing learner diversity and supporting all learners and working with others (EADSNE 2012). The Inclusive Pedagogical Approach acknowledges the transformative impact of teaching which can affect any child's capacity to learn. This requires that teachers suspend their judgement on who can do what and enables teachers to shift their gaze from teaching some or a few to teaching everyone (Florian 2020). Florian (2014) acknowledges the challenges for schools and teachers with such an approach. Challenges include bell curve thinking, the focus on deficit and need as opposed to strengths and possibilities, the belief that teachers do not have the capability to teach everyone and more worryingly, the belief that some learners are not their responsibility.

Teachers who wish to enact inclusive pedagogy face challenges within their school context with tensions between school-based policies and their inclusive practice. Structural features in schools such as streaming, ability grouping and separate provision for special needs exacerbate differences and reinforce divisions and limit possibilities (Spratt and Florian 2015). Florian and Spratt (2013) highlight the work of Ball (1981), Hargreaves (1982), Boaler, William, and Brown (2000) all of whom identify the damaging effects of predicting future potential based on current achievement which include reproducing social inequalities, and undermining students' sense of self-worth. The focus on pathology and defectology (Allen 2020) continues despite advancements both in policy and practice partly due to resources being tied to the label and diagnosis (Allen 2020; Rose and Shevlin 2020).

However, the concept of inclusive pedagogy as a framework for inclusion has faced criticism for not considering the individualisation of approaches which are sometimes necessary for some children. Qualitative research which examined teachers' practices for including autistic learners in the classroom identified that specific strategies to manage behaviour could be considered exclusionary, as they target individual children (Lindsay *et al.* 2014). Underpinned by an inclusive pedagogical approach, this study examined 13 teachers' strategies for including

autistic children in a wide range of elementary level mainstream classroom in two cities in Ontario, Canada. Findings from analysis of in-depth interviews reveal that, although teachers adhered to inclusive pedagogy as described by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), it can be difficult to achieve for students who require specific attention to address behavioural issues. The authors recommend that, although valuable, the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach could benefit from adjustments to reflect the complexity of including all students when some have specific needs, such as behaviour, arising from their autism (Lindsay *et al.* 201).

Arguably, the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach does not address the challenges of supporting students with complex needs in the classroom. The Inclusive Pedagogical Approach envisages classrooms that are flexible and without limits, and where an inclusive philosophy and inclusive practice will eradicate barriers and support accommodations regardless of the nature, severity or complexity of needs. However, the inclusion of students with complex needs in post-primary schools has been identified as particularly challenging (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021). Systemic barriers, such as the structure and organisation of post-primary schools, lack of access to support, inflexible and discrete approaches to learning, teaching and assessment and the performativity agenda have been identified as harmful to the inclusion agenda (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021). Regardless of teachers' philosophical approaches to inclusion the barriers in post-primary contexts may inhibit teachers' use of inclusive pedagogy. Inclusive approaches such as the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach propose a vision of full inclusion where All means All, in which all children with no exceptions are educated in mainstream classroom alongside their peers (Kaufman and Hornby 2020). However, criticism has been launched at the simplicity of such an approach. Kauffman and Hornby (2020) quote the American journalist and literary critic H.I. Menken, who suggests that 'for every complex problem there is a solution that is simple neat, and wrong' (p.2). In this case the complex problem or wicked problem (Armstrong 2017; Fitzgerald 2020) is inclusive education and the solution is full inclusion. Thereby a call for specialised individualised supports framed within an inclusive philosophy which can be enacted in the general classroom is necessary. By offering choice, flexibility and a range of options to everyone, Universal Design for

Learning (UDL) is one such approach which can be seen to embed the philosophy and principles of inclusive pedagogy while proposing an actionable framework which acknowledges the realities of supporting the needs of All, especially including children with disabilities.

2.6 Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework which challenges the medical model of disability by rejecting deficit thinking (Neminen and Pesonen 2020) and shifting the focus away from the learner onto the teacher (Rao and Meo, 2016). In doing so, it 'translates the social model of disability (Chapter One, Section 1.4.2.2) into classroom practices' (Fovet 2020, p.3) through the creation of barrier-free designs for teaching, learning and assessment which engage learners even with the most intense learning needs (Love *et al.* 2019). The concept of UDL was developed by the Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is this model of UDL which was applied in this research. UDL draws upon research in neuroscience and education to understand cognition and learning (Meyer *et al.* 2014; Rao and Meo 2016; Dalton 2017; Quirke *et al.* 2023). Understanding how we learn, through memory, language processing, problem solving, experiential learning, thinking and perception is 'central for the effective consideration of learner variability' (Dalton 2017, p.19). UDL has three core principles in its framework; Multiple Means of Representation (the 'how' of learning), Multiple Means of Action and Expression (the 'what' of learning), and Multiple Means of Engagement (the 'why' of learning) (Figure 2.3).

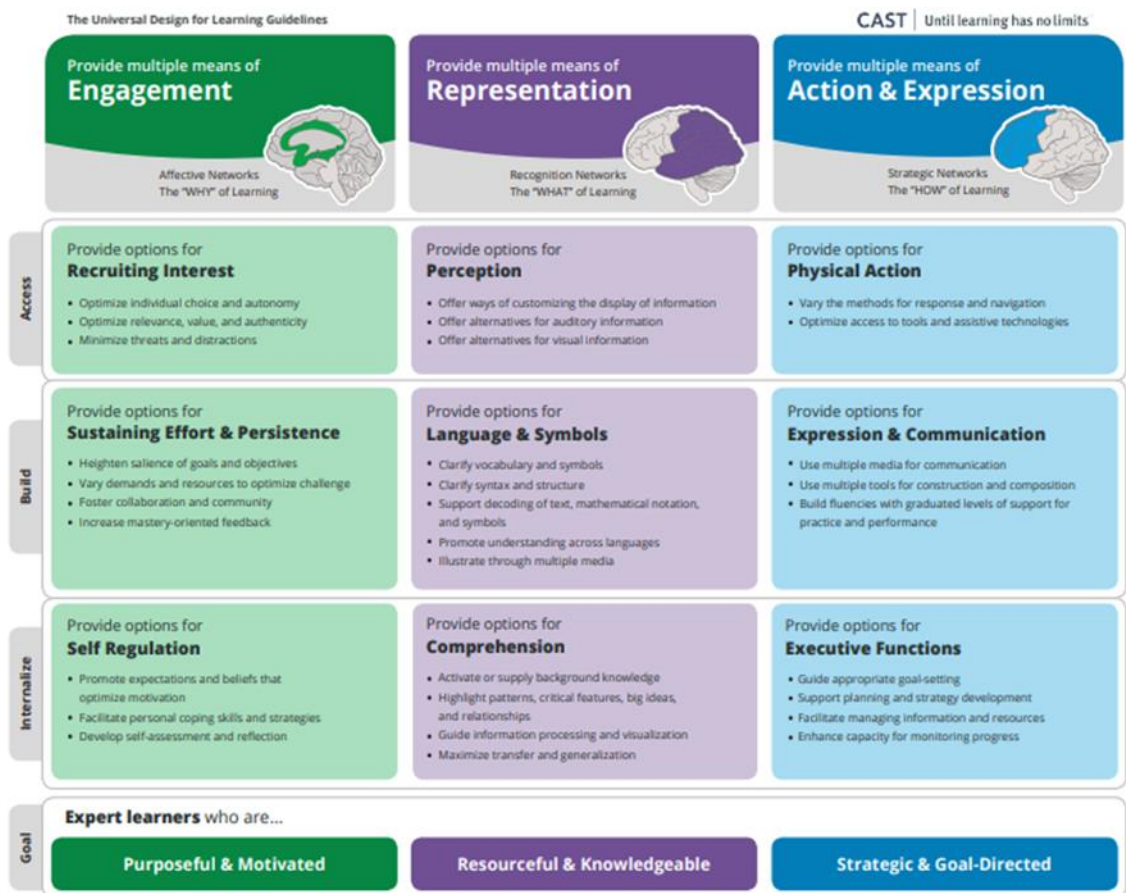


Figure 2.3. Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2 (graphic organiser) (CAST 2018)

Each principle is based on, and linked with, network areas in the brain. Multiple means of representation are linked to recognition networks, multiple means of action and expression are linked to strategic networks and multiple means of engagement are linked to affective networks (Meyer *et al.* 2014; Rao and Meo 2016). When we engage and acquire new information, skills and knowledge these networks interact 'allowing us to recognise, comprehend, internalise, express and relate to the information we are learning' (Rao and Meo 2016, p.2). Therefore, teachers must provide rich and varied learning experiences which incorporate the three principles of UDL which activate neural networks in the brain, thereby facilitating learning for all.

UDL guidelines developed by CAST (2011) and updated in 2018, are a tool which offer concrete suggestions for integrating supports (Rao and Meo 2016), and can be applied to diverse learning environments to ensure participation of all learners in a

meaningful manner. UDL is inclusive without being ‘hyper-individualised’ (Sanger 2020, p. 34). UDL is ‘a sustainable, environment focused framework’ (Fovet 2020, p.3) which requires planning for learner variability from the outset. In this sense it can be described as a ‘front loaded model’ (Dalton 2017, p.20) of classroom instruction. At the core of UDL is the belief,

‘that teachers and curriculum developers should identify and ameliorate students’ learning barriers through effective instructional planning focused on engagement, flexible use of materials and meaningful accessible instruction’

(Israel, Ribuffo and Smith 2014, p.6).

The three principles of UDL support the removal of barriers and widening of access for all (Dalton 2017), including students with disabilities (Quirke and McGuckin 2019) and diverse linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (Israel, Ribuffo and Smith 2016; Rao and Meo 2016). To support teachers in this process, CAST offers a set of comprehensive guiding principles and checkpoints as part of the UDL framework (Figure 2.3) to support teachers in offering and providing variation of instruction, engagement and demonstration of learning to ensure that students become experts in their learning. These checkpoints outline how teachers can provide access to learning goals, to build and develop students’ knowledge and to support students to internalise their learning and skills. Central to this framework is the development of expert learners (Quirke *et al.* 2023) who are purposeful and motivated, respectful and knowledgeable, strategic and goal directed (CAST 2018). Although, currently there is a lot of anecdotal evidence on the use of UDL to remove barriers to learning in the mainstream classroom, there is little attention being paid to how UDL can support students with ID to meaningfully participate in educational settings, including mainstream classrooms. This research is conceptualised within the principles and philosophies of UDL and how they can be interpreted in educational settings. This project contributes to the body of knowledge and understanding of how a UDL approach, using the CAST model, can support the participation of all, including those with ID.

Multiple means of representation provide the physical access and requires content to be provided in a multi-model way, for example, using images, animations and

other visual aids (Barahona *et al.* 2023) or through ‘discussion, readings, digital texts and multimedia presentations’ (Meyer *et al.* 2014 p.6). Multiple means of action and expression allow students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understanding in a variety of ways incorporating traditional text, the use of visuals, multimedia presentations and digital recordings (Meyer *et al.* 2014). Multiple means of engagement foster student engagement and allow us to focus how we can engage students in the learning process by promoting and providing multiple ways they can engage with tasks (Quirke *et al.* 2023), thus sustaining student’s motivation (CAST 2018). Teachers can use materials which reflect students’ cultures, backgrounds and interests, (Gauvreau *et al.* 2023) while using strategies such as ‘collaborative learning, instructional games and simulations and real and virtual tours’ (Meyer *et al.* 2014, p.6). Section 4.10.1 outlines how these principles of UDL were applied to data collection in this research.

The analogy of a menu (Rao and Meo 2016) with a variety of options to support engagement, participation and demonstration of learning has been used to illustrate the guiding principles and checkpoints of UDL. Teachers can refer to the menu of options as they design lessons which intentionally build in strategies and supports and consider learner variability (Israel, Ribuffo and Smith 2014; Rao and Meo 2016). The UDL framework has been designed to meet the widest range of learning needs while acknowledging that that there will always be some students who need ‘particular and specialised add-ons’ (Quirke *et al.* 2023, p.33) such as individualised explicit strategy instruction, Assistive Technology (AT) and modifications to the curriculum to support their needs (Israel Ribuffo and Smith 2014). UDL does not suggest that the needs of students with profound and multiple learning difficulties such as independent living skills, toileting and feeding need can be addressed using the UDL framework alone. Meyer *et al.* (2014) suggest that UDL should be considered as a framework in which evidence-based practices are embedded. This, according to these researchers, allows teachers to deliver evidence-based strategies such as modelling and guided practice in their instruction consistent with UDL.

The implementation of a UDL Framework reduces the need for such individualisation (Israel, Ribuffo and Smith 2014) but does not ignore it. Similar to the inclusive

pedagogical approach its ‘focus is on everybody in the community of the classroom’ (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011, p.820) and does not discriminate on grounds of diagnosis or label. Although UDL was conceptualised for special education (Dalton 2017) the increase of diverse student populations in mainstream education brings this framework into general education classrooms where the focus must be on building and capitalising on students’ strengths, rather than on remediating weaknesses (Dalton 2017). By doing so, UDL can support students’ belonging and participation. Providing choice and flexibility can give voice and agency to students and may reduce feelings of isolation, exclusion, loneliness and otherness which have been reported in qualitative research on autistic young peoples’ experience of mainstream schools (Goodall 2018). Therefore, it is critical for special education teachers and classroom/subject teachers to have strong foundations in UDL (NCSE 2024) to enact inclusive practice.

However, although UDL promotes an inclusive approach for all, a lack of empirical research to support the efficacy of UDL to improve students’ outcomes has been identified (Flood and Banks 2021). This according to the authors is a significant limitation to the implementation of the UDL framework in schools (Flood and Banks 2021). Coupled with this, proponents of inclusive special education (Hornby 2015; Kaufmann *et al.* 2018) argue that evidence-based strategies, interventions and procedures associated with special education provision are necessary to improve outcomes for some students with SEND. Therefore, establishing an evidence base for inclusive frameworks such as UDL and Inclusive Pedagogy is imperative if we wish to use such approaches to improve outcomes for all, including students with SEND.

2.7 Dilemmas of Difference: The Problem of Labelling

Inclusive pedagogy and UDL seek to remove barriers which enhance segregation or discrimination based on diagnosis or labels. Rather, they insist and support teachers to take responsibility for the learning of all children in their class (Florian and Spratt 2013). Labels are problematic in terms of enabling inclusive practice (O’ Brien 2020). Labelling is stigmatising (Kaufmann 2018) and identifies the otherness in children which fosters exclusion (Norwich 2013). Furthermore, it fails to provide any ‘insight

into what individualised pedagogy and pedagogic decisions might look like' (O'Brien 2020, p. 306).

The outcomes of labels in the Irish context as well as other jurisdictions are problematic which create tensions and dilemmas (Allen 2020; O'Brien 2020; Rose and Shevlin 2020). Although a diagnosis or clinical label can have legislative, resourcing and early identification functions (NCSE 2024; O'Brien 2020) which attract and, in many cases, guarantee resources (Allen 2020; Rose and Shevlin 2020), they highlight difference and can perpetuate the stigma that having a label may entail. To broaden the understanding of the complexity of diagnosis and labeling, Russel and Norwich (2012) and Norwich (2013) present research which identifies both the positive and negatives of having a label. Solity (1991) (cited in Norwich 2013) and Mansell and Morris (2004) (cited in Russell and Norwich 2012) refer to the use of labels as devaluing and discriminatory. Hodge (2005) (cited in Russel and Norwich 2012) found evidence that parents felt pressured into accepting a label in order to access services. In contrast, others such as Farrugia (2009) and Rutter (2011) (cited in Norwich 2013; Russel and Norwich 2012) found a label as a useful tool to explain the child's difficulties to others as a means to increase tolerance. Similarly, Riddick (2002) (cited in Russel and Norwich 2012) found a label of dyslexia as helpful on a private level. Therefore, dilemmas of difference occur (Norwich 2013). If children are identified as having a disability there is a risk of negative labeling and stigma. However, if they are not identified there is a risk that they will not receive the teaching and resources they require to meaningfully participate in the classroom (Hornby 2015).

Hornby (2015) challenges the notion of 'dilemmas of difference' (Norwich 2013). He identifies these dilemmas as a product of confused thinking. Hornby (2013) maintains that children with SEN will attract labels from other children and teachers regardless of labels because having special educational needs or disabilities marks them as different from others in their classroom. Avoiding labeling will not prevent children being stigmatised (Hornby 2015), rather it may preclude them from getting the education they need (Kaufmann and Badar 2014).

Russell and Norwich (2012) suggest the emergence of the social model of disability where disability is seen as socially constructed through peoples' attitudes, and societies infrastructures evoke binary concepts of normal and abnormal with anything different presented as abnormal. This, according to Russell and Norwich (2012), requires a shift in norms and values to avoid the stigma that can come with having a label. Kauffman and Hornby (2020) maintain that individuals must be sorted and categorised according to labels or the 'category of disabilities is meaningless, and therefore, cannot be studied' (Kauffman and Hornby 2020, p.4). 'Disabilities Studies' according to these authors 'becomes the study of everyone, shallow and unfocused study of homo sapiens' (p.4). The challenge therefore is to sort, label and categorise better, not to eliminate the ability to communicate effectively about disabilities (Kauffman and Hornby 2020).

2.7.1 The Effect of Labels on Teacher Efficacy

Despite the contrasting views, the categorical approach and associated labels are problematic for inclusive education as they perpetuate the otherness and differences in children which fosters a belief in teachers that they do not have the required knowledge and skills to support their needs. Teacher efficacy is perceived as teachers' belief or conviction in their capacity to affect student performance (Guskey and Passaro 1994). Teacher-perceived efficacy, according to Bandura (1997), influences the classroom environment and learning experiences to enhance student learning. Numerous studies have indicated that teacher efficacy is linked to positive attitudes towards inclusive practices (Brennan 2017). Sharma *et al.* (2012) cited an early comprehensive study of predicting teachers' attitudes to inclusion conducted by Soodak, Pedell and Lehman (1998) which identified teachers' efficacy as the strongest predictor of their attitudes to inclusion. They also found that low teacher efficacy was linked to anxiety and rejection of the idea of inclusion in their classroom (Sharma *et al.* 2012). NCSE commissioned research (2015) highlighted the lack of teacher efficacy in supporting the needs of students with SEND in the Irish context. However, the development of knowledgeable and skilled teachers in SEND practices is recognised as a crucial factor in the establishment of inclusive learning environments (NCSE 2024; Kinsella and Senior 2008; Rose *et al.* 2015) Findings from

project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools), reveal that class/subject teachers do not believe that have the requisite skills, knowledge and understanding required to provide effective curricular instruction for children with SEND (Rose *et al.* 2015).

Project IRIS, a large-scale longitudinal study, investigated the experiences of and outcomes for learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Irish schools. A mixed method approach was applied to this study, utilising a national survey and focus groups. Case studies involving 158 students from primary, post-primary and special schools as well as parents, school staff and other service providers, including those from the Health Service Executive (HSE) allowed for in-depth investigation of each context using interviews, observations and analysis of policy documents. Although the voices of students were captured through interviews, there was little detail in the NCSE report as to how students were supported to voice their perspectives. At a later date, Rose and Shevlin (2021) elaborated how children, particularly those with identified needs, were supported using visuals and artefacts during the interview process. Pictorial and symbolic presentations of research instruments were also employed. However, reflecting on the process the authors identified 'more time involving young people in the preparation of these instruments would have been beneficial' (p.166).

Findings present a mixed picture of provision in Ireland and were reported under four areas: policy, provision, experience and outcomes (Rose *et al.* 20125, p.2). Provision for students was evidenced through teachers' use of differentiation strategies, or withdrawal support. From this it could be argued, in this study; teachers' perceptions of provision were influenced by the additional needs approach (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011) with the focus on the individual needs of some, being different to others who could participate in the class. Teaching for some, therefore, required specialist approaches, which teachers felt they did not have the capacity to provide.

2.8 Development of Inclusive Education in Ireland

In Ireland, the complex relationship between the Department of Health and the Department of Education, born out of the medical model, ensured that no agency or

individual had statutory responsibility to provide services as a right, which hindered the progression of inclusive policies and practices during this time. From as early as the 1950s the policy relating to the education and care of those with SEND was to support the establishment of special schools (Carey 2005; NCSE 2010). This parallel approach was supported by the Report of Enquiry on Mental Handicap (Government of Ireland 1965) which recommended that special education should take place in residential or day special schools (NCSE 2010). This segregated approach to education was seen as essential, as children with SEND were deemed to be incapable of benefitting from ordinary methods of instruction (Thomas, Walker and Webb 1998). Undeniably, in the Irish context there ‘appeared to be resistance to safeguarding rights of disabled people to equitable services through legislation as enacted in other countries’ (Griffin and Shevlin 2011, p.49).

The global trend towards a more inclusive framework progressed against the backdrop of rapid social and educational policy developments. This trend was framed within the rights-based principles and underlying policy statements which emerged from a range of legislative provisions. Figure 2.4 illustrates some of the critical influences on the development of inclusive education.

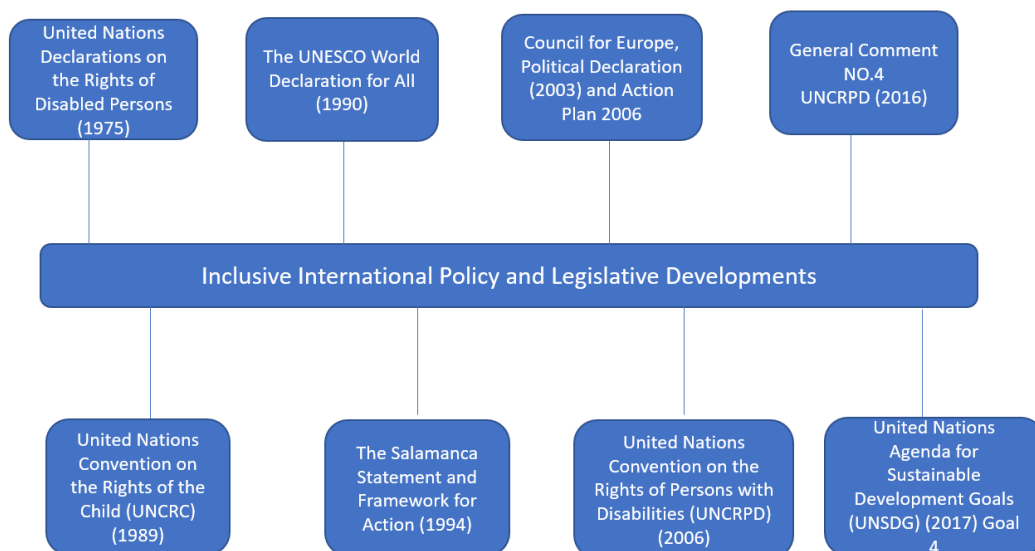


Figure 2.4. Inclusive International Policy and Legislative Developments

The Salamanca Statement (1994), is regarded as the single most important international document in the field of inclusive education (NCSE 2010). It requested

all governments to 'give the highest priority to making education systems inclusive, and to adopt the principle of inclusive education as a matter of law or policy' (Westwood 2013, p.3). Inclusive education, according to the statement was the 'most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes' (UNESCO 1994, section 2) and as such would reduce marginalisation experienced by people with disabilities (O'Brien 2020). Although advocating the removal of barriers to facilitate full inclusion in mainstream school for children with SEND, the Salamanca Statement did recognise in a small number of exceptional cases, inclusion in mainstream schools may not be the most suitable option (Hornby and Kaufmann 2023). In this case, placement in special school or special class should be flexible and allow for part-time attendance in mainstream schools/classes (UNESCO 1994). Subsequent to this, further public policy debate on the rights of persons with disabilities to access and participate in mainstream societal and educational activities ensued (Griffin and Shevlin 2011).

The Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (Government of Ireland 1993) Report was critical in terms of policy and provision of special education in the Irish context (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 1999; Carey 2005; MacGiolla Phádraig 2007; Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) 2009; Brennan 2017). This report called for the integration of children with SEND into mainstream schools and the reduction of student: teacher ratios. It found that segregation inhibits one of the main goals of education; that is 'providing students with the necessary skills to live, socialise and work in their own communities' (Mannion 2017, p.17). Furthermore, its key recommendations served as a template for the future development of special education policy. Principles such as the right to an individualised and appropriate education, the important role of parents, the right of access to local mainstream schools and the establishment of a continuum of education, all place the SERC Report (1993) as seminal in terms of the future of a rights-based vision of inclusive education (Egan 2013; Kenny *et al.* 2020). Significantly, the report acknowledged that the term SEN was problematic as it incorporated a vast range of educational difficulties which occur along a continuum

and require a differentiated response approach (Griffin and Shevlin 2011). A broad definition of SEN was adopted in the SERC report, and included,

‘all those whose disabilities and /or circumstances prevent or hinder them from benefiting adequately from the education which is normally provided for pupils of the same age, or for whom the education which can generally be provided in the ordinary classroom is not sufficiently challenging’

(SERC Report, p.18).

Although this definition identifies needs on a continuum and acknowledges the influence of social-economics issues, the focus remains on within-child deficits (Griffin and Shevlin 2011) as such mainstream placement may not be appropriate for some. As a result, it recommended placement for students with more significant needs such as those with moderate ID in separate designated setting (Travers 2023). Despite its shortcomings, the Report was seen as the first ‘credible attempt to improve system capacity in relation to special educational provision’ (Griffin and Shevlin 2011, p.53).

However, during this time many parents of children with SEND continued to face barriers and resistance when attempting to obtain appropriate educational provision for their children who had autism and/or severe/profound SEND or whom the state deemed ineducable (Meegan and MacPhail 2006). Litigation for many was and continues in some cases to be the only recourse. Cases such as O’Donoghue (1993) and later Sinnott (2000) fought for the fundamental right of children to achieve an appropriate education based on educational needs rather than medical or care needs (Kenny *et al.* 2020)

The influence of the SERC Report (1993,) was first apparent in the 1995 Government White Paper on Education ‘Charting our Educational Future’ (Government of Ireland 1995), where the right to access and the right to participate were seen as central to promotion of quality and equality for all ‘including those who are disadvantaged through economic, social, physical and mental factors in the development of their full educational potential’ (p.12). Successive policies and legislative acts continued to emerge at a rapid pace to support inclusive education practices in Ireland (NCSE 2015). The Education Act (1998), provided the first statutory basis since the foundation of the State to recognise the rights of children with disabilities to

participate fully in the life of the school and their right to supports and services to allow them to do so (NCSE 2010; Flood 2013). Explicit reference is made throughout this Act that students with disabilities should ‘access educational provision on an equal basis to their non-disabled peers’ (Shevlin and Banks 2021, p.162). However, a major limitation of this Act is that services for children with SEND will only be provided if there are sufficient resources to do so. Vague language such as ‘as far as practicable’ and ‘having regard to the resources available’ (Government of Ireland 1998 Part 2, section 6) limits what the Government is legally required to provide (Flood 2013; Brennan 2017).

Other legislative acts such as The National Disabilities Authority Act (1999), the Education Welfare Act (2000), the Equal Status Act (2000), Education for Persons with Special Education Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) and the Disability Act (2005) all speak to the rights and entitlements of children with SEND in Ireland (NCSE 2015). The EPSEN Act (2004) comes from the standpoint of inclusion and perhaps is the most significant piece of legislation relating to special needs provision in the history of the State. The definition of disability within EPSEN (2004) encompassed a wide range of difficulties to include ‘physical, sensory, mental health or learning disabilities’ (Shevlin and Banks 2021, p.162) which marked a significant departure from traditional deficit dominated definitions (Shevlin and Banks 2021, p.162). However, failure to enact critical elements of this Act has resulted in a lack of clarity regarding policy on the rights of children with disabilities to education (Children’s Rights Alliance 2016).

In 2005, The NCSE was established under the EPSEN Act (2004), to improve the delivery of services to children with SEND and to provide policy advice and best practice in inclusive education, based on national and international research (Griffin and Shevlin 2011). After the EPSEN Act (2004) it became clear that schools in the Irish context needed support in implementing inclusive structures (O’Gorman and Drudy 2010; Travers *et al.* 2010; Griffin and Shevlin 2011; Rose *et al.* 2015; Brennan 2017). A lack of expertise and experience in mainstream schools in special education and the continued policy of inclusion of students with SEND in Irish schools left many feeling ill-equipped and unable to cope with the increased demands (Griffin and

Shevlin 2011). In response, in 2005, the Department of Education and Science (DES) introduced the General Allocation Model (GAM) which was designed to ensure that all schools had enough resource teaching hours to meet the needs of children with SEND. Furthermore, the GAM reflected the expectation that most schools would have students who would present with additional needs (DES 2005). Circular SP.ED.02/05 outlined that the GAM was 'intended to make possible the development of truly inclusive schools' (p.3). Schools according to this system would have enough resources to cater for students who present with high incidence special needs such as those whose:

'achievement is below the 10th percentile in standardised test of reading and mathematics';

'Pupils with mild speech and language difficulties, pupils with mild social or emotional difficulties and pupils with mild co-ordination or attention control difficulties such as dyspraxia, ADD. ADHD';

and

'pupils who have special educational needs arising from high incidence disabilities (borderline mild general learning disability, mild general learning disability and specific learning disability)'.

(Circular SP.ED 02/05, p.3).

Schools under the GAM had the flexibility to deliver support via one-to-one, or group teaching, through in-class support or withdrawal, depending on the individual needs of the child. Complex and enduring needs such as physical disabilities, hearing and visual impairments, emotional disturbance, autism, specific speech and language disorders became known as low incidence special needs and continued to require a psychological assessment report (DES 2005). This categorisation of need based on diagnosis was influenced by the medical model of disability which places deficits within the child. The use of medical models for categorisation in education has been criticised (Demetriou 2020). A classification system which places children into categories for the identification of disability is 'neither straightforward nor universally accepted as appropriate' (Shevlin *et al.* 2013a, p.125). Labels and categories do little to support teachers' understanding of the complexity or nuanced manner which disability can affect individuals (Shevlin *et al.* 2013a). A single descriptor can be too simplistic and reduces teachers' capacity or belief in their own

capacity (Demetriou 2020) to respond appropriately regardless of resources provided. Definitions and labels such as impairment, disorder and disturbance create negative stereotypes, whereby disability is equated to inability (Griffin and Shevlin 2011). Therefore, this categorisation is problematic, on the one hand a label can create stigmatisation, while on the other it qualifies students to receive additional support. Under the GAM, schools who had children presenting with low incidence special needs were granted additional support in the form of resource teaching hours. However, the process of tying resources to assessment resulted in long waiting lists for assessment and restricted the capacity of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) from developing a comprehensive psychological support service to schools (Griffin and Shevlin 2011).

The development and expansion of the Special Education Support Service (SESS) in 2003 provided much needed support for schools, and in particular teachers, to meet the demands of inclusive practices in schools. The SESS aimed to improve the quality of teaching and learning related to special education provision (Griffin and Shevlin 2011). The development of knowledgeable skilled teachers in SEN and the establishment of effective support structures are recognised as critical factors in the establishment of inclusive learning environments (Hornby 2012, 2014; NCSE 2015). At this time, there was a growing realisation that the types of students necessitating extra and additional support went beyond those traditionally thought of as having SEND (NCSE 2010). Students for whom English was a second language, children from the Travelling community and other vulnerable and marginalised groups were identified as having additional needs (DES 2007). To support the integration of the 'increasingly diverse population' (NCSE, p.7), the DES commenced the development of support structures which included the deployment of resource teachers to 'support all children attending schools on a fully integrated basis' (NCSE 2010, p.7). Additionally, class teachers were to be supported in the process of integration through the deployment of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). NEPS was previously established in 1999 to assess the needs of children and assist in the production of Individual Education Plans (NCSE 2010). However, the process of tying resources to assessment of need has drawn much criticism, in part due to long waiting lists (Griffin

and Shevlin 2011) but also in valuing the diagnosis and label to secure adequate resources for schools and students (Allen 2020; Rose and Shevlin 2020).

A significant and positive step towards inclusive education at post-primary level emerged with the introduction of the *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post-Primary Guidelines* (DES 2007). These guidelines advocated a whole school approach to policy development and provided practical supports including the Scheme of Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations (RACE), to support schools and teachers to integrate students presenting with additional needs in the classroom. The introduction of the RACE scheme sets out to remove, in as far as practicable, the barrier to participation in state examinations for those students whose SEND would impair their performance (DES 2007). Despite supports such as the RACE scheme, Visiting Teacher Service, provision of grants to purchase assistive technology and exemptions from the study of Irish, some students with SEND struggled to access the curriculum at junior and senior cycle level in post-primary schools. With the increase of students with SEND accessing mainstream schools a gap in provision emerged. This necessitates curricular reform. This reform is ongoing and occurred in all levels of education from early childhood to senior cycle in post-primary schools.

2.9 Curricular Reform

In Ireland, inclusive education continued to undergo a period of rapid growth and development and central to this has been curricular reform across early childhood, primary and post-primary education over the last two decades.

2.9.1 Early Childhood and Primary Education

Recognising the importance of early childhood as a foundation for lifelong learning, *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, was published by the NCCA in 2009. This is the first curriculum framework for children from birth to six years and supports children to grow as competent and confident learners (NCCA 2009). However, societal changes, developments in research, shifts in policy and increasingly qualified professional workforce, as well as changes in the lived experience of babies and young children, since its publication requires the Aistear

Framework to be updated (NCCA 2023). As schools are often considered a microcosm of society (Elbedour *et al.* 2020), the profile of students attending schools at all levels has changed, mirroring a greater diversity of strengths and needs (NCCA 2015, 2018). To support the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education, The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) commenced in 2016 (Government of Ireland 2023). AIM focused on children availing of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme and provided a range of universal and targeted supports to allow practitioners to cater to a wide range of abilities and focus support when needed (Government of Ireland 2023). This seven-step support mechanism adopts a rights-based, child-centred approach which focuses on identifying and responding to a child's developmental level, abilities and needs rather than relying exclusively on formal diagnoses (Lynch *et al.* 2021).

Curriculum reform at primary level has also taken account of policy, research and the increased diversity of students. An overcrowded curriculum, increase variability amongst learners and challenges in using assessment for and of learning have been identified (NCCA 2020). Calls for the Primary Curriculum to do more to prepare children for adult life have necessitated a reconceptualisation of teaching, learning and assessment at primary level, which reflect national priorities (NCCA 2020). An increase in time allocation for existing curriculum areas such as Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education (PE) as well as the introduction of new aspects such as Coding and Computational Thinking, Education About Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and a greater emphasis on Wellbeing mirror the evolving social, economic, cultural and political influences which shape young children's lives. The publication of the *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (DES 2011) focused priorities for the teaching of language and mathematics, which resulted in the NCCA redeveloping the primary curriculum in the area of language (NCCA 2020). The *New Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC) (2019) seeks to support children on their language learning journey, in both English and Irish language instruction, while also acknowledging the diversity of language now spoken in Irish Primary Schools (NCCA 2019). The *Primary Language Curriculum* contains learning outcomes and associated progression continua (NCCA

2019). Additional Support Pathways for children with complex needs, provide support for teachers in identifying where a child is achieving in their language learning journey. These pathways range from children experiencing language by being present and aware of their learning environment to generalising where children transfer and apply learned skills. Teachers can use the pathways for reporting on children’s language development. Importantly, these additional support pathways align with the progression pathways designed for students participating with the Leve One Learning Programme (L1LP) at Junior Cycle in post-primary education. Therefore, a common language is now being used for reporting at both primary and post-primary levels for the learning of students with SEND. Furthermore, key competencies which will be embedded across all curriculum areas and subjects from junior infants to sixth class link closely with Aistear’s (2009) themes and the Key Skills in the Framework for Junior Cycle (NCCA 2020) (Table 2.4). Therefore, redeveloping the early childhood and primary curriculum ensures future connections and continuity along the education continuum (NCCA 2023) from birth to end of post-primary education.

Table 2.4. Interconnections Along the Education Curriculum

Aistear Themes	Primary Curriculum Competencies	Junior Cycle Key Skills
Wellbeing	Being an Active Citizen	Being Literate
Identity and Belonging	Being Creative	Managing Myself
Communicating	Being a digital learner	Staying Well
Exploring and Thinking	Communicating and Using Language	Managing Information and Thinking, Being Numerate
	Learning to be a learner	Being Creative
	Being Mathematical	Working with Other
	Fostering Wellbeing	Communicating

2.9.2 Post-Primary Education

Since the establishment of the Junior Certificate in 1998, many significant changes have occurred within Irish society (NCCA 2015; 2018). Within special education,

legislative and policy developments underpinned the drive towards an inclusive educational experience for all (NCCA 2015). In response, the NCCA undertook a series of consultation processes with education stakeholders and identified a gap in curriculum, assessment and certification provision at Junior Cycle for students with a low mild to high moderate range of learning difficulty (NCCA 2015; 2018). The introduction of the New Junior Cycle Programme, specifically the introduction of the Level Two Learning Programme (L2LP) in 2014 and the subsequent introduction of the L1LP in 2018, aimed to make the curriculum more accessible and relevant to students with SEND, (NCCA 2018). Learning in junior cycle is informed by eight principles, 24 statements of learning and eight key skills. These provide the structure for schools to design their junior cycle programme (NCCA 2015) to take account students strengths and needs. This New Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) (Figure 2.5) incorporated:

‘a shared understanding of how teaching, learning and assessment practices should evolve to support the delivery of a quality, inclusive and relevant education that meets the needs of students both now and in the future’

(NCCA 2015, p.6).

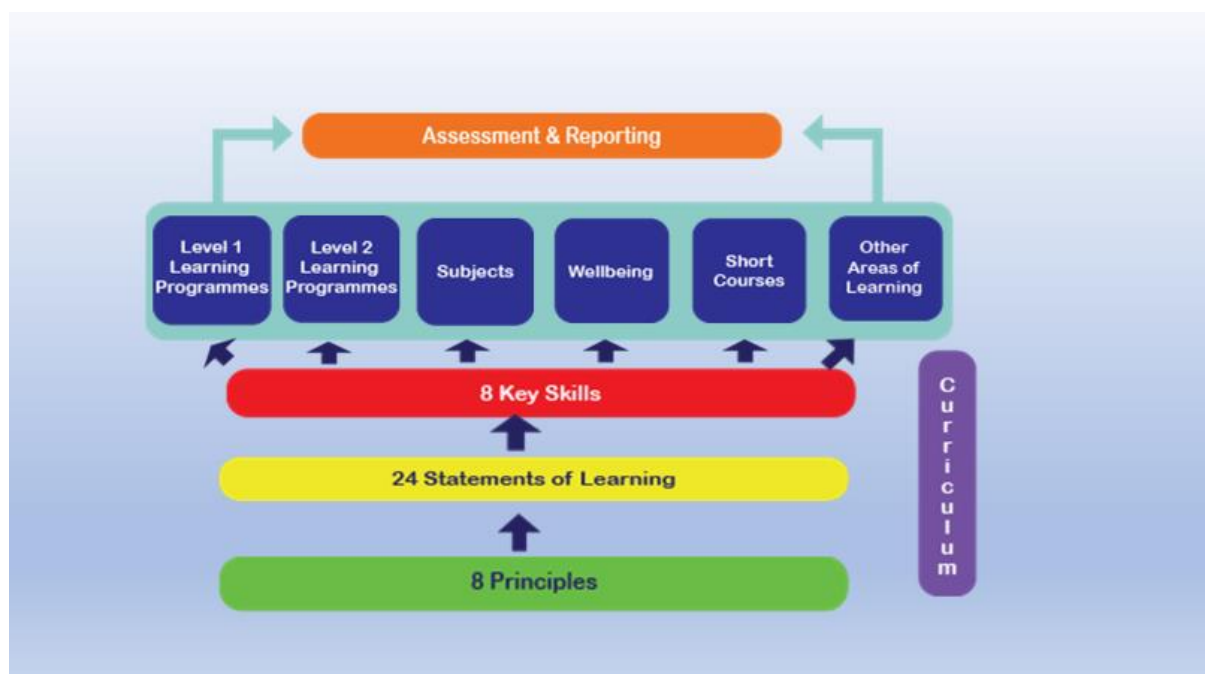


Figure 2.5. Framework for Junior Cycle (Junior Cycle for Teachers), (DE 2024, p.51)

Schools now have the flexibility to design their own Junior Cycle programme at three levels, in response to the needs of their students (NCCA 2015). Schools are supported in this process by the Continuum of Support (CoS)(NEPS 2010) and the 2017 Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools. The Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) allows for a dual approach to assessment that supports students' learning over a period of three years (NCCA 2015). Furthermore, assessment in the L2LP and L1LP is formative in nature and 'involves the use of evidence from assessment and feedback to identify where students are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there' (NCCA 2014, p.31). This change in assessment practice acknowledges that 'students learn best when teachers provide feedback that helps students to understand how they can improve their learning' (NCCA 2015, p.7). The review of Junior Cycle education and subsequent changes in teaching, learning and assessment necessitated a review of Senior Cycle education to take place.

The review of the Senior Cycle Leaving Certificate programme commenced in 2016 with Phase 1 (2016-2017), Phase 2 (2018-2019), and Phase 3 (2019), now complete. Initial findings outlined in the *Interim report of review of senior cycle education* (NCCA 2019) identified that the current system produces challenges for young people with low achievement, those with SEND, those for whom English is an additional language (EAL) and students from the Travelling community (NCCA 2019). Schools who participated in the review have suggested that the current Senior Cycle programme needs significant reform as it is not inclusive of all learners and assessment practices are in direct contrast to those offered at Junior Cycle (NCCA 2019). An advisory report, which will detail priority areas, long term goals and a proposed timeline for developments is currently being devised. This will be presented to the Minister for Education and Skills for consideration (NCCA 2023).

2.9.3 The Push Towards Full Inclusion

Simultaneous to curricular reform at Junior Cycle, the NCSE *Report Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs* (NCSE 2014) highlighted several shortcomings associated with the system for allocating special education teaching resources to schools. In response, the DES produced new guidelines to primary and post-primary schools outlining a new special education teacher allocation model

(SETAM) in 2017. These guidelines and the accompanying Circulars 0013/2017 and 0014/2017 (DES 2017) made explicit the schools' roles and responsibilities for the inclusion of students with disabilities where the class/subject teachers are deemed as 'having primary responsibility for educating all students in his/her classroom including children with SEN (DES Circular 0014/2017, p.17). This revised model supported a more equitable, rights-based approach to provision of support (Kenny *et al.* 2020). Under this model, the DE (formally known as the DES prior to 2020) provides special education teaching supports directly to schools based on education profiles. This 'single unified allocation for special education support' (DES 2017, p.1) took account of the numbers of students with complex needs enrolled in the school, the learning support needs of students evidenced by standardised test results and the social context of the schools, including disadvantage and gender, and gave guidance on how schools could organise and apply resources (DES 2017). However, in February 2024 the new special education teacher allocation model (SETAM) (2024) was published, this removed complex needs and gender from the profiling criteria (DE Circular 02/2024 and 03/2024). A rationale for the removal of complex needs from the profiling criteria was outlined in the circular. This explained that no clear definition of complex needs exists, and no reliable data is available to indicate the prevalence of children with complex needs in the Irish context, and therefore cannot be reliably used as a measure. Prior to this, complex needs accounted for 42.5 per cent of a primary schools' allocation and 63 percent of post primary schools' allocation under SETAM (2017), see Table 2.5.

Table 2.5 SET Allocation Model Comparative Revision 2017 and 2024

SET Allocation Model 2017	Set Allocation Model 2024
<p>Profiled allocation criteria include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baseline 20% (Primary and Post Primary) • Disadvantage 5.5% Primary; 3.1 Post Primary • Standardised Tests Literacy and Numeracy 27.85% Primary; 11.6 % Post primary • Complex Needs 42.5 % Primary; 63% Post Primary • Gender 4.35% Primary; 2.15 Post Primary 	<p>Profiled allocation criteria include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baseline based on enrolments 25% (Primary and Post Primary) • Disadvantage 6.5% (Primary and Post Primary) • Standardised Test Literacy and Numeracy 68.5% (Primary and Post Primary) • Note No explicit allocations for Complex Needs; Gender removed as a profiling criterion.

Although baseline criteria founded on school enrolments, disadvantage and standardised tests of literacy and numeracy have increased, the removal of complex needs from schools’ profiling criteria may prove problematic. Schools, teachers, disability groups and parents have called for clarification on this decision and a reinstatement of complex needs as part of the profiling criteria. Many believe that the removal of complex needs will negatively impact provision and may result in reduced levels of inclusion in mainstream schools. The following quotes illustrate these concerns;

‘The allocation model [2024] blatantly points out a discriminatory system where pupils who have more significant support needs are encouraged to avail of special schools and classes[.]. This would seem to completely contradict the new policy advice from the National Council of Special Education, working towards more inclusive schools’

Derval McDonagh CEO Inclusion Ireland

Similarly, responding to the removal of complex needs from the profiling criteria, Adam Harris , CEO of AsIAM, Ireland’s Autism Charity said;

‘children with the highest level of need appear to be being told that they can access more support in special classes than in a mainstream class, irrespective of their parent’s choice, the voice of the child or where they are most suited to learn. It is deeply concerning that the Department of Education is moving in this direction’

As indicated above, the removal of complex needs from a schools’ profiling criteria is in direct contrast to the NCSEs (2024) recent policy advice, *An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society Policy Advice Paper on Special Schools and Classes*. The NCSE uses the category of complex needs as a rationale for its advice to continue the current multi-track system of provision using special classes and special schools to provide support for students with complex needs as part of its progressive realisation of an Inclusive Education System (NCSE 2024).

Despite concerns over the removal of complex needs as a criterion for schools profiling for additional resource allocations, SETAM (2024) will continue to provide autonomy to schools to allocate resources for students with SEND using the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) Continuum of Support Framework CoS (DES 2007) (Figure 2.6). This framework enables schools to respond to needs in flexible ways. The CoS recognises that special educational needs occur along a continuum, therefore, a school’s response and interventions should be incremental, moving from whole-school and classroom-based supports to more targeted, intensive and individualised support as required (DES 2017). However, criticism has been addressed towards this continuum view for its close alignment with traditional placement options; mainstream classrooms, special classrooms and special schools (Sudeen and Banerjee 2020). This facilitates the segregation of students with SEND in separate classrooms/schools which is in violation of Article 24 of UNCRPD (2006).

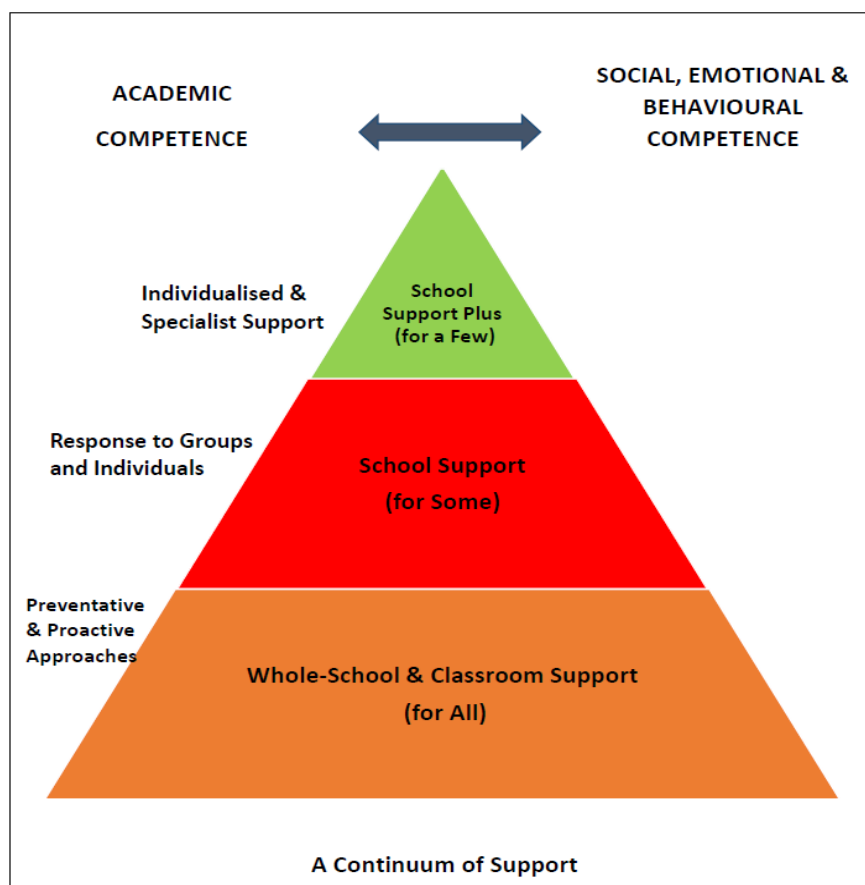


Figure 2.6. NEPS Continuum of Support (DES 2007) (taken from DES 2017, p.8)

However, the CoS is presented as ‘problem solving model of assessment and intervention which enables schools to gather and analyse data, as well as to plan and review the progress of individual students’ (DES 2017, p.7). This process is supported by engagement and collaboration with external professionals such as psychologists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists. The principle that those with the greatest needs receive the greatest level of support is of paramount importance and allows schools to provide a flexible approach to support the needs of students with disabilities in mainstream schools.

Significantly, SETAM and supporting guidelines sought to address the need/resource match dilemma (Egan 2013) and inequities (NCSE 2015) which were evident in the previous General Allocation Model (GAM) (DES 2005). However, despite the flexibility of support and increase in resources, schools continue to remain ‘sites of struggle’ (Egan 2013, p.5) as teachers continue to grapple with the pace of change and continue to feel that they lack the skills and knowledge necessary to support the

increasing diverse needs of students with special educational needs in the classroom (O’Gorman and Drudy 2010; Travers *et al.* 2010; Rose *et al.* 2015). Teachers in SET posts in mainstream settings have no requirement to have training or qualifications in inclusive special education. Instead, vague language such as ‘should have’ (p.28) and ‘should consider’ (p.33) are used in recommendations for specialist training (DES 2017, p.28). As there is no requirement for schools to have specialist staff working with students with SEND, there may be a temptation to place ill-equipped and inexperienced staff in positions where they are tasked with providing support to the most vulnerable students (Mannion 2017) but, with an emphasis on universal interventions.

The necessity for teachers to have increased expertise and access to Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in the area of inclusive special education, is seen as a critical factor to the establishment of inclusive learning environments (O’Gorman and Drudy 2010; Shevlin *et al.* 2013b; Hornby 2014; Kauffman and Badar 2014; Kauffman and Hornby 2020) and is a key recommendation from both Project IRIS (Rose *et al.* 2015) and the most recent *Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes* (NCSE 2024):

‘There is need for further continuing professional education for school managements, principals and teachers regarding best practice for the education of students with special educational needs, including, as required, specialist modules relating to the education and care of students with disabilities

(NCSE 2024, p.112)

Concerns over the placement of newly qualified and inexperienced staff in special classes in mainstream schools have also been repeatedly expressed (Banks *et al.* 2016; NCSE 2019; 2024). Findings from the NCSE Policy Report (2024) highlight that newly qualified teachers (NQTs) are being allocated to special classes despite previous recommendations which emphasise the importance of placing the most qualified and experienced teachers in special education settings. As a result, in Ireland, a contradiction remains, where the teachers who feel ill-equipped to provide the necessary provision to students with disabilities due to their lack of training in inclusive pedagogical approaches have primary responsibility for the very provision they feel ill-equipped to provide (Mannion 2017).

Further to curricular developments in the Irish context (Section 2.9) and the revised Special Education Teaching Allocation Model (SETAM) in primary and post-primary schools (2017;2024), the commencement of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act (2018) and the proposed introduction of The School Inclusion Model (SIM) (NCSE 2019) all enhance and support inclusive practices at a systems and ground level. The aim of the SIM is to build school capacity to increase the participation of students with SEND across early, primary and post-primary education sectors (Lynch *et al.* 2020). The SIM features a number of elements which complement and enhance SETAM. These include the introduction of the In School and Early Years Therapy Support Demonstration Project (Demonstration Project), and a proposed new frontloading allocation model for SNAs. The Demonstration Project is designed to provide a tiered model of therapy provision which prioritises collaboration between health and education providers in school contexts (NCSE 2020). This continuum of support model adopts a whole school approach, targeted, and intensive approach to provision which reflects the CoS utilised in schools. The proposed frontloading of SNAs mirrors the system for allocating SETs to schools under SETAM (2017). These proposed changes reflect a unified approach to support whereby a collaborative, flexible response to students' strengths, needs and abilities is utilised. The significance of these changes and developments and their implications for students and their families, teachers, schools and the entire education system cannot be underestimated. Schools now and in the future have greater autonomy in the deployment of resources than ever before. Central to this suite of resources is the SNA. The role of the SNA in supporting students with disabilities in mainstream schools will now be presented.

2.9.4 Role of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) in Schools

The origins of the SNA scheme in Ireland can be traced back to the Child Care Assistant Scheme in 1979 (DES 2011). Child Care Assistants were designed to support non-teaching duties of teachers in special schools (Logan 2006; DES 2011). However, from the 1990s nationally and internationally there was a move away from segregated provision for students with disabilities. In Ireland, the SERC report (1993) recommended a continuum of provision, as such, support staff such as SNAs were

identified as necessary to support the integration of children with SEND in mainstream schools (Government of Ireland 1993). Further to this, the Education Act (1998) 'enshrined in law the rights of each child to an appropriate education and support services' (Logan 2006, p.92). The concept of automatic entitlement assured that children with SEND would have access not only to special teaching support, but crucially, if necessary, the child care support to enable them to reach their potential in school (Logan 2006). Since then, there has been an exponential growth in the numbers of SNAs supporting students with SEND in schools. Numbers have risen from 293 SNA posts in 1998 (Griffin and Blatchford 2021) to a projected number of 21,000 in 2024 (Kearney 2023).

Circular 07/02 first outlined the role of the SNA in assisting 'in the care of pupils with disabilities in an educational context' (DES 2002, p. 1). The duties of the SNA according to this circular were of a non-teaching nature (DES 2002; Logan 2006). Reflecting the medical model of disability which dominated special education provision at this time, the sanctioning of an SNA was dependant on a recommendation from professional 'who diagnosed the child's special care needs' (DES 2002, p.2).

In the following years the educational landscape for students with SEND changed significantly. Legislative and policy developments such as EPSEN 2004, the subsequent development of the NCSE and NEPS and the introduction of GAM (2005) impacted the provision of special education supports to schools. In 2011, the DES undertook a review of the SNA scheme and made a number of recommendations with regards future provision (DES 2011). Although, the review pointed to many positives it also recognised challenges, particularly where SNAs were deployed to support 'behavioural, therapeutic, pedagogical, teaching and administrative duties' (DES 2014, p.3). Addressing these challenges Circular 0030/2014 sought to clarify and restate the purpose of the SNA scheme. Care needs were separated into primary and secondary care needs. Although these needs were identified in previous circulars, the delineation of needs placed primacy on the primary care needs such as, feeding, toileting, administration of medicine, supervision, assistance with moving and lifting children and assistance with severe communication difficulties

and also emphasised the role of the SNA in facilitating independence (DES 2014). Once again, the non-teaching role of SNAs was emphasised and attention was drawn to the responsibility of teachers for the education and personal development of all children in their classroom including children with SEND (DES 2014). Accordingly, SNA access is not sanctioned to support the needs of students with intellectual disabilities or specific learning difficulties in the classroom (Griffin and Blatchford 2021). Despite the role of the SNA being clearly defined in successive circulars (NCSE 2018) various studies and reports have indicated that the duties of SNAs extend beyond their original remit (Keating and O'Connor 2012; Griffin and Blatchford 2021). There continues to be a policy practice gap between the prescribed role and the actual role of SNAs (NCSE 2018).

Findings from one small scale study conducted in the Irish context, identified the role of the SNA as one of both education and care (Logan 2006). This mixed method study utilised a survey in the form of a postal questionnaire to principals, SNAs and mainstream teachers in 127 primary schools in Dublin. One hundred and ninety completed questionnaires from a possible 381 acknowledged the deployment of SNAs in mainstream schools as a welcome provision to support the inclusion of students with SEND. In the second phase of this research, case studies of three students supported by SNAs found that although there is a care element to their role, SNAs were increasingly engaged in teaching and learning processes (Logan 2006). Interviews ($n=12$) with SNAs, mainstream teachers working with SNAs, students to whom SNAs were assigned, and parents of students assigned an SNA, all credited SNAs with supporting students' learning (Logan 2006). Duties of an educational nature, such as 'encouraging pupils, clarifying instructions, adapting or interpreting lessons and assisting individuals and small groups with educational activities' were identified (Logan 2006, p.98). Moreover, the majority of participating teachers and principals considered these duties appropriate for SNAs to carry out (Logan 2006).

Consequently, SNAs can now be considered to occupy a 'third space along a continuum between care and education' (Griffin and Blatchford 2021, p.210). As such, in Ireland, the role of the SNA is 'characterised by contradictions, tensions and ambiguities about its status, function and deployment in schools' (Keating and

O'Connor 2012, p. 535). Similarly, to Logan (2006), Keating and O'Connor (2012), also found evidence of SNAs supporting students' learning in schools. Their mixed methods study involved questionnaires, interviews, focus group and classroom observations in 55 mainstream primary schools in the Midlands and Mid/West Region of Ireland. Responses from mainstream classroom teachers ($n=90$) and SNAs ($n=89$) revealed that SNAs were engaged in a range of educational duties. These included, clarifying instructions for students, helping students to concentrate and finish work, giving encouragement to student and relating student progress to teachers (Keating and O'Connor 2012).

More recently, findings from Griffin and Blatchford (2021) support earlier findings from Logan (2006) and Keating and O'Connor (2012). Although this research once again focused on primary school settings in Ireland, this convergent parallel mixed methods design sought to reduce the overreliance on interviews found in earlier research. The use of systematic observations totalling 74 hours and 55 minutes with semi-structured interviews, documentary review of target students planning, and field notes, provided a detailed picture of SNA support in the primary classroom. Findings reveal the focus of SNA support was academic in nature (Griffin and Blatchford 2021). Observational data revealed that 87 per cent of learning tasks in the classroom were undifferentiated for target students. As a result, 'SNAs frequently served as agents of differentiation, enabling curriculum access and preventing academic related frustrations' (Griffin and Blatchford 2021, p. 207).

Findings from research in the Irish context as outlined above, indicate that despite successive circulars and policy reviews, the role of the SNA has expanded beyond the prescribed care remit and fostering independence. Proposed changes to the SNA scheme such as the frontloading of SNAs and title change (NCSE 2018) will do little to remedy this situation. Perhaps recognising this policy practice gap, the DE established the Special Needs Assistants Workforce Development Unit (SNAWDU) in December 2022. This was set up to examine the current role of the SNA and any reform development required. Consisting of 310 participants across six locations in Ireland, SNAs and representatives from Fórsa, the main trade union representing SNAs in Ireland met at various dates in May 2023 to participate in focus group

interviews (DE 2023). Findings confirmed the ambiguity surrounding the role of SNAs which was identified in the above research. The need for a structured approach to induction of new SNAs was highlighted and a mentoring programme was proposed. A job description or information guide for newly recruited SNAs, individualised to the school but also the broader remit of the job was suggested. The need for timely provision of written information on care needs of students and the schools' approach to delivery of care needs was identified. A range of training needs were noted. Importantly, SNAs felt 'their role and their contribution to student's successful placement is undervalued' (DE 20203, p.35). Furthermore, they felt without their role, teachers would not be able to operate effectively in the classroom (DE 2023). A formal review and consultation is now underway.

Evidently in Ireland, the role of the SNA continues to extend beyond its prescribed remit of care needs, 'into domains of academic behavioural, social, and emotional support' (Griffin and Blatchford 2021, p. 209). Yet, policy has failed to remedy this situation, rather, SNAs appear to be viewed as 'a fix-all solution for the complexity of care needs presenting in the Irish classroom' (Sheehan 2023, p.509). With the increased number of students with SEND in our schools this policy practice gap is set to continue. Despite the suite of resources and raft of policy developments, the inclusion of students with SEND in mainstream schools remains complex. There appears to be an over reliance on the role of extra adult support, beyond their prescribed remit in supporting students access mainstream education (Sheehan 2023). This suggests that schools continue to struggle to support students with SEND. Not only are SNAs adopting an education role, but special class provision is also on the increase (Travers 2023). All of this suggests that despite the push for full inclusion, schools are not ready. The next section will interrogate the rise in special class provision in light of United Nations Convention of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006) which suggests that such provision is in breach of children's rights.

2.9.5 Special Class Provision in Ireland

Since the enactment of the Education Act (1998) and subsequent introduction of special education policy and legislation (See Section 2.8), special education has featured as an important aspect of inclusive education in Ireland. The SERC Report

(1993) first introduced the concept of a continuum of provision for students with SEN in mainstream and special school settings. This was expanded in Section 20 of the EPSEN Act (2004) which specified that the NCSE should ensure that a ‘continuum of special needs provision is available as required to each type of disability’ (EPSEN 2004, p.21) Since then, reforms in curricular provision and in the system of resource allocation for students with SEN has resulted in a significant increase of the numbers of students with SEND in mainstream schools (NCSE 2014; Shevlin and Banks 2021). The latest statistics (See Table 2.6) from the DE indicate the number of Special Education Teachers in primary and post-primary, mainstream classes, rose from 13,395 in 2017 to 13,765 in 2021 (Government of Ireland 2023). The number of SNAs in the same period rose from 8,581 in primary schools and 2,821 in post primary schools to, 11,506 in primary schools and 3,769 in post primary schools (Government of Ireland 2023). The projected combined number of SNAs in schools for 2024 is 21,000 (NCSE 2023).

Table 2.6. Numbers of Special Education Teachers and Special Needs Assistants in Mainstream School in Ireland (DE 2023, p.26).

Indicator	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Special Education Teachers in primary and post primary schools (mainstream classes) (Whole Time Equivalent) (WTE)	13,395	13,412	13,530	13,620	13,765
SNAs in primary schools	8,581	9,309	9,948	11,285	11,506
SNAs in post primary schools	2,821	3,047	3,291	3,696	3,769

Despite the developments in policy and the increase of SETs and SNAs to support the needs of students in accessing provision in mainstream schools, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of special classes in Ireland.

Special classes in Ireland emerged as an alternative to special school provision. Concerns that segregation of students in special schools can be disadvantageous to children and the influence of a joint report issued by the World Health Organisation

(WHO), the United States and UNSECO (1954), supported the initial development of special classes in mainstream schools (Travers 2023). Currently in Ireland, the DE pursues a multi-track approach (Sheehan 2023; Kenny *et al.* 2020; NCSE 2016) to the provision for students with SEND. In mainstream schools, students are either placed in a mainstream class and provision is provided through the CoS framework, through in-class or withdrawal approaches, or they can be placed in a special class designated for a particular disability (Kenny *et al.* 2020). The NCSE and DE share the responsibility for the provision and designation of special classes and describe their role as ‘part of a continuum of provision that enables students with more complex additional learning needs to be educated, in smaller class groups, within their mainstream schools (NCSE 2016, p.2). Limited research on the role of the special class or the efficacy of this support model has taken place in the Irish context (NCSE 2016; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021; Shevlin and Banks 2021). However, rapid expansion of this model continues to occur in Irish schools (Shevlin and Banks 2021; Travers 2023).

In the period between 2013 and 2023 there has been over a 600% increase in special classes in Ireland (Travers 2023). This increase may initially be seen as the result of the increase in the number of students identified as having a disability in the past two decades (Kenny *et al.* 2020). However, closer examination of figures release from the NCSE (2023) reveal this growth is due to the significant expansion of autism classes in mainstream schools, which now account for 89 per cent of special classes in Ireland (Travers 2023). This has resulted in a significant imbalance in provision whereby one disability, i.e., autism, is over-represented in the designation of special classes. In 2023, 378 of the 389 new classes opened in mainstream schools in Ireland, were designated as autism classes (NCSE 2023). The remaining 11 consisted of six classes designated as moderate general learning disability, three as multiple disabilities, one as hearing impairment and one designated as other (NCSE 2023). Further analysis of figures from NCSE (2023) reveal that it was 2018 since the last class designated as Mild General Learning Disabilities was opened. Questions must then be asked as to why there is such a focus on special education provision in the form of special classes for autistic students, when they have a relatively low prevalence rate compared to other disabilities in Ireland (Shevlin and Banks 2021).

The influence of parental and advocacy groups due to their perceived belief of the benefits of special class provision has undoubtedly attributed to this increase. However, a recent evaluation of autism classes in mainstream schools by the DE Inspectorate (2020) noted with the increase in demand particularly of autism classes ‘there is danger that segregated educational provision could expand unintentionally’ (DE 2020, p. 61).

NCSE commissioned research (Banks *et al.* 2016) highlights the benefits for students who access special classes. Findings from this national longitudinal study describe special classes as a safe haven with calm spaces, where social skills can be supported through making friends and playing with each other. Other benefits included students reporting an increase in feeling safe in the special class while the reduced numbers were seen to support the path to further inclusion. The special class was also identified as a space where a tailored curriculum to support individuals’ strengths and needs could be implemented, which was not always possible in mainstream settings. However, negative perceptions, stigma and students’ dissatisfactions were also identified particularly in post-primary schools where students were older and more self-aware. Stigma and perceptions of being different were associated with lower levels of need, suggesting that inclusion in mainstream schools may have been more beneficial for these students. However, Slee (2019) would argue that this multi-track system creates schools as places for some, rather than all children. Special classes can be seen as socially constructed spaces for children with SEND, a type of micro exclusion within the school space (Nind *et al.* 2022). Spaces, such as those for children with SEND (special classes) and those without (mainstream classes) contribute to students’ identities as ‘insiders or outsiders of the learning community’ (D’Alessio 2012, p.524) and as such may be a barrier to inclusion. Notably, in Ireland the DE Inspectorate evaluation (2020) found evidence of some students at post-primary level being placed in special classes where ‘they are capable of greater integration with the mainstream classes’ (p.7). Students’ placement in special classes should be temporary with a view to increasing inclusion in mainstream classes as much as possible. However, finding from the NCSE (2016) and more recently by the DE Inspectorate (2020) indicate little integration in

mainstream classes; rather some students remain in the special class for the entire day throughout their school career (NCSE 2024; Shevlin and Banks 2021). Nind *et al.* (2022) contend that the use of spaces within schools underpins students' understanding of their place, and positioning within the school thus reinforcing the insider, outsider self-perception proposed by D'Allesio (2012).

Currently, in Ireland the placement of students in special classes is determined by a written professional recommendation and input from teachers, school management, parents and Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO) (DE 2020) and the HSE Assessment of Need (AON) process (Circular 0025/2024). The AON is a statutory process under the Disability Act (2005) which determines the health and education needs of AON applicant with assistance from NCSE and teachers. There appears to be little evidence of the role of students with disabilities in this decision-making process. Indeed, determining the most suitable placement for students is not straightforward and has been for a long time, a hotly contested issue (Haug 2017). Placement is dependent on a range of factors, including individual needs, parental preference and provision available in the local area (Croydon *et al.* 2019). Furthermore, parents and teachers appear to view education from different perspectives. Teachers tend to place a stronger emphasis on academic progress (Kocaj *et al.* 2019). Whereas, parents look to the bigger picture, with a focus on independent living skills, self-care, regulation, social and communication skills (Croydon *et al.* 2019). These skills are often associated with the hidden curriculum and include everyday skills, actions, modes of dress, and behaviours that may not be taught directly, but can be problematic for some students with SEND (Myles and Simpson 2001; Lee 2011). Therefore, there appears to be a difference between teachers and parents over the intended outcome of education and the importance attached to the outcome (Kocaj *et al.* 2019). This may result in parents choosing a special class placement due to the belief that a students' holistic needs will be catered for (Croydon *et al.* 2019).

In light of developments such as UNCRPD (2006) and with the increase in special schools and significant increase in special classes in Ireland, special class provision has now become the 'crux of the inclusion debate' (Shevlin and Banks 2021, p.164)

in the Irish context. Therefore, the need to examine this debate in light of the current conceptualisation of inclusion as outlined by the UNCRPD is necessary.

2.9.6 Influence of United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) (UNCRPD) on Inclusive Policy in Ireland

Obligations following the Irish Government's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018 required a review of the provision of educational placements in special classes and special schools for students with SEND. The NCSE previously advised the DE on the future role of special schools and classes in 2011. At that time in line with current legislative advice, namely EPSEN 2004 and Education Act 1998, the NCSE advocated,

‘special classes in mainstream schools or special schools located on mainstream campuses as the best way forward for students whose placement in mainstream classes was not deemed to be in their best interest or to be inconsistent with the effective provision for other students’

(NCSE 2019, p.2).

However, much has changed in the national and international educational landscape; most notably the Irish Government's ratification of the UNCRPD, since the NCSE's 2011 policy advice, and a better understanding of the system changes necessary to enable the development of inclusive schools has emerged through research and practice. This review was presented at the NCSE research conference 2019 where a model of full inclusion grounded in Article 24 of the UNCRPD, was illuminated as the way forward. The UNCRPD is considered as the most significant external influence on current and future special education provision in Ireland (NCSE 2019) and was presented as the ‘dawn of a new era for inclusion and inclusive placement’ (O'Brien 2020, p.302). Article 24 (2) of the UNCRPD obliges member states to ensure that children with SEND have access to quality, free, inclusive general education system with appropriate individualised supports to facilitate effective education (NSCE 2019) that maximises academic and social development. Furthermore, the ratification of UNCRPD requires states to move to the full realisation of Article 24 to ensure enactment of people's rights. This requires member states, of which Ireland is one, to move towards a full inclusion model with the removal of separate special education provision (NCSE 2019). Full inclusion

means the inclusion of all students, 'all means all' (Kaufmann *et al.* 2018. p.2) including those with complex needs, such as severe and profound intellectual disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Tiernan 2022). According to De Beco (2016) however, inclusive education is not just about placing students with disabilities in mainstream schools. To suggest such, is an over simplification of the philosophy underpinning Article 24. Inclusive education requires adaptation and transformation of the general education system to make it universally accessible for all. This is clearly outlined in General Comment No.4 (2016 para 11) of Article 24 of the UNCRPD,

'placing students with disabilities within mainstream classrooms without any accompanying structural changes to, for example organisation, curriculum and teaching and learning strategies, does not constitute inclusion'.

The UNCRPD Committee is clear on what it constitutes as inclusion. General Comment No.4 (2016) on Article 24 outlines core features of inclusive education systems. These include: a whole systems approach, where the focus is on availability of resources; a whole educational environment with an emphasis on leadership to embed policies, culture and practices to achieve inclusive education; whole person approach which recognises individuals capacity to learn; support for teachers and ancillary staff to develop skills and competencies to achieve inclusive education; respect for and value of diversity, including measures to prevent abuse and bullying; learning-friendly environments which are safe and accessible where everyone feels supported and valued; effective transitions throughout the lifespan of education and beyond; recognition of partnerships with other stakeholders, to increase their understanding and knowledge of disability; and monitoring, to ensure that segregation of integration is not happening. Its definition and identification of practices which do not constitute inclusion pose significant challenges in the Irish context namely because, current DE policy is to provide a continuum of educational provision for children with SEND. This according to the UNCRPD Committee (2016) is segregation.

Accordingly, considering our obligations under the UNCRPD (2006) and following a comprehensive review of review of provision, the NCSE (2024) now recommends a move towards the progressive realisation of an inclusive education system where all

children will attend their local schools. In the short term, no significant change will take place and our current multi-track system will continue to operate for now. The NCSE recognise that this progressive realisation towards an inclusive education system will require a fundamental change of school and societal culture and a significant shift in mindset (NCSE 2019). Moreover, it will necessitate a structural change to the 'organisation, curriculum, teaching and learning strategies' (NCSE 2019, p.16) as outlined in General Comment No.4 of Article 24 UCRPD (2016). To achieve this there will be a need to; improve transition planning; increase the availability of external supports; need for ongoing CPD in inclusive special education, not just for teachers but principals and school management; a regular review of student placement in special classes will need to take place; there will be need for curriculum change and development of post-school pathways; a need to find a resolution to some students travelling long distances to attend special schools; and there will be a requirement to improve school buildings aligned with the principles of UDL to provide sufficient space to support students with complex needs (NCSE 2024). To enable this progressive realisation, a recommendation to establish a strategic planning group under the leadership of the DE and the NCSE has been made (NCSE 2024). Recognising the complexity of changing systems this group will oversee a multi-year implementation plan which takes account the needs of all. Although, this progressive realisation goes a long way towards achieving our obligations under the UNCRPD (2006) it does, however, stop short of guaranteeing a system of full inclusion. If this system is adopted by the Minister for Education, it will adopt a needs-based rather than an inclusion first perspective as this system will take account of the needs of children who, because of individual circumstances, cannot attend local schools. The NCSE recognises that this vision of an inclusive system of schools requires a collaborative approach where the voices of all stakeholders, including the voices of students with SEND and their parents/guardians will inform the decision-making process. However, the NCSE accepts that there will be significant challenges in achieving this vision as stakeholders including parents/guardians may still need to be convinced of the benefits of an inclusive education system.

Article 24 as a model of full inclusion is not without its critics. Disagreements existed in the drafting of the UNCRPD, principally on the right to inclusive education and whether special education still needed to be an option (De Beco 2018; Goodall 2020). General Comment No.4 of the UNCRPD (2016) references the need for individualised support measures to be in place in environments that maximize academic and social development. These measures according to De Beco (2016) may deviate slightly from the general education system but critically must be ‘consistent with the goal of full inclusion’ (General Comment No. 4. Article 24 (2) (e)). However, recognising the need for individualised support measures (needs-based approach) for some, in environments that maximise academic and social development, suggests a ‘stance of moderate inclusion’ (Goodall 2020, p. 1305) within the general education system. A stance of moderate inclusion may go some way to allaying the fears and anxieties which surround this debate. Dissenting voices have emerged from teachers, school leaders, disability rights advocacy groups and leading academics as to the feasibility, possibility and morality of a model of full inclusion. Perhaps, this is partly due to misinterpretations, misunderstandings and contradictions within literature on the UNCRPD. For example, Kauffman *et al.* (2018) note that one of the challenges with the UNCRPD is that educators, individuals and groups working with those with disabilities were not consulted in the wording of Article 24. This, according to the authors, reflects the belief within these sectors that full inclusion cannot be meaningfully implemented in educational settings. However, more recently, Byrne (2022) identified that that the convention was ‘developed directly with people with disabilities’ (p.11). Moreover, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (‘the Committee’), who are responsible for reporting and monitoring compliance with the UNCRPD, is made up of a majority of people with disabilities (Kayess and French 2008; Byrne 2022). This is significant as Kaufmann’s statement leads people to believe that there was no input from those directly affected by Article 24, but both Article 24 and the Committee are informed by the perspectives and experiences of people with disabilities.

Concerns regarding full inclusion are also due to the identification of inclusion as a place, and that place being mainstream school settings. When mainstream is the

only option, as implied by Article 24, and General Comment No.4, it makes the place of inclusion the central concept. Full inclusion necessitates the abolition of special schools and special classes and has been met with resistance, with some countries placing restrictions on the ratification of Article 24. The UK Government in 2009 placed restrictions on its obligations and sought to change the definition of a general education system to include both mainstream and special school (Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) 2019) in recognition that instruction rather than geographical location is central to inclusion (Kaufmann *et al.* 2018).

Despite the Irish ratification of Article 24 of the UNCRPD and the abundance of legislative acts and policy documents, special education remains problematic in Ireland as a policy practice-gap persists (Shevlin, Winter and Flynn 2013; Rose *et al.* 2015). Despite the international agenda to promote and endorse inclusion, Irish policy and legislation will continue to operate a separate and parallel system of special and mainstream education at least for the foreseeable future. Dual approaches to education have been criticised by the United Nations Disability Committee (2016) as they segregate and discriminate on grounds of disability (NCSE 2019). Inclusion, therefore, cannot and will not be achieved where there are systems that allow children to be organised into separate environments based on disability (De Bruin 2020), if mainstream education is used as benchmark to define inclusive education.

However, nationally and internationally, challenges in enacting and implementing inclusive policies in practice have been recognised (NCSE 2015). Vayrynen 2000 (cited in NCSE 2010; 2015), claims that 'despite adopted policies on inclusive education, all countries struggle with the management and implementation of an education system that truly caters for diversity' (p. 8). Funding mechanisms, curricula, community and parental involvement, structures to facilitate collaboration and attitudes are the greatest barriers to the development of inclusive education (NCSE 2010). NCSE commissioned research (2010; 2015; 2019; 2024) further highlights the difficulties with inclusive provision in the Irish context. Significant barriers in the areas of teacher knowledge and expertise, limited access to therapeutic services, inconsistencies in development and implementation of

Individual Education Plans (IEP), appropriate identification and assessment procedures, which if not addressed undermine progress in developing inclusive learning environments (NCSE 2015). Findings from a survey conducted by the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) (2019) identified that teachers experience high levels of anxiety as a result of feeling ill-equipped to support the diverse range of learners in their class. Key areas for training include pedagogies for classroom teaching, assessment strategies to support and record students' learning and responding to students with emotional and behavioral difficulties (ASTI 2019). The purpose of this survey was to gather data on post-primary teachers' work with students with SEND in light of the introduction of SETAM (2017). An online questionnaire recorded a response rate of 12 per cent comprising ASTI members who are subject teachers, SETs and guidance counsellors. Findings indicate that out of the 1,319 teachers who participated in the questionnaire, 20 per cent of them had a qualification in special educational needs. However, only 5 percent of teachers out of a total of $n=897$, whose role was exclusively classroom teaching had a SEN qualification. Moreover, 65 per cent of total respondents ($n=1319$) reported not participating in training for students with disabilities in the years leading up to the survey due to current workloads, lack of information about availability of training, lack of access to training, family commitments, financial constraints and feeling training was not necessary. Although, this survey was only conducted with ASTI members it can be seen as representative as the ASTI is Ireland's main post-primary teachers' unions which at the time of the survey represented 10,941 members (ASTI 2019). With teacher knowledge and expertise identified as crucial for developing inclusive practice and with the principles underpinning SETAM (2017) coupled with the increase of students with SEND in mainstream settings, the results of this survey are concerning.

Furthermore, with the increased marketisation of education and the culture of performativity and hyper-accountability (O'Brien 2020) which, in the Irish context is connected to high stake Leaving Certificate Examinations (NCSE 2010), places the principles of inclusive education in direct competition to practice (Bourke and Mentis 2011). If we have a system of education which holds the current summative State

Exams as a type of Holy Grail as evidence of students' knowledge, learning and understanding, i.e., value what we measure rather than measure what we value, we will continue to operate a system that excludes many. There is a significant body of research indicating that educational outcomes and learning opportunities for students can improve by broadening approaches to assessment (DES 2015) and some assessment practices exclude students from learning (Bourke and Mentis 2011). Therefore, dilemmas and tensions exist where teachers and schools may be willing to enact principles of inclusive education (Beachman and Rouse 2012), but neither has the knowledge, expertise, systems or resources to allow them to do so (Lamb and Bones 2006, 2008). For Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2011), the weakness of inclusive education is that it sits within a 'theoretical vacuum' which allows for the 'pragmatic watering down of the underlying idealism of inclusion' (p.37). As such, inclusion as a 'grand project' (Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou 2011, p.37) has limitations as the concept of inclusion does not engage with the realities of education and schooling (Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou 2011; Norwich 2014).

Despite the apparent drive both nationally and internationally for full inclusion, other voices have emerged which cast doubt on the possibility, feasibility and morality of full inclusion where All means All (Kaufmann and Badar 2014; Hornby 2015; Kauffman and Hornby 2020; Hornby and Kaufmann 2023). Inclusion, although an important goal of special education, is not the only goal (Kauffman *et al.* 2018). The goal of education for children with special educational needs (SEN) and learning disabilities according to Hornby (2015) 'must be to facilitate independence and a sense of wellbeing, active participation in the communities in which they live' (p.242) now and in the future. The existence of rights-based vision to inclusive education as outlined in Article 24 of the UNCRPD does not necessarily mean it is morally right (Hornby 2015) or in the best interests of the child (Warnock cited in Terzi 2010). The right to an appropriate education in a recognised school is the right to effective instruction and this supersedes the right to be educated alongside mainstream peers (Hornby 2015; Kauffman and Badar 2014).

The right to an appropriate education in a recognised school was first enshrined in law in the Irish context in the Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland 1998). The function of a recognised school according to the 1998 Education Act, is to provide an education which is appropriate to the needs and abilities of the child (Government of Ireland 1998). A recognised school is a school which is recognised by the Minister of Education (Government of Ireland 1998). Therefore, education, appropriate to the needs and abilities of a child, can take place in a mainstream school, special school, special class or in a resource class (Warnock 2010; Hornby 2015; Kaufmann and Badar 2015; Goodall 2020). Special education provision needs a dedicated space, which for Hornby and Kaufmann (2023) this is not the same as a segregated space. The right to learn is not the same as the right to learn in the same environment (Warnock 2010). Making the place of instruction, that being mainstream the central issue in the understanding of inclusion is a fallacy which may indeed provide an image of social justice but without effective instruction, it is little more than imagology (Kauffman *et al.* 2018). The vision of inclusion outlined in Article 24 and further developed in General Comment no. 4 (2016) may never be achievable. Cooper and Jacobs (2011) argue that being present in a school does not equate to social and educational inclusion and to promote and assume otherwise is both a delusion and is one of the ‘most dishonest and insidious forms of exclusion’ (p.6).

O’Brien (2020) asks us to consider whether ‘inclusion has become the barrier to inclusion’ (p.298). In our quest for the delivery of social justice has inclusion become the victim of political and philosophical ideology? If inclusion is centered on overcoming and removing barriers to learning (O’Brien 2020, p.300), then place of instruction cannot therefore become the barrier. The desire for equity is strong (Kauffman *et al.* 2018) but equality of educational opportunity cannot be assured if mainstream education is the only option available to all (Kauffman and Badar 2014). The UNCRPD situates human rights as place related, not instruction related (Anastasiou and Kauffman 2019). This misconception results in the oversimplification of the complexities involved in special education provision, namely the importance of special, individualised instruction that meets the needs of individuals and the necessity to have specialised teachers to meet their needs (Kauffman *et al.*

2018, Kauffman and Hornby 2020) in dedicated spaces when necessary (Hornby and Kaufmann 2023). Inclusion is where you feel you belong (Warnock 2010; Goodall 2018) and where your needs are appropriately met (Kauffman *et al.* 2018). Findings from a small scale, flexible, qualitative, participatory study with twelve autistic students oppose the concept of full inclusion (Goodall 2020). Students in this study felt that full inclusion for all autistic students should not be forced, but rather, should be the goal, when appropriate and when necessary supports are in place. This according to the author supports the understanding of inclusion detailed by the Committee on the UNCPRD in General Comment No.4 (2016 para 11).

Similarly, Kauffman and Hornby (2020) draw on earlier research in the UK in the 1980s to illustrate the importance of instruction rather than place of instruction as essential for inclusion (Hornby and Kidd 2001). This research, which saw the closing of a special school for young people with moderate learning difficulties in line with government policy at the time, traced the progress and development of students as they transferred into mainstream schools and beyond. Findings from a follow-up study revealed that most of these students (17 out of 24) did not have a job, and 21 out of the 24 of them were not living independently. A major reason for this, according to Kauffman and Kidd (2001), was a result of their transfer into mainstream schools which saw the withdrawal of vocational programmes specific to their needs which would have prepared them for employment and thereby inclusion in society. Although it was a small-scale research study, the results question the efficacy of elevating place rather than instruction as the gold standard for inclusion. Similarly, Rose (2018) identifies that,

‘placement data may suggest that students with disabilities are exposed to the general education curriculum, but achievement data suggests that they are not actually learning that curriculum: they continue to lag dramatically behind their peers’

(p.11).

Furthermore, disability, although part of human diversity, is not just another form of difference and cannot be equated with parentage, skin hue, sexual orientation, weight or social disadvantage (Anastasiou and Kauffman 2013; Kaufmann *et al.* 2018; Hornby and Kaufmann 2023). There are important and significant differences and

social justice cannot be achieved by responding to these differences as if they are equal (Anastasiou and Kauffman 2013). Consequently, appropriate placement which is determined by the nature of the child's SEND, which can evolve and change over time (Hornby 2015), must and should occur along a continuum within a 'cascade of services' (Deno 1970, p.234). This moderate, temperate view of inclusive education envisions 'inclusion in general education as the best placement and alternative placements (dedicated spaces) when it's not' (Kauffman *et al.* 2018 p.5).

2.10 Inclusive Special Education as a Model of Inclusion

A continuum of placement was first envisioned in the Irish context in the SERC Report 1993, however almost 30 years later there is little movement between special and mainstream placements (DE 2020; Travers 2023). Inclusive and special education are based on two different philosophies which provide divergent views of education for children with SEND (Hornby 2015). Hornby's theory of Inclusive Special Education seeks to amalgamate and combine the philosophical values and ideals of inclusive education with the strategies, interventions and procedures of special education (Hornby 2015). This hybrid theory of inclusive special education interrogates the confusions which exist in relation to inclusive education and proposes a new vision for the education of children with SEND. The necessity to create a new theory comes from a viewpoint that a policy of full inclusion is impossible to achieve in practice (Hornby 2015). Hornby (2015) cites the work of Evans and Lunt 2002; Thomas and Loxely 2007; Hansen 2012; Kaufmann and Badar 2014, who argue that there will always be some children who cannot be successfully included in mainstream schools due to barriers, which therefore set limits to the possibility of full inclusion. Hence, Hornby's model marries both divergent views of special and inclusive education to expand upon strategies for providing effective education for all children with SEND regardless of where they are educated, making instruction not place of instruction, the central tenant.

Confusions of definitions, rights, labelling, peers, aetiology, intervention models, goals, curricula, reality, finance, means and ends, research evidence all contribute to the 'ideological struggle' (Florian 2014, p.293) in inclusive education. Hornby addresses these confusions in his model of inclusive special education. Reflective of

recommendations from the SERC Report (Government of Ireland 1993) and the latest policy advice from the NCSE (2024), Hornby's model focuses on the inclusion of as many children as possible in mainstream schools with an option for a continuum of placement between special schools, special classes and mainstream schools, and urges close collaboration between special and mainstream settings (Hornby 2015). To achieve this Hornby (2015) calls for a retention of evidence-based practices to support effective special education such as IEP's and systems such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Positive Behaviour Interventions. Approaches that incorporate assistive technologies and methodologies such as peer tutoring, co-operative learning, and meta cognitive strategies coupled with close collaboration with parents, and other professionals are all key elements in inclusive special education. To achieve this, Hornby's model also recommends a clear national policy supported by legislation that clearly specifies the rights of children with SEND (Hornby 2015). The model identifies the need for schools to have policies and procedures in place to ensure national and international legislation and guidelines are implemented. For schools to achieve this, procedures for identifying, monitoring and reviewing the progress of children with SEND must be in place. Organisational procedures, led by specialised teachers and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) who are supported by multi-disciplinary teams, must ensure that school wide practices are based on research evidence to support and facilitate the development of academic and social needs of children through appropriate teaching strategies and methodologies (Hornby 2015).

Much can be taken from Hornby's model of Inclusive Special Education in the Irish context. Indeed, our current system of support utilising the Continuum of Support in mainstream schools reflects the procedures for monitoring and reviewing the progress of students in Hornby's model. However, on examination many significant barriers remain to enacting his model. The failure to enact the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland 2004) leaves the rights of students with SEND baseless in legislation. Furthermore, research by Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) identifies that SENCOs in the Irish context operate in a policy vacuum where a lack of formal recognition of their role limits their capacity to enact change. Therefore, systems

may be in place, but leadership recognition within schools to ensure the systems are enacted have no formal standing or legislative power. Furthermore, findings from recent Irish research identifies that schools are not supported in their efforts to enact inclusive policy (Sweeney and Fitzgerald 2023; ASTI 2019). Research conducted by RED C Research on behalf of the ASTI in March 20019 identified a lack of training and qualifications, lack of time for collaboration, increased workloads, large class sizes and unremunerated duties involving SEN co-ordination as challenges and barriers to the enactment of inclusive policy. A policy practice gap was a key finding from Project IRIS (Rose *et al.* 2015) and the most recent policy advice on provision for special classes and special schools from the NCSE (2024). It appears that, despite the continued development of inclusive policy, a practice gap remains where teachers feel unsupported and ill-equipped to meet the diverse needs of learners in their classrooms.

2.11 Conclusion

Ireland is at a crossroads in its provision for inclusive education over the last number of years. The most recent policy advice from the NCSE (2024) reflects a new vision towards the progressive realisation of inclusive education system in the Irish context. However, this falls short of full inclusion. The Full Inclusion Model as advocated by the UNCRPD (2006) places philosophical beliefs where rights of children with SEND to mainstream education are forefront but are in direct contrast to current provision and proposed changes recommended by the NCSE (2024). Our current and future system of provision facilitates the segregation of children on grounds of SEND. This, for some, is discrimination (NCSE 2019). The Equal Status Act (Government of Ireland 2000) prohibits discrimination on grounds of disability yet our current and proposed future system of education advocates such an approach as there is an awareness, that there will always be some children who because of individual circumstances will never be able to attend their local school. This segregated approach led to chastisement by the UNCRPD and has drawn criticism from leading academics in the field of inclusion education (Black-Hawkins 2015; Allen 2020; Ainscow 2021; De Bruin 2020; Florian 2021). The recent ratification of Article 24 compels us to scrutinise this provision as inclusive and special education are presented as binary concepts

(Kauffman *et al.* 2018; Kaufman and Hornby 2020). However, voices have emerged which challenged the interpretation of these rights. Kauffman and Hornby (2023; 2020) believe General Comment 4, issued in article 24 by the UNCRPD (2016) is flawed as it suggests that children with SEND educated in segregated settings receive an education inferior in quality. They reject this and suggest that specialised placements in dedicated spaces (Hornby and Kaufmann 2023) are necessary for some students with more complex enduring SEND, as they allow for programmes and curricula to be tailored to meet individualised needs. This, according to the authors, can only ever be imagined in mainstream settings. Significantly, findings from the *Global Education Monitoring Report on Inclusive Education* (UNSECO 2020) identifies that most countries continue to offer a dual system of education for children with SEND. This, according to Kauffman and Hornby (2020), is because ‘predications of the demise of special education may be premature’ (p.1). Once again, literature reminds us that a policy practice gap is evident. Hornby (2021) and Kauffman and Hornby (2020) suggest the idea of full inclusion is a vision, a beautiful vision, but one where the policy of one agency, that being the United Nations, is different from the reality and practice of inclusion of education systems worldwide.

Throughout this debate there is a notable absence of voices from children with SEND. Thomas (2009), cited in Shaw (2017), suggests a reason for this is that children are considered as objects of policy, or worse, political footballs where decisions are made on their behalf without consultation. However, a new era, a paradigm of childhood is emerging (Motherway 2009) where the necessity to see children as active participants in the construction of the societies in which they live is evolving (O’Kane 2000). Central to this paradigm is the concept of children’s voice which is embedded in children’s rights. Article 12 of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) espouses the right of children to express views on matters pertaining to them. However, there is little evidence in the Irish context of children being involved in decisions relating to educational provision. Fitzgerald (2020) asks us to imagine and ‘reflect on the kind of world we want for our children and the kind of education we want which will allow them to flourish’ (p.2). The goal for wellbeing is human flourishing (Seligman 2011). Young people and children

flourish 'when they are curious, eager to learn; creative and imaginative; connected and empathetic; a good team player; confident about whom they are; resilient; and positive about themselves growing into better people' (Roffey 2015 cited in Mannion 2017 p.25). Fleming (2010) reminds us that children need to be involved in all stages of research efforts and the importance of children's participation and voice has been highlighted by numerous researchers, (Booth and Booth 1996; Darbyshire *et al.* 2005; Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Simovska 2013; Clarke *et al.* 2015; Colliver 2017). Consequently, understanding children's perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment must be prioritised if we are to avoid the illusion of inclusion in our society.

Chapter Three

Literature Review: Student Voice

'There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children'

Nelson Mandela

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will trace the development of the concept of student voice as it explores the new paradigm of childhood (Motherway 2009), where children are seen as social actors and experts in their own lives with indisputable rights. It will chart the development of children's rights policy and legislation in the international context which resulted in the development of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). Ireland's response to the international convention, particularly Article 12, will be examined. Policy and legislation in the Irish context present real challenges and barriers to enactment of children's rights, particularly children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Ireland operates a parallel system of provision where children's rights and disability rights are dealt with by separate agencies and separate policies (Moloney *et al.* 2021). Children with disabilities in Ireland are silenced by a lack of legislative provision upholding their rights (Maloney *et al.* 2021). It is fitting that academics, schools, and policy makers are now focusing on how the voice of all children can be accessed and heard so that children can have agency and autonomy over matters concerning them.

Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) captures State parties' legal obligations to children to support the enactment of their rights. This model serves as my conceptual understanding of children's rights to be heard and to participate in decision making in all matters concerning them. This includes the right of all children to be involved in the conceptualisation of inclusion. As a result, I will examine Lundy's Model which interrogates both the provisions and requirements necessary to elicit and engage with the voices of children in an authentic manner. Space, Voice, Audience and Influence are identified as key components necessary to both listen and give due weight to the opinions of children. Children have the right to be

consulted on matters concerning them (UNCRC 1989, Article 12). Article 12 of the UNCRC has direct relevance to matters of education and schooling (Jones 2017; Robinson, Quennerstedt and l'Anson 2019). Therefore, schools are ideally placed to support student voice initiatives. This is not without its challenges, historically, the participation in decision making in schools and education was the enjoyment of teachers, school management, policy makers and parents.

As such the genesis of student voice discourse in Ireland will be explored and issues of power and control in the context of education and schooling will be scrutinised. Constructs such as student councils will be analysed to ascertain if they are typically representative structures, which provide authentic opportunities for students to participate, or rather if they perpetuate tokenistic engagement which results in little change. Developments in policy, across all educational sectors identify the importance of student voice in improving educational outcomes. Curricular reform has placed student voice and participation at the heart of the educational experience. Schools are now mandated by international conventions to actively support children's participation in all matters concerning them. Yet, questions are raised if schools and teachers have the necessary skills and capacities to elicit the voices of all students. Student voice and inclusion are presented as symbiotic, interconnected concepts, where the promotion of one supports the development of the other which in turn improves outcomes for all.

3.2 Making Children Visible: The Development of Children's Rights

The image of the child and views of childhood have evolved and developed significantly in recent decades (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2014). Children's rights theory and practice are born from a broader understanding of general theories about human rights (Arce 2012; Kosher, Ben-Arieh and Hendelsman 2016). They are relatively new in contemporary social and political discourse (Ife and Tascón 2016; Kosher, Ben-Arieh and Hendelsman 2016). Much like the concept of inclusive education as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.3, the development of children's rights has been shaped by social, economic, cultural and political circumstances (Holzscheiter *et al.* 2019). Much of this development has occurred in recent years.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the call for the consideration of the status and rights of children (Hayes 2002). The educationalist Ellen Kay (1900) called for the twentieth century to be the century of the child (Hayes 2002; Rudd 2014). During this time a new concept of childhood (Christensen and James 2009), and a sociology of childhood (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2014) emerged, which shaped and influenced sociology, policy and research (Christensen and James 2017). Central to these developments is the concept of children’s rights (Motherway 2009). Advocating human rights for children and the new social theorising about children were part of the same movement in which children’s status as autonomous human beings and children’s place and role in society were being reconsidered (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2014). Therefore, the children’s rights movement has undergone ‘transformations from child saving (protecting children) to propagating the personhood, integrity and autonomy of children (protecting their rights)’ (Freeman 1998, p. 432). Table 3.1 summarises the major developments of children’s rights on the international stage.

Table 3.1. Development of Children’s Rights: The International Context

(Summarised from United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) 2023)

Date	Development
1924	Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child
1948	Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25)
1949	European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (Article 2 right to education)
1959	Declaration of the Rights of the Child
1979	International Year of the Child
1989	The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is adopted by the United Nations General Assembly
1990	World Summit for Children
2002	United Nations Special Session on Children, child delegates address the General Assembly for the first time.

2010	The United Nations Secretary-General issues the Status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
2011	Optional Protocol to the CRC is adopted. This allows the Committee on the Rights of the Child to investigate complaints of child rights violations.
2015	Somalia and South Sudan ratify the Convention. Only the United States has not ratified to date.

The Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1924), and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25 (1948) were early attempts at recognising children’s rights to education, play, healthcare, freedom from exploitation, special care and assistance and social protection (UNICEF 2021). Furthermore, the Geneva Declaration was the first to identify the role and duty of mankind in the active and distinct promotion of children’s rights worldwide (Geneva Declaration 1924, Preamble; Pazez 2021). In 1959, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child was published. This represented an updated view on the rights of children (Pazez 2021). It marked the start of a movement to make children more visible in society (Hayes 2012). It was, however, aspirational and lacked an emphasis on children’s autonomy, the importance of children’s views or any appreciation of the importance of empowerment (Freeman 2000). The advent of the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s, focused efforts in the expansion of children’s rights discourse (Stearns 2017). The year 1979 was declared the International Year of the Child. This gave many countries the opportunity to revise the national status of children, it also led to a focus on how national and international policies impact on the quality of children’s lives (Hayes 2012).

The UNCRC (1989) (Section 3.2.2) is identified as a significant achievement for human rights, as it recognises the roles of children as social, economic, political, civil and cultural actors (UNICEF 2021). Other significant landmarks include the 1990 World Summit for Children which was held in New York less than a year after the adoption of the UNCRC. The Summit adopted a Declaration and a Plan of Action for the survival, protection and development of youth (United Nations (UN) 2021). This served to elevate the profile of children as a matter for genuine policy consideration

(Hayes 2012). In 2002, child delegates addressed the UN Assembly for the first time. This was momentous as it served to embody Article 12 of the UNCRC (Section 3.2.3), as children have the right to be consulted on matters pertaining to them and have their voice heard. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was adopted in 2006. Article 24, of the convention (Chapter 2, Section 2.9.6) explicitly addresses the rights of these children to access an inclusive, quality, and free education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live (NCSE 2019). The fact that conventions such as the UNCRC and the UNCRPD are considered necessary reflects the degree to which the violation of children's rights in contemporary society has been recognised (Hayes 2012).

3.2.1 United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

Under the UNCRC, a child is defined as a person under eighteen years of age (Hayes 2002). This convention (UNCRC 1989) offers the fullest legal statement and definition of children's rights (Freeman 2000). Comprising 54 articles aimed at specifically outlining children's rights and freedoms (Robinson, Quennerstedt and Anson 2019), the UNCRC provides 'an internationally endorsed set of standards through which states are required to operationalise children's rights' (Lundy and McEvoy 2011, p.130). It is the outcome of ten years of negotiation among government delegations, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations (Freeman 2000; Hayes 2002). A total of 196 countries, with the exception of the United States of America (USA), has ratified the UNCRC in its national policy (Fleming 2015; UNICEF 2023). The UNCRC excited the world and is heralded as a great success, no other previous or subsequent international agreement united such world opinion (Freeman 2000). It represents a collective acknowledgement that children, like adults are right-bearing citizens of their nations, and nations around the world (Kilbourne 1998). Ratification of the UNCRC is significant (Lundy 2007; Fleming 2015) as it is legally binding and necessitates each State to enact its principles (Lundy 2012) which are accepted as minimum standards of provision to children (Jones and Marks 1997; Freeman 2000). Furthermore, states can be held accountable in international fora for their failure to endorse their international obligations to ratify children's rights (Lundy 2012).

Importantly, the UNCRC recognises children as full human beings with the ability to participate freely in society (Freeman 1996 cited in Lundy 2007; Fleming 2015). With its focus on children's rights, autonomy and freedom, the UNCRC represents a societal shift in attitude and belief about the role of children in their own lives. Historical perceptions of children as passive dependents are challenged and replaced with an understanding that children are deserving of individual status and rights (Maloney *et al.* 2021). It is precisely this recognition and its perceived potential to undermine parental rights and adult authority which led to the USA refusing to ratify it (Kilbourne 1998). However, Article 5 affirms the primacy of the family and requires State parties to respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents. The UNCRC does not propose rights for children at the expense of others, but rather it distances itself from a paternalistic approach that views children as passive objects towards a recognition of the individuality of children who deserve to be respected and listened to (Hayes 2012).

The UNCRC articulates a number of rights (Freeman 2000) (Figure 3.1). Rights concerning development and welfare of children include the right to education as outlined in Article 28. Rights concerning children in special circumstances extend to children with special needs, refugee and orphaned children, minority and indigenous children (Freeman 2000).



Figure 3.1 Rights of Children in UNCRC (adapted visually from Freeman 2000)

The UNCRC is an instrument for the ‘protection of children’s rights’ rather than simply the protection of children’ (Hayes 2012, p. 21) The UNCRC is concerned with the four P’s (Figure 3.2) participation, protection, prevention, and provision for and of children (Van Bueren 1995 cited in Jones and Marks 1997).

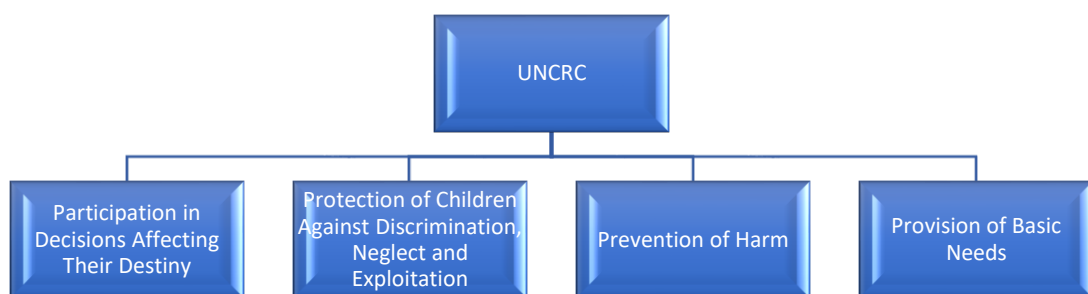


Figure 3.2 The Four Ps of the UNCRC adapted visually from (Van Bueren 1995 cited in Jones and Marks 1997, pp.177-178).

The UNCRC is lauded as a gold standard (Holzscheiter *et al.* 2019), an advocacy tool (Veerman 1992), a transformative instrument (Melton 2005) and as an impressive manifesto (Hayes 2002). Others, however, see it as an idealistic document with a

Western ethos (Freeman 1992; Steiner and Alston 2000 cited in Hayes 2002). Criticism has been directed towards the UNCRC for not doing enough to protect the rights of all children. Freeman (2000) argues that although the UNCRC is a real achievement in uniting countries towards a common goal it should only be seen as a first step. Further action and refinement, must reflect the needs and understanding of children in the 21st century.

One of the issues identified in the literature relates to how the child is conceptualised within the UNCRC documents (Velez 2016). Children, according to Velez (2016), are presented as a homogenous group who emerge as a definable category progressing linearly towards a fixed potential. Conceptualising children in this manner fails to account for the reciprocal relationship between a child's social context and their personal development which, according to Velez (2016), is crucial to understanding how individuals develop. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development recognises the importance of individuals and their relationships to the environmental systems and networks which surround them. These relationships shape our values, beliefs, social roles and lifestyle which evolve over time. In contrast, the child in the UNCRC, according to Velez (2016), is presented as a solitary individual, impervious to influence from the social networks which surround him/her. The difficulty with positioning children and childhood in silos, free from influence of their social networks and communities is that it fails to take account of the reality that children's experiences, perceptions and development are diverse (Pazey 2021). Children, including children with SEND, are in fact a heterogenous group with wide-ranging skills, abilities and needs (Mitchell 2017).

Significantly, the UNCRC was not formulated by children or by children's groups, nor did they have any real input into the drafting or preliminary discussions (Freeman 2000). This is problematic. The UNCRC encodes a set of rights from the perspective of others looking in and on the world of those whom these rights directly impact. One cannot escape the irony of such an approach. Article 12(1) emphasises participatory rights for all children in matters affecting them (UNCRC 1989) yet no children had any input in its formulation.

3.2.2 UNCRC: Rights of Children with Disabilities

Criticism has also been directed towards the UNCRC as the rights of children with disabilities are given limited recognition (Byrne and Lundy 2018; Jones and Marks 1994). Article 2 of the UNCRC ensures that all children are protected against all forms of discrimination based on disability. This, however, does not guarantee equal rights (Mark and Jones 1997) as it allows for differentiation of the rights of people with disabilities. Differentiation may not be considered discriminatory if the criteria for differentiation is reasonable and its aim is legitimate (General Comment 18 Paragraph 13, United Nations Committee on Human Rights 1989). By using the 'language of anti-discrimination rather than the principle of inclusion' (Freeman 2000, p.282), the rights of children outlined in the UNCRC may therefore 'be open to interpretation which has the effect of denying rights to children with disabilities' (Jones and Marks 1997, p.180), thus legitimising segregation (Freeman 2000). Without a principle of inclusion, barriers to participation which are constructed by society (Oliver 1992) remain in place. Failure to enact a principle of inclusion in the UNCRC has drawn much criticism (Freeman 2000; Sabatello 2013; Jones 2017). However, nearly two decades after the UNCRC the right to inclusive education was enshrined in Article 24 of the UNCRPD (2006) (Chapter Two, Section 2.9.6). Despite this, barriers remain as the concept of inclusion and implementation of inclusive education remain problematic (Hyatt and Hornby 2017). The urgency to address this concept is critical as Article 24 of the UNCRPD (2006) enshrined the rights of all children to an inclusive education with the removal of separate provision. Chapter One, Section 1.5 identified the need for a reconceptualisation of the concept of inclusion and inclusive education to include the views of all students, but particularly those whom it affects. The rights of children enshrined in Article 12 of the UNCRC and Article 7 (3) of the UNCRPD, to express their views and have their voices heard may shine a light on implementation of Article 24.

Furthermore, analysis of language used in the UNCRC identifies that the convention appears to marginalise the rights of gay children, female children, street children and other marginalised groups such as refugees, indigenous children and children in the juvenile justice system (Freeman 2000). Article 2(2) provides for non-discrimination

but limits this to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status. However, the concept of inclusion, as we currently understand it, has developed and expanded to embrace those who are at risk of marginalisation or exclusion for whatever reason (Spratt and Florian 2015; Strum 2019; Rose and Shevlin 2020). Therefore, although the non-discrimination principle evident in the UNCRC is important, it stopped short in fully protecting the rights of the aforementioned group (Freeman 2000; Moloney *et al.* 2021). However, the fact that disability was identified as a ground for discrimination in Article 2 evidences the intention of the UN to provide for the rights of children with disabilities (Jones and Marks 1997) and possibly paved the way for further developments such as those in the UNCRPD.

Article 23 (3) recognises the rights of children with disabilities to enjoy a full and decent life with the right to special care, appropriate to the child's condition. This special care shall ensure a child's access to education, training, health care, and rehabilitation. This right is, however, dependent on the availability of resources. Rights which are contingent upon eligibility criteria and available resources are little more than lofty aspirations which perpetuate the barriers which society creates (Jones and Marks 1997). This clause, therefore, provides governments and organisations with an opt out from enforcing these rights. For without a legal imperative these rights are dependent on good will. As a result, children with disabilities must be visible in budgets and money must be ringfenced to support the realisation of their rights (Maloney *et al.* 2021).

Additionally, the importance placed on special care, rehabilitation, training and treatment emphasises a medical model of disability, where importance is on non-discrimination and welfare, rather on rights and inclusion (Jones and Marks 1997; Freeman 2000;). This is problematic for a number of reasons: special care, rehabilitation and treatment prioritise the provision on health rather than education. Health and welfare can be perceived as expensive and burdensome for State parties to implement. Article 23 promotes this perception as its provision of services can be dependent on available resources (Sabatello 2013). The emphasis is

on the needs, rather than the strengths of the child. As a result, States can deny provision on the basis they lack the resources to address these needs.

3.2.3 Compliance with the UNCRC

Compliance with the UNCRC is monitored by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (Lundy 2007; Doek, Krappmann and Lee 2020). Committee members are independent international experts on children's rights (Landsdown 2000; Doek, Krappmann and Lee 2020). Article 43 outlines the system for periodic reporting to the UN Committee on Children's Rights. Every five years State parties are required to report on the progress and implementation of the UNCRC in their country (Hayes 2002; Lundy 2012). Importantly, the UN Committee also considers submissions from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) which gives a strong voice to those advocating for children's rights. Furthermore, it permits the Committee to evaluate governmental reports on account of information provided by the NGO sector (Hayes 2002). Findings from analysis of 27-member states who reported on their implementation during the period of 2000-2011 suggest that the UNCRC is having an impact on domestic education policy (Lundy 2012). The Committee urges State parties to ratify relevant international instruments such as the UNCRPD (Maloney *et al.* 2021) to further protect and uphold the rights of children with disabilities. In this regard the UNCRC and by extension the UNCRPD outline the rights of all children.

The Convention is the most widely ratified instrument of children rights with 196 state members (UNICEF 2021). In 2019 the Convention celebrated its 30th anniversary. That same year an independent expert, Manfred Nowak, submitted a Global Study on Children Deprived of their Liberty, which revealed that nearly 1.5 million children continued to be deprived of their rights each year (UN 2019). Despite the raft of conventions, policies and standards, the plight of children, particularly children with SEND around the world, continues to be a source of concern as their rights are frequently abused and violated (Freeman 2000; Sabatello 2013; Amnesty International 2023).

Children's rights discourse is in flux and tensions have emerged between the rights of the child, the rights of parents, and State parties' responsibilities to enact these

rights (Hayes 2012; Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2013). However, an imbalance of power imposed by adult creations of what is best can be seen by children as not right for them (Bradwell 2019). Article 12 of the UNCRC attempts to address this imbalance of power by giving voice to children to express views in matters concerning them.

3.2.3 Article 12 of the UNCRC: Voice; Participation; Influence; Power and Inclusion

Article 12 of the UNCRC was a significant milestone in advancing student voice in the context of children's rights discourse in education (Fleming 2015). Student voice is used to describe a range of activities which seek to increase the participation of students in education. For this reason, student voice and inclusion are inextricably linked. They are both based on the premise of rights and respect for children as experts in their own lives who can actively contribute to shaping their education. Consequently, Article 12 (1 and 2) proved to be one of the most controversial provisions during the drafting process (Lundy 2018). Article 12 not only gives children, individually and collectively, the right to participate in decision making but importantly to have their views taken seriously (Lundy and McEvoy 2018; Mol 2019).

Article 12 requires that:

- 1) States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
- 2) For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of natural law.

(UNCRC Article 12 1989)

Although the UNCRC is concerned with a variety of children's rights, Article 12, has direct relevance for matters of education and schooling (Jones 2017; Robinson, Quennerstedt and l'Anson 2019). An increasing number of academics and professional educators (Jones 2017) are recognising the value and importance of children's rights to participate and to have their voice heard and their opinions

valued in the context of schooling (Alderson 2000; Rudduck and Flutter 2000; Rudduck and McIntyre 2007).

'Article 12 provided the global impetus for the formulation of children's participation rights' (Woodhouse 2014, p.258). However, children's enjoyment of Article 12 is contingent on the support and cooperation of adults (Lundy 2007). However, tensions exist between the rights of adults and the rights of children. Lundy (2007) argues that adults have a number of concerns which centre on;

- Scepticism about children capacity (or a belief about that they lack capacity to have meaningful input into decision making)
- A worry that giving children more control will undermine authority and destabilise the school environments
- Compliance will require too much effort which would be better spent on education.

(Lundy 2007, p.930)

Scepticism about the capacity of children, particularly children with SEND (Mansfield 2018) to have meaningful input into decisions concerning them (Brasof and Mansfield 2019) stems from paternalistic attitudes which shape adult-child relationships (Jones 2017). This type of paternalism is demonstrated in issues of power and control evident in social constructions of childhood and has been influential in the development of education (Jones 2017). Children, according to this view, need guidance, education, discipline, and support to develop their full rationality (Christopher 2019). Children's right to personhood with authoritative force (Jones 2017) is dismissed in favour of the belief that children lack capacity for moral decision making (Shapiro 2003). The widespread belief to see and treat children as morally immature and childish (Christopher 2017) emerged from developmental psychology (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2014) where the dominant view is that children are people in the making and not people in their own right (Jones 2017). This view presents children as objects in the process of development towards a fixed end. Such objectification and future orientation relate to competence (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2014). Competence, therefore, is

evident when children reach the formal operational stage of development (Wadsworth 1996). Children who have not yet developed this level of thinking are regarded as lacking competence. Throughout history, large groups of adults and children have been denied rights on the grounds that they do not possess, or they have not yet reached an acceptable level of competence and rational thinking that is necessary to exercise these rights (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2014). Indeed, the idea of competence appears in Article 12(1) of the UNCRC, where rights are bestowed on those who are 'capable of forming his or her own views'. This notion of capacity and competence therefore serves to justify denying rights to certain groups. Listening to children and providing opportunities to be heard requires effort and resources (Lundy 2018). This is more evident for children who are marginalised and disadvantaged (Alderson and Morrow 2020). Therefore, it is common for adult decision makers to exclude children from enjoying their rights (Lundy 2018), thereby perpetuating power and control over children who often remain as objects without a voice (Hayes 2012).

Tensions between the rights of parents, the rights of children and the right of the State arise from concern that giving children more control will undermine authority and destabilise school environments (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2014). Power structures in schools are often hierarchical, giving adults control over time, space and activities (Alderson 1999; McCormack *et al.* 2019). This power differential is often combined with a perception of children as passive recipients, whereby knowledge is bestowed on them by adults, who know better. Thus, resulting in the potential influence of children on their own education being ignored or downgraded (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2014). Concern that compliance will require too much effort at the expense of education has been counteracted with a multitude of studies which have identified the benefits for consulting children (Lundy 2007).

Article 12 (1 and 2) recognises children's right to express their views, for their views to be given due weight and for their views to be heard. This right applies to all children without discrimination (Lundy 2012). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child identified when a State ratifies the UNCRC, it takes on obligations under international law to implement it (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child para 3).

This requires State parties to ‘undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of rights recognised in the UNCRC’ (Article 4). However, a policy practice gap has emerged between State parties’ international commitments and actual practice relating to educational decision making (Lundy 2007). The UNCRC propelled countries to recognise children’s rights and to formulate mechanisms for their enactment. However, one of the inherent difficulties with enactment of children’s rights is that initial goodwill can dissipate when rhetoric needs to be put into practice, costs money, challenges dominant held views and generates controversy (Lundy 2007).

Approaching children’s issues from a human rights perspective is part of the evolving perception of the child (Jones 2017). There is now more than ever a greater awareness and recognition that children are not invisible, but are social actors that have opinions and views which are valid (Motherway 2009). There is a growing body of literature on the power of children’s participation (Rudduck and Flutter 2003; Christensen 2004; Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Fleming 2010; Merewether and Fleet 2014; Colliver 2017). Furthermore, there is growing acceptance that children and young people have the right to be involved in decisions which affect them (Rose and Shevlin 2003; Jones 2005; Lundy 2007; Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felton 2011). Despite this, children’s views are not consistently or reliably incorporated into educational decision making (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felton 2011; Prunty *et al.* 2012). In many cases where this is happening it is ‘tokenistic’ (Lundy 2007, 2012, 2018).

The importance of Article 12 for education cannot be underestimated (Lundy 2007).

As;

‘Children do not lose their human rights by virtue of passing through the school gates. Thus, for example, education must be provided in a way that respects the inherent dignity of the child and enables the child to express his or her views freely in accordance with article 12 (1) and to participate in school life’.

(Committee on the Rights of the Child (2001) General Comment No. 1: The Aims of Education, p. 3).

The challenge, therefore, remains for State parties, of which Ireland is a member to enact the UNCRC and fulfil its obligations that involvement of all children regardless of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or

social origin, property, disability, birth or other status ‘in decision making is a permanent, non-negotiable human right’ (Lundy 2007, p.940).

3.3 Developments in Response to the UNCRC: The Irish Context

Ireland ratified the UNCRC in 1992. Since then, Ireland has made significant progress towards realising the rights and meeting the needs of children (Children’s Rights Alliance 2010). Table 3. 2 summarises key developments in response to the UNCRC in the Irish context.

Table 3.2 Developments in Response to the UNCRC: The Irish Context

Date	Development
1992	Ireland Ratified the UNCRC
2000	National Children Strategy, <i>Our Children- their Lives 2000-2010</i>
2001	National Children’s Advisory Council and National Children’s Office
2002	Dáil na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg
2003	Ombudsman for Children’s Office
2004	Ombudsman for Children
2011	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
2012	Children’s Referendum
2014	Child and Family Agency TUSLA
2014	Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young people 2014-2020
2015	National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020
2017	Hub na nÓg
2020	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, integration and Youth (DCEDIY)
2021	National Framework for Children and Young people’s Participation in Decision Making.

3.3.1 Current Irish Context: Overview of Policy

Publication of the National Children’s Strategy, *Our Children, Their Lives 2000-2010* (Government of Ireland 2000), was a key national document developed in response

to the UNCRC (Prunty *et al.* 2012; Fleming 2015). It made a noticeable and valuable contribution to policy as its vision was based on democratic citizenship and participation. The goals of the National Children's Strategy are that children would be heard that their lives would be better understood and that they would receive quality support and services (Government of Ireland 2000). Consequently, it embodied children's rights, including their right to voice as outlined in Article 12 of the UNCRC (Prunty *et al.* 2012). This had a significant and positive effect on the realisation of children's rights practice in the Irish context (Lundy 2014). Other developments in response to the UNCRC include the establishment of the National Children's Advisory Council (2001) and the National Children Office in 2001 within The Office for Children and Youth Affairs (Children's Right Alliance 2010; Fleming 2015). Reflecting ongoing developments in the realisation of children's rights this office has expanded in its remit and is currently called the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY).

An increase in consultation with, and participation of, children through mechanisms such as *Dáil na nÓg* (youth parliament) and *Comhairle na nÓg* (local youth councils), and the Children and Young People's Forum (Children's Rights Alliance 2010; Lundy 2014; DCYA 2017) ensued. The Ombudsman for Children's Office (2003) and the subsequent appointment of Ireland's first Ombudsman for Children in 2004 demonstrated the Irish governments' commitment to protecting children and listening to their voices (Children's Right Alliance 2010). The Ombudsman for Children's Office protects the rights of children and young people in Ireland. It can investigate complaints about services to children by public organisations such as schools, hospitals, governmental departments and certain public bodies funded by the State (Ombudsman for Children's Office 2020). The goal of the Ombudsman for Children is for children and young people to be actively heard and respected so they can experience safe, fulfilling and happy everyday lives (Ombudsman for Children's Office 2020).

The publication of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020* evidenced the earlier commitment by the

Government of Ireland to protect the rights of children by listening to them. The vision, outlined in this publication is;

‘for Ireland to be one of the best small countries in the world in which to grow up and raise a family, and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard and where they are supported to realise their maximum now and, in the future,’

(DCYA 2014, p.2)

Principles incorporating children’s rights, the family, equality, and accountability are evidence-informed and outcomes-focused and are central to the implementation and monitoring of the *National Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020* (DCYA 2014). A set of five interconnected and reinforcing national outcomes for all children are identified. These include that all children be active and healthy; be achieving in all areas of learning and development; be safe and protected from harm; enjoy economic security; be connected, respected and contributing taking account of the needs, rights and best interests of all children, including those who are marginalised and disadvantaged (DCYA 2014). *The National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020* (DYCA 2015) (The National Participation Strategy) ensures that children have a voice across the five outcomes set out in *Better Outcome, Brighter Futures the National Policy Framework for Children and Young people, 2014-2020* (DCYA 2015). A central tenet of this strategy is to improve and establish mechanisms to increase participation of marginalised voices in decision making (DCYA 2015). This strategy and the accompanying Action Plan (DCYA 2018) enable all children and young people to enjoy their rights ‘by attempting to mainstream children’s participation in every government department and agency’ (Byrne and Lundy 2018, p.5). The Action Plan (DCYA 2018) obligates the Health Service Executive (HSE) Disability Services to create a framework to detail how children’s voices will inform the evolution of disability services (Moloney *et al.* 2021).

The *National Participation Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020* identified the need for the establishment of a Children and Young People’s Participation Hub (Hub na nÓg) (DCYA 2015; DCEDIY 2021). Hub na nÓg was established as a national centre for excellence on children’s and young

people participation (DCEDIY 2021). It is a key driver in supporting the implementation of both *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* and the *National Participation Strategy* (DYCA 2015).

Furthermore, *The National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making* (The Framework) was launched in April 2021. The Framework is based on the child-rights model of participation (Lundy 2007) and is underpinned by the UNCRC the UNCRPD and the *National Participation Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020* (DCEDIY 2021). This Framework enables the implementation of the National Participation Strategy across sectors and professional groups to improve their practice in listening to children and young people. The Framework consists of a series of checklists which provide guidance on how to meaningfully incorporate children and young people in all aspects of decision making (DCEDIY 2021).

Ireland's policy developments, therefore, have consistently strived to improve the lives of children and increase their participation in all matters concerning them. The Framework for Participation is a culmination of previous policy developments, which seek to support departments, agencies and organisations in listening to children and young people and giving them a voice in decision making.

3.3.2 Overview of Legislation

Unlike Ireland's progress towards integrating the UNCRC into policy, the integration of children's rights in domestic legislation has been limited (Lundy 2014). Recent findings highlight that children with disabilities are overlooked or omitted in 'many child-and disability-focused laws' in Ireland (Moloney *et al.* 2021, p.3). Article 12 states that children have a right to express views freely in all matters concerning them. Yet, 'children with disabilities are not actively involved in consultations on many existing laws, policies and programmes affecting them' and they are relatively 'invisible in data' (Moloney *et al.* 2021, p.3). According to the Ombudsman for Children, Dr Niall Muldoon, numerous barriers exist in Ireland which impede children with disabilities from enjoying their rights in a range of areas, such as education and health and welfare (Moloney *et al.* 2021). Siloing is a key barrier to the realisation of

the rights of children with disabilities (Moloney *et al.* 2021). Children's rights and disabilities rights are dealt with by separate agencies and separate policies in Ireland. This prevents a collaborative approach to the rights of children with disabilities in non-disability specific policies and programmes. Furthermore, there are few mechanisms in place for children with disabilities to 'participate in the monitoring of laws and policies on equality and non-discrimination' (Moloney *et al.* 2021 p.23). The Ombudsman for Children has called on the State to remove these barriers and to enact its obligations under the UNCRC and the UNCRPD and to lead not impede this progress (Moloney *et al.* 2021). This will require amendments to legislation which impacts the lives of children with disabilities in areas such as family law, health, education, justice and housing (Moloney *et al.* 2021).

The Irish Constitution (1937) was a key influence in policy making in Ireland. However, Article 42.5 of the Constitution is the only reference to the rights of children and is limited to children where parents have failed in their child rearing responsibilities (Hayes 2012). It is this limitation of constitutional rights to vulnerable or troubled children rather than all children (Hayes 2012) which gave rise to the thirty-first amendment of the Irish Constitution in 2012 (Fleming 2015). Section 4.2 of Article 42A (Referendum Commission 2012) make explicit children's rights which embody the vision outlined in the UNCRC (Fleming 2015; Moloney *et al.* 2021). Article 42A necessitates that the State 'recognises and affirms the natural and imprescriptible rights of all children and shall, as far as practicable, by its law protect and vindicate those rights' (Constitution of Ireland Article 42A). The amendment to the Constitution required legislation to be enacted for provisions whereby the best interests of the child are fundamental to any decisions made and the views of children are taken into consideration (Lundy 2014) albeit in the areas of family law and child protection (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission 2015). However, other legislation such as the Adoption Act 2010, The Child Care Act 1991, The Children's Act 2001 and the Education for Persons with Special Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN) all fall short of enacting children's rights outlined in the UNCRC (Lundy 2014).

The Child Care Act 1991, incorporated the principle of participation into Ireland's domestic legislation governing child welfare and protection (Kennan *et al.* 2019). However, a number of criticisms have been directed towards the Irish child protection framework (Child Care Act 1991) from leading inclusion charities (Inclusion Ireland 2018), policy researchers (Moloney *et al.* 2021) and those working in Child Welfare and Protection Services (Barnardos 2018). The Child Care Act 1991 places children's welfare as the first and most important concern' but that it must happen with due deference to the constitutional rights of parents' (Lundy *et al.* 2014, p.52). Much of the debate about children's rights highlight tensions which exist between the rights of parents to raise their children on the one hand and the rights of the children to autonomy and self-determination on the other (Cohen and Naimark 1991; Thomas and O'Kane 1998; Howe 2001; Huntington 2006; Hayes 2012; Reynaert *et al.* 2019). The superior position of the family and in particular parents, act as a detriment of children and their rights (Kilkelly 2007). The weak constitutional positioning of children (Kilkelly 2007) is linked to the relative absence of children's rights where rights are ignored or underplayed in Irish law and policy (Kilkelly 2007; Lundy *et al.* 2014, Moloney *et al.* 2021). The UNCRC unequivocally recognises the primacy of parents but contends that the unique status of children necessitates a clear declaration of their rights to be made (Hayes 2012).

The rights of children who are marginalised are largely ignored in Irish law and policy (Kilkelly 2007, Moloney *et al.* 2021). Significantly, child protection and welfare enacted through the Child Care Act 1991 does not adequately address the rights of children with disabilities to protection and care (Inclusion Ireland 2018). Inclusion Ireland has called for a reform of the Child Care Act 1991 to be compliant with UNCRC and equality legislation (Inclusion Ireland 2018; Moloney *et al.* 2021). The Child Care Act 1991, lacks a clear children's rights focus (Kilkelly 2007). Reform of the Child Care Act 1991 would safeguard that children with disabilities would enjoy the same care and protection as all other children (Moloney *et al.* 2021). The Child Care Act 1991 is currently being reviewed in line with a commitment in better *Outcomes Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020*,

which states that the Government commits to review and reform of legislation and policy as necessary.

The importance of child protection, welfare and family supports to the enactment of children's rights was reaffirmed by the establishment of TUSLA, the Irish child and family agency in 2014 (McCormack, Gibbons and McGregor 2020). However, these rights do not extend to children with SEND (Moloney *et al.* 2021) as children with SEND are not under the remit of TUSLA and they are not included in the work they do (Inclusion Ireland 2018). Therefore, revision of the Child Care Act 1991 could go some way towards addressing the exclusion of children with SEND from the remit of Tulsa and ensure that children with SEND receive adequate child protection and welfare services (Moloney *et al.* 2021, p. 61). Both the Ombudsman for Children and Ireland's Special Rapporteur on Children protection have expressed concern on 'whether Ireland's child protection programme is sufficiently inclusive from the perspective of protecting children with disabilities' (Shannon 2016 cited in Inclusion Ireland 2018, p.10). The Child Care Act 1991 predates the UNCRC and the UNCRPD. Ireland now has a chance to reform this Act and its Child Protection Procedures in line with inclusive legislation and policy to create a culture of child protection where there is no doubt that children with SEND will be treated equally to other children.

Reforms in the area of child protection through legislation such as the Children First Act 2015 emerged following several damning reports such as the Kennedy Report (1969) and the Ryan Report (2009) which showed serious failures in the system to protect children as a consequence of not listening to them (Jackson *et al.* 2020, Moloney *et al.* 2021). The Children First Act 2015 places statutory obligations on part of the Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011) (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission 2015, p.16). The Children First Guidelines 2011 were updated in 2017 by the publication of *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (DCYA 2017). The Children First Act (2015) and the *Children First Guidelines* (2017) place statutory obligations on providers of services to children and those working with children to protect and uphold children's safety, welfare and rights (DCYA 2017). However, children with SEND are at heightened risk from abuse and neglect (Conroy 2012; Flynn 2018;

Inclusion Ireland 2018). Research indicates that children with communication, behaviour and sensory needs are particularly vulnerable to abuse (Stalker *et al.* 2010). Worryingly, children with SEND are often treated differently to their non-disabled counterparts in child protection systems and evidence of poor practice in safeguarding is evident (Stalker *et al.* 2010; Flynn 2019). Shortfalls and inefficiencies in child protection and welfare for children with SEND is evident in the Irish context (Flynn and McGregor 2017). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2016) recommended a rights-based approach to disability (Moloney *et al.* 2021) which must be adopted to prevent inequalities in child protection and welfare.

A range of children's issues have undoubtedly been addressed through the development and implementation of policy and practice initiatives in Ireland (Lundy *et al.* 2014). Ireland now has a strong infrastructure for children's protection and participation (DCYA 2015), though reform is required to support the realisation of the UNCRC and in particular, Article 12 into domestic law (Lundy *et al.* 2014). Hayes (2012), called for a re-evaluation of the place of children in Irish policymaking and recommended a shift towards a more pro-active rights-based model away from the reactive welfare model that Ireland long possessed. However, concerns that participation comes after protection and prevention in legislation and policies (Bradwell 2019) remain. For without participation, how do we listen to children? How can they become agents of change in their own lives? Without children's participation there is no way to incorporate their voice into legislation, practice or policy (Bradwell 2019).

Ireland has come a long way in providing opportunities for participation of children in matters concerning them. Yet, there is still some road to travel (Hayes 2012). Lundy asserts that a commitment to the enactment of Article 12, and in particular, the participation of children, is 'not an option which is the gift of adults, but a legal imperative which is the right of the child' (Lundy 2007, p.932). Therefore, we are obligated and mandated to find an equitable way for children to participate meaningfully in all matters concerning them.

3.4 Conceptualising Article 12: Lundy's Model of Participation

Children and young people are the end users of policies, programmes and laws that have been developed and implemented in their name without their consultation or participation (Kilkelly 2007; Lundy *et al.* 2014; Moloney *et al.* 2021). Article 12 of the UNCRC mandates that State parties who ratify the Convention listen and give voice to children on all matters concerning them (UNCRC 1989). Yet, governmental bodies including child protection and welfare services and educational setting all struggle to implement the participation principle in a meaningful manner (Kennan *et al.* 2019). The *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making 2021* and *Hub na nÓg* support governmental departments, state agencies and NGOs in Ireland to improve their structures for listening to the voices of children and young people to inform policy practice (DCEDIY 2021). Research looking at child policy in the United Kingdom (UK) indicates a propensity to connect policies to the UNCRC (Byrne and Lundy 2018). This however often proves to be lip service without any meaningful follow through (Byrne and Lundy 2018). Therefore, a rights-based approach to policy is necessary to enact the UNCRC in a meaningful manner (Lundy *et al.* 2014; Byrne and Lundy 2018). A right-based approach endorses that;

- Explicit and consistent reference be made to the UNCRC;
- All polices be aligned to the standards of the UNCRC;
- Polices be evaluated for their actual and potential impact on children;
- Children be involved in all stages of development and implementation;
- Children's views be given due weight;
- There be clear structures and oversight mechanisms which have a holistic approach;
- Spending on children and young people be explicit and involve children and young people; and
- All polices and documents be available in an age-appropriate manner and accessible for all (Byrne and Lundy 2018, p.11).

Lundy (2007) identifies inherent obstacles to the successful implementation of the UNCRC and in particular, Article 12 in policy and practice. These includes limited

awareness of and confidence in understanding the provisions of the UNCRC (Lundy 2007; Byrne and Lundy 2018). This is, however, a breach of Article 42, which requires State parties to: ‘make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike’ (UNCRC 1989 Article 42). The Committee on the Rights of the child has observed that:

‘If the adults around children, their parents and other family members, teachers and careers do not understand the implications of the Convention, and above all its confirmation of the equal status of children as the subjects of rights, it is most unlikely that the rights set out in the conventions will be realised for many children’

(Committee on the Rights of the Child 2003, Paragraph 66).

For this to change there needs to be a programme of awareness for all those working with children which addresses this knowledge gap (Lundy 2007; Byrne and Lundy 2018; Moloney *et al.* 2021). The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommend that initial teacher education and professional development for teachers should be ‘systematic and ongoing’ and should ‘increase knowledge and understanding of the Convention and encourage active respect for all its provisions’ (2003, paragraph 53).

This increase in knowledge and awareness must enhance the understanding that eliciting and valuing children views is not just good practice but legally binding (Lundy 2007). However, Lundy (2007) argues that the precise remit of Article 12 is misunderstood and is often ‘mentioned under the banner of the voice of the child, the right to be heard, the right to participate and or the right to be consulted’, (Lundy 2007, p.930). Although a convenient summary, this reduction serves to diminish the essence and impact of what the legal remit requires (Lundy 2007).

Article 12 (2) states that children have the right to express views in all matters affecting them, this is not restricted to one right but rather all rights outlined in the UNCRC. To understand what this means we must ask children whether a matter affects them (Lundy 2007). If Article 12 is to be fully implemented in governmental bodies such as schools, children must be involved ‘at each of the stages at which decisions are made which will ultimately impact on the child in the classroom’ (Lundy 2007, p.931). This, according to Lundy (2007), should occur when:

- Decisions are being made which impact on individual children;

- When school and classroom policies are being developed; and
- When government policy/legislation on education is determined.

A further obstacle which prevents the realisation of participation, is the lack of understanding of how participation can be implemented in practice (Bell and Wilson 2006; Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Mcleod 2008; Jackson *et al.* 2020; Moloney *et al.* 2021). Various models have attempted to capture different levels of participation, for example, Hart (1992) and Shier (2001). These models portray participation across a spectrum, from a minimal standard of consultation with children, to full participation where children have an opportunity to make decisions which affect their lives (Kennan *et al.* 2020).

Lundy (2007) proposes a model for conceptualising Article 12 which attempts to capture State parties' legal obligations to children in terms of educational decision making. The Lundy Model underpins the National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making (DCEDIY 2021) and provides a rights-based framework that enables a thorough interpretation of the implications of Article 12 for practice (Jackson *et al.* 2020). According to this model, successful implementation of Article 12 requires consideration of four separate but interrelated factors (Lundy 2007; Kennan *et al.* 2019; Jackson *et al.* 2020). Lundy's Model (Figure 3.3) (Lundy 2007, p.933) comprises of four chronological steps in the realisation of children's right to participate (Kennan *et al.* 2019). These include:

- Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view;
- Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views;
- Audience: Their views must be listened to; and
- Influence: The view must be acted upon as appropriate.

Lundy argues that there is a significant overlap between, (a) space and voice, and (b) audience and influence. The first element, Space: assures the child's right to express a view is a space that is safe and inclusive (Lundy 2007; Kennan *et al.* 2019). The second, Voice: stipulates that children must be facilitated to express their view. Significantly, Lundy identifies that some children may need the help of others to form their views (Lundy 2007). This identifies the need that children have for information,

facilitation and guidance in expressing their views (Jackson *et al.* 2020). The third, Audience: requires that children’s views be given due weight as outlined in Article 12 (2) and that the views of children must be listened to by someone with the capacity to make decisions (Jackson *et al.* 2020). The final requirement is Influence whereby the views of children must be acted upon as appropriate (Kennan *et al.* 2019). Ensuring that children have space, voice, audience and influence avoids the perils of tokenistic participation (Lundy 2007).

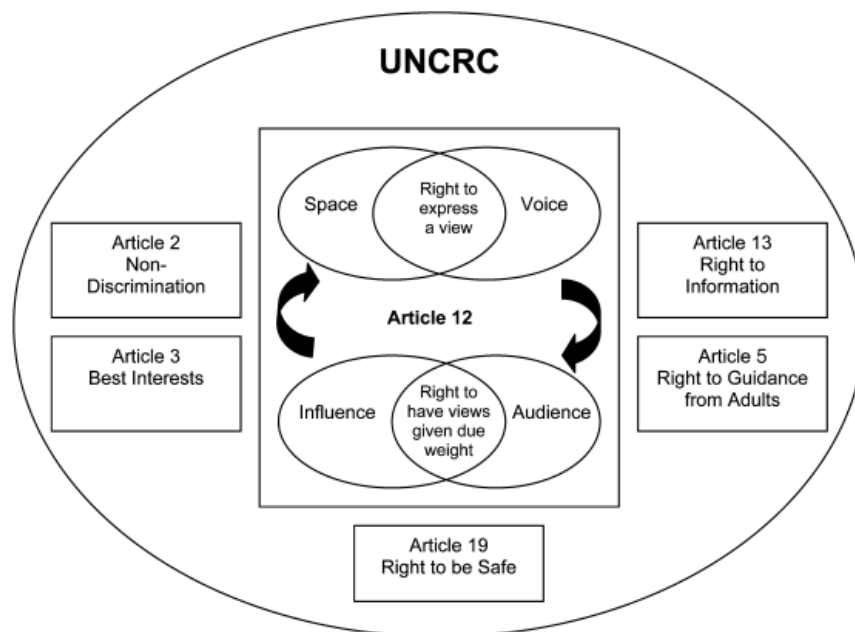


Figure 3.3 Lundy’s Conceptualisation of Article 12 (Lundy 2007, p. 932)

The Model acknowledges that decision making is rarely static but rather an iterative process and highlights that once the first stage is over the process can begin again. Emphasising the embedded and interconnected nature of Article 12 within the wider UNCRC, other provisions necessary to support children’s participation are incorporated. These include:

- Article 2 (non-discrimination);
- Article 3 (best interests);
- Article 5 (right to guidance);
- Article 13 (right to seek, receive and impart information); and,
- Article 19 (protection from abuse) (Lundy 2007).

Children and young people's participation in decision making is defined in Ireland as;

'the process by which children and young people have active involvement and real influence in decision making on matters affecting their lives, both directly and indirectly'

(DCYA 2015, p.20).

This is compliant with Article 12(1) of the UNCRC and Article 7(3) of the UNCRPD (Moloney *et al.* 2021). The significance of both articles for education cannot be understated (Lundy 2007). Therefore, schools are mandated under both human rights conventions to actively support all children including those with disabilities to participate in all matters concerning them.

3.5 Voice is Not Enough: Children's Participation as an Emerging Discourse in Irish Education

The concept of children's participation and student voice has emerged in the past two decades in response to the new sociology of childhood (Fielding 2004; Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2014), and developments in inclusive, rights-based discourse, grounded in international conventions. Student voice activities are regarded as the primary way for schools to enhance children's participation in matters concerning them (Pazey 2021). Recognising student voice is fundamental to students' daily school experience, because this is where students are (Pazey 2021). Research demonstrates the link between voice, engagement and participation and student outcomes including an increase in self-esteem, social status (Holdsworth 2000), democratic skills, citizenship, student adult relationships, (Fielding 2004; 2013), academic success (McMahon and Portelli 2004) students' health and wellbeing (De Roiste *et al.* 2012), agency, belonging and competence (Mitra 2004). Student participation through active, meaningful, and collaborative engagement is considered crucial to enhance learning processes and outcomes (Bovill *et al.* 2011; Mannion and Fitzgerald 2018). Paradoxically, although there has been a strong emphasis on eliciting student voice in schools, understanding what student voice and participation means, what it looks like, how it can be measured and assessed is less clearly articulated (Anderson, Graham and Thomas 2019).

Student voice is a complex, multi-level (Tangen 2008) concept which is described and defined interchangeably by a wide range of terms, activities and set of approaches (Figure 3.4) (Cook-Sather 2006, 2020; Fleming 2015) which reposition students' engagement with teachers and schools (Fleming 2015). Student voice is used across a variety of contexts and means different things to different people (Cook-Sather 2006). It can include having an opportunity to be heard, to be counted on, and to have influence on outcomes (Cook-Sather 2006). It is the 'process through which children and young people, individually and collectively are able to speak up about their education' (Thomson 2011, p.24). This can involve talking to students about their experiences in school with a view to changing these conditions (Rudduck 2005). Alternatively, it can embrace a transformative set of practices involving dialogue and consultation which reposition students' role in a democratic context (Fielding 2004).

Student voice, therefore, refers to;

'students in dialogue, discussion and consultation on issues that concern them in relation to their education, but in particular, in relation to pedagogy and their experiences of schooling

(Fleming 2015, p.223).

Student voice incorporates,

'initiatives that strive to elicit and respond to students' perspectives on their educational experiences, to consult students and to include them as active participants in critical analysis and reform of school, and to give students greater agency in researching educational issues and contexts'

(Thiessen 2007, p.579).



Figure 3.4 Language and Terminology Used to Describe Student Voice (Visually adapted from Fleming 2015, p.223)

The focus on consultation, change and agency situates students as active stakeholders and partners (Fleming 2019) who offer a unique perspective on teaching, learning and assessment (Cook-Sather 2006). This calls for a ‘radical collegiality’ involving a shift in gaze and a rebalancing of power in which students are situated as ‘agents in the process of transformation’ (Fielding 1999, p.22).

Student voice has implications not only for students but also for school staff and the communities in which they live (Fielding 2004). Activities which encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue and action lead to the development of ‘pre-figurative democratic practice’ (Fielding 2004, p.198). Peer support arrangements, such as, buddy systems, peer teaching/tutoring, and circle time are examples of such activities. So too, are systems which promote and support students to plan, develop, and implement changes within schools such as student councils and students on

governing bodies. Similarly, activities which encourage overt student leadership, which promote and encourage current and future active citizenship in a democratic society (Fielding 2004).

Fielding (2004) asks us to consider the nature of student voice activities, to seek clarity on what kinds of things are being described as student voice. He offers a two-part framework as a way of interrogating practices so that reasonable judgements can be made by teachers, schools and researchers about the degree to which student voice activities either perpetuate the silence of students or transform their engagement in a groundbreaking and supportive manner. The first part, 'From Data to Dialogue: a four-fold typology of student engagement' sees students as 'data sources, as active respondents, as co researchers and as student researchers' (Fielding 2004, p.201). Student involvement in this typology is on a continuum from passive involvement (students as data sources) to student voice as the initiating force in an enquiry process (students as researchers) (Fielding 2004). The former part of the continuum sees students as recipients of a better-informed pedagogy whereas the latter values students as partners in the learning process through initiation and direction of research with teacher support (Fielding 2004).

The different typologies identified by Fielding (2004) open a set of possibilities for schools to develop student agency. The 'development of student agency includes inviting students to author and co-author analyses of teaching and learning' (Cook-Sather 2020, p.183) which involves a shift in mindset and sharing of power. In this way Fielding's four-fold typology shifts the focus of power and control along the continuum from the teacher to a more collegial democratic partnership with students.

The second part of Fielding's (2004) framework identifies a set of conditions which must be in place for developments in student voice to take place. Questions which interrogate these conditions focus on areas such as, Speaking, Listening, Skills, Attitudes and Dispositions, Systems, Organisational Culture, Space and the Making of Meaning, Action and The Future (Table 3.3). These questions could support schools to embed the four elements of Lundy's Model of Participation (Space, Voice, Audience and Influence). Lundy's Model seeks to operationalise the elements

necessary to implement Article 12 of the UNCRC. Fielding’s framework can therefore support schools to question if they have the necessary conditions to embed Lundy’s Model.

Table 3.3. Evaluating the Conditions for Student Voice (Fielding 2001, p. 134)

Speaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is allowed to speak? • To whom are they allowed to speak? • What are they allowed to speak about? • What language is encouraged / allowed? • Who decides the answer to these questions? • How are those decisions made? • How, when, where, to whom and how often are those decisions communicated?
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is listening? • Why are they listening? • How are they listening?
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the skills of dialogue encouraged and supported through training or other appropriate means? • Are those skills understood, developed and practised within the context of democratic values and dispositions? • Are those skills themselves transformed by those values and dispositions
Attitudes and Dispositions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do those involved regard each other? • To what degree are the principles of equal value and the dispositions of care felt reciprocally and demonstrated through the reality of daily encounter?
Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How often does dialogue and encounter in which student voice is centrally important occur? • Who decides? • How do the systems enshrining the value and necessity of student voice mesh with or relate to other organizational arrangements (particularly those involving adults)?

Organisational Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the cultural norms and values of the school proclaim the centrality of student voice within the context of education as a shared responsibility and shared achievement? • Do the practices, traditions and routine daily encounters demonstrate values supportive of student voice?
Spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where are the public spaces (physical and metaphorical) in which these encounters might take place? • Who controls them? • What values shape their being and their use?
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What action is taken? • Who feels responsible? • What happens if aspirations and good intentions are not realised?
The Future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do we need new structures? • Do we need new ways of relating to each other?

3.5.1 Student Voice Policy Discourse in Ireland

In Ireland, the rights of children to have a voice on educational matters was first enshrined in law in the Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland 1998). The role for students was first mentioned in the outline of the functions of the school principal (Fleming 2013). This asserts that the principal shall

‘under the direction of the board and in consultation with the teachers, the parents and, to the extent appropriate to their age and experience, the students, set objectives for the school and monitor the achievement of those objectives’

(Government of Ireland 1998, Section 23,2).

The involvement of students in the context of consultation in identifying objectives for the school was a significant milestone. Yet, their positioning in the balance of power was subordinated or indeed eradicated in subsequent subsections of the Act (Section 23.6) in favour of the elevated role of parents, teachers and staff.

The Act provided for the establishment of student councils in post-primary schools (Gilleece and Cosgrove 2012). The early vision set out by the Act viewed the construct

of a student council as a means 'of informing students in a school of the activities of the school' (Section 27.1). The establishment, organisation and governance of student councils were firmly controlled by the Board of Management. The subsequent publication of '*Student Councils: A Voice for Students*' (DES 2002) provided further guidance on how student councils should be established and operationalised in schools. Furthermore, it 'linked the student council to student voice and placed the concept of voice as central to the student council' (Fleming 2013, p.68).

Constructs such as student councils can support student involvement in the life of a school (McCormack *et al.* 2019) and are a recommendation by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009). They can cultivate a climate, culture and practice that encourages safe and productive learning environments which enhance student outcomes (Brasof and Mansfield 2018). Student councils seek to be a representative structure, whereby students, school management, staff and parents work in partnership on the affairs of the school, for the benefit of all (DES 2002). They are an important part in the 'realisation of children's rights' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009, paragraph.107.) However, although the guideline documents reference student involvement and student partnerships there is no reference to consultation or dialogue or the central role of students in decision making (Fleming 2013). The language used throughout limits any sense of empowerment, verbs like assisting, representing, promoting, supporting all reduce the role to one that is supportive and advisory, 'but not as consultative or dialogic' (Fleming 2001, p. 68). Moreover, the importance of a student council to impact any real change is diminished somewhat by the fact that its establishment is not obligatory in schools (Fleming 2015). There is no legislative provision at primary level and no requirement at post-primary level (Cosgrove and Gillece 2012). Language such as may rather than shall or should be established is used which provides an option to schools rather than mandating its use as a structure to support student participation. Furthermore, the function of the council according to the Education Act is to;

‘promote the best interests of the school and the involvement of students in the affairs of the school, in co-operation of the board, parents and teachers’

(Section 27, 4).

This places their primary role as the promotion of the interests of the school over the involvement of students thereby reducing their capacity to exert influence over policy and practice (Fleming 2013; Charteris and Smardon 2019).

Cosgrove and Gileece (2012) are critical of the objectives and functions of the student council as outlined by the DES (2002), particularly how the concept of meaningful participation is applied to them. The objectives of student councils set out in the guidelines include the enhancement of communication between students, management, staff and parents; the promotion of an environment conducive to educational and personal development; the promotion of friendship and respect among students; support the management and staff in the development of the school; and to represent the views of the students on matters of general concern to them (DES 2002). The guidelines further state that the functions of the student council are to;

‘represent the views of the student body to the school management; to promote good communication within the school; support educational developments and progress of students; assist with induction and mentoring for new first year students; contribute to the development of school policy, assist school sporting and cultural activities and assist with or organising fund-raising events for charity and liaising with student councils in other schools’

(DES 2002, p.11).

However, meaningful participation is:

“the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community and democracy. Instead of allowing adults to tokenise a contrived student voice... meaningful student involvement continuously acknowledges the diversity of students by validating and authorising them to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge, and experiences throughout education in order to improve our schools”

(Fletcher 2005, cited in Cosgrove and Gileece 2012, p.378)

Looking at the functions and objectives set out by the DES, it is difficult to imagine how they would permit the participation of students in shaping their school environment in a meaningful manner (Cosgrove and Gileece 2012). Matters such as

curriculum development, subject content, pedagogical processes, choice of textbooks or ways in which subjects are taught (Cosgrove and Gillece 2012) parent-teacher meetings, reporting on students learning and provision of support for students with special education needs, are all absent from the functions and objectives of the student council as set out by the DES (2002)(Cosgrove and Gillece 2012). Rather they are reduced to assisting, contributing, and supporting with mundane tasks dictated by guidelines produced by the DES.

Research has repeatedly highlighted the differences between students' and teachers' views on various aspects of schooling (Cefai and Cooper 2010). Therefore, the necessity to engage with students in dialogue to bridge the gap between perspectives is evident. Student councils afford students limited power or influence over matters which are important to them (Fleming 2015). Therefore, the function and role of the student councils as outlined by the DES inhibit meaningful participation of students. They can, therefore, be used to 'give students a voice but not a say' (Democracy Commission 2005, p.33).

Although it is widely recognised that the function of student councils and other representative school structures is to 'articulate and advocate for the own interests' (Charters and Smardon 2019, p.1), questions must be asked of who is speaking for whom and for what purpose? Cook-Sather (2006) urges us to remember that there is no 'one single student voice' (p.367). What emerges is the most dominant voice (McCormack *et al.* 2019). Students are not a homogenous group; there are varied perspectives and lived experiences which must be heard. Certain students including those with SEND tend to be excluded from the 'arena of student voice initiatives' (Pazey 2021, p.2). Findings from a study carried out by the Children's Research Centre on behalf of the Working Groups on Student Councils in Second Level Schools in Ireland (2005), found that elections to student councils can often be a popularity contest or can occur via teacher's selection and approval (Keogh and Whyte 2005).

This study employed traditional methodological approaches in the form of focus group and interviews with adults ($n=131$) (deputy principals, principals' teachers, member of Board of Management) and children ($n=251$). Focus groups with child participants incorporated participatory approaches to support students to engage in

the research. This included developing posters using a group ranking in order of importance on what they thought school councils should do. Another poster outlined the challenges student councils experience and solutions for each challenge. Although a range of school types participated in this research, no special school was included. As this study sought to explore the barriers, enablers and supports to the development and operation of student councils in Ireland, it would have been useful to include the perspectives of these schools. Furthermore, schools self-selected students to participate in the focus group interviews, although guidance was given to select a representative sample the danger that schools will select those most articulate students perceived as having the capacity to contribute to the research is ever present. An open invitation to all students to participate with embedded selection-criteria may have provided a more representative sample.

Selection and election processes are problematic for students with SEND. Studies of peer acceptance indicate that students with SEND are more likely to be rejected and experience isolation than students without difficulties (Stone and La Greca 1990). Students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) represent some of the most marginalised students in schools and are often the least empowered and listened to of all their peers (Cefai and Cooper 2010) and are therefore least likely to be elected. Selection and approval by adults can lead to exclusion and isolation due to 'adults views and beliefs about whether they have the ability or maturity to effect change (Brasof and Mansfield 2018). If student councils serve as the primary voice of students in schools, then questions must be asked if they are truly representative in nature. If the voices of only a few are being heard or if they lack any real influence then the very existence of a student council or other student voice initiatives is both tokenistic and discriminatory in a democratic, inclusive school context.

The way in which student voice activities are carried out can reproduce existing inequalities in schools' structures (McMahon and Portelli 2004). The term student voice, and the development of student voice initiatives have become part of the popular discourse in all educational sectors. Student voice can therefore be at risk from being 'an empty and superficial catch phrase or slogan' (McMahon and Portelli 2004, p.60). Researchers have warned about the dangers of tokenism, where schools

and teachers listen to students without hearing or acting upon their calls for change. Brasof (2018) identifies an organisational improvement paradox which indicates a disconnect between student voice initiatives and sustainable and meaningful change. An organisational improvement paradox occurs when positive outcomes in one part of an organisation (for example a student council) fail to translate to other areas such as school policies (Brasof 2018). Inclusive student voice activities should contribute to schools' organisational structures and processes in a meaningful manner (Brasof 2018).

The establishment of Whole School Evaluation (WSE) in 2004 and School Self-Evaluation (SSE) in 2012 extended the policy discourse on student voice in Ireland (Fleming 2013; Fleming 2019). Students are regarded as key stakeholders in the SSE process which is the internal review and evaluation procedure for schools (Skerritt *et al.* 2023). This situates the concept of student voice in the classroom (Fleming 2013; Skerritt *et al.* 2023). Furthermore, the publication of *Looking at our School; A Quality Framework for Post Primary Schools (LAOS)* (2016) and subsequent update in (2022) further enhanced the role of students in the SSE process. Language such as agency, autonomy, voice, personalised learning opportunities, collaboration and negotiation with teachers and peers situates students as co-creators and co-contributors in the school processes. The provision of domains, standards and statements of practice, enables students to emerge as active and reflective learners, and key stakeholders in the operation of teaching, learning and assessment schools (DES 2016; Fleming 2019) due to such policy documents. As such, it has the potential to reduce the disconnect between student voice initiatives and their impact on schools' processes. Schools now have the opportunity to provide students with the space, voice, audience and influence on policy and practice in their own context.

One such example of policy impacting practice is demonstrated through a programme called SPOTLITE (Student Perspectives on Teaching and Learning in The Educational Space) which is implemented in one post-primary school in Ireland. Students in this school engage in discussion and consultation with teachers based on observations of lessons where examples of highly effective practice of teaching and learning under six categories are evident (Shortall and Casey 2023). Reflections on

the programme indicate benefits for students and teachers alike. The impact is felt both in the classroom and wider school. Students report feeling included and having a say in their own learning. A culture of professional conversation has emerged between students and teachers. Teachers are responding to feedback by integrating new methodologies, relationships have improved between teachers and students and teachers have reported it has helped with lesson planning. All staff are focusing on the six categories which include relationships, teaching methods, environment and routine, assessment/feedback, homework and study and what do students' value? (Shortall and Casey 2023). Although still in its infancy and not yet formally evaluated, this programme demonstrates the impact which student voice activities can impact school processes.

However, concerns have emerged with how student voice initiatives can be used as means to monitor teachers (Skerritt 2023). Teachers, according to Skerritt (2023), may well facilitate student voice to inform their own practice in their own classroom, however, this too can inform others, and can be used as a type of monitoring by school management, other teachers and parents. Consequently, while SSE is currently focused on school improvement rather than accountability, linking student voice to policy is problematic as it can be used as a method to enhance teacher surveillance (Skerritt *et al.* 2023). Despite such concerns, student voice initiatives continue at pace. It is now widely accepted that incorporating the voices of students in teaching and learning improves outcomes for all. As such the concept of student voice now underpins all levels of curricula in Ireland.

3.5.2 Student Voice in the Curriculum

Student voice is spread across the tapestry of all levels of curricula in Ireland from early years to post-primary level. Chapter Two, Section 2.9.1 outlines how Aistear, the early years curriculum focuses on children as citizens with rights to be involved in decision making and the right to experience democracy (NCCA 2009; Fleming 2019). The influence of students in shaping the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum in Ireland was facilitated through consultations with children (NCCA 2023). At post primary level the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) (Section 2.9.2, Figure 2.5) places students at the centre of the educational experience. Student

voice underpins and overarches teaching, learning and assessment at Junior Cycle. The eight principles of Junior Cycle seek to embody earlier definitions of student voice, by providing opportunities to be heard through meaningful consultation and engagement which embed the 'principles of inclusivity, participation and grass roots development' (Leitch *et al.* 2007 p.460).

The twenty-four statements of learning provide schools and teachers the flexibility to provide a Junior Cycle programme that is grounded in their own context and is responsive to the needs of their student population. The eight key skills enhance the transformative opportunities for students to develop as active learners and agents of change in their own learning journey. Teacher planning therefore, involves teachers and students working collaboratively together to develop learning intentions and success criteria (DES 2015). The teacher's role is one of facilitation where students as researchers (Fielding 2004) develop through dialogue, engagement and mediation (DES 2015). The shift in power dynamics transforms the student-teacher relationship as student and teachers work together as co-creators of knowledge and makers of meaning to support and enhance teaching, learning and assessment practices. This provides the opportunity to embed student voice in the pedagogy in the classroom (Fleming 2019). A dual approach to assessment involving ongoing formative and a final external summative assessment, through a state examination certificate, further facilitates students' engagement. Embodying the inclusive principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Chapter Two, Section 2.6, Figure 2.3) students can demonstrate learning in a multi-modal manner through project work, written work, charts, diagrams and video recordings of learner participation (NCCA 2014).

Student voice and inclusion are interconnected, symbiotic concepts, where the activity of one can support the existence of the other. Inclusion refers to visibility, voice, participation, agency and achievement of all learners. This can only truly happen when the perspectives of those who are most marginalised are utilised to inform, create and review legislation, policy research and practice.

3.6 Students Have a Voice but Not a Say: The Absence of Power

The ability of students to speak for themselves and to be actively involved in all matters of school life has been recognised in educational research and literature (Fielding 1999, 2001, 2004; Rudduck and Fielding 2006; Lundy 2007; Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Cefai and Cooper 2010; Bovill et al. 2011; Mitra 2018). Children are articulate and honest and have the ability to analyse their experiences (Burke and Grosvenor 2015). Students are insiders and have a unique source of knowledge and expertise on what it is like to be a student in a particular school (Cefai and Cooper 2010). To understand a particular phenomenon, we need to elicit a variety of perspectives and lived experiences (Porter and Lacey 2005). Students, therefore, can, and are able to, provide an accurate account of their own learning processes and how these can be enhanced and supported through school and classroom practices (Fielding and Bragg 2003; Leitch *et al.* 2007). Alison Cook-Sather (2002) asks us to consider the absolute necessity of counting students among those with ‘authority to participate both in the critique and reform of education’ (p.3). Authorising students’ perspectives can improve educational practices which can help teachers make what they teach more accessible (Cook-Sather 2002). Findings from a small scale ($n = 8$), mixed methods, action research study in a special school setting in Ireland, found that listening and acting upon students’ perspectives on how they like to learn enabled the class teacher to adapt, change and modify teaching methodologies in response to student feedback (Mannion 2017; Mannion and Fitzgerald 2018). Engaging with the voice of students with SEND authorised the researcher/practitioner in this study to respond to needs in a dynamic and meaningful way, where the teacher and students were ‘interlocked in an interactive process; influencing each other’ (Mertens 1989, p.13). Students, therefore, in this study became the teacher and the teacher the student, where a shift in power and a willingness to respond resulted in meaningful change in classroom practices.

Students in Ireland have low perceived levels of influence on decision making processes in schools (Cosgrove and Gillece 2012; McCormack *et al.* 2019). The absence of evidence of teachers’ use of student’s voice is well documented (McIntyre, Pedder and Rudduck 2007) as ‘initial goodwill can dissipate when the

rhetoric needs to be put into practice' (Lundy 2007, p.931). Although there may be widespread support for consulting students, it may prove tokenistic (Lundy 2007). However good students' suggestions and ideas might be, it is how and if the teacher responds to them that makes the difference (McIntyre, Pedder and Rudduck 2007).

Recent Irish research explored students' perceptions of their participation in publicly managed post-primary schools and found few examples of student-initiated change or student involvement in decision making processes (McCormack *et al.* 2019). This mixed methods study utilised traditional methodological approaches in the form of a questionnaire and follow up focus group interviews to measure student perceived levels of participation. Factors such as student's level of responsibility, the extent to which they were actively involved in their learning, their involvement in devising school rules and the extent to which they were encouraged to consider their own actions/behaviour were scored using a Likert Rating Scale. Follow up focus group interviews with a random selection of respondents explored participants views regarding their participation and how they believe it is evident within the life of the school. Findings from the questionnaire reveal a 'strong level of agreement towards their participation in aspects of school life' (McCormack *et al.* 2019, p.6). However, subsequent focus group interviews described a more passive participation and responsibility in and of learning. Students' understanding of and opportunities for meaningful participation was limited to collecting sports equipment, using their mobile phones during breaks, photocopying materials, going to their locker and other such tasks. Students did not provide any evidence of involvement in curriculum reforms or in the development of school policies (McCormack *et al.* 2019). Indeed, the subordinate role which students perceive is illustrated by participants comments such as, "it's whatever they [teachers] say goes" and "teachers treat us like we are so much less than them and we are just young students that don't know anything" (McCormack *et al.* 2019, p.7). Questionnaires revealed that students felt they were encouraged to be actively engaged in lessons ($n=599$, 87.1%). However, focus groups interviews revealed while some student-centred approaches were used by teachers, didactic teaching styles, where students listened, read or took notes were more common. The main activity which students identified was "listening in class", "sit

down and listen to what the teachers are saying”, “if you don’t listen you won’t absorb the information” (McCormack *et al.* 2019, p.8).

A discrepancy exists in the findings from the questionnaire which relied on a Likert Rating Scale and the subsequent focus group interviews. The results from the former indicate more positive perceptions of participation in the life of the school. The Likert Rating Scale in the questionnaire used positively worded statements which reduces the possibility of response bias (Alvarez *et al.* 2018). Despite this, students may have responded in ways they thought the researcher wanted to hear. The use of focus group interviews gives researchers an opportunity to elicit more of the participants points of view through guided discussions (Mertens 2020). Therefore, questions regarding students’ perception of their participation may have provided the students time to reflect upon and evaluate their experiences which may account for this discrepancy.

Findings from this study echo those of earlier studies which investigated students’ perceptions of their rights and participation in education, health, family, play and leisure, and youth justice and policing. Research conducted on behalf of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2004) identified the invisibility that students feel in school. Child participants identified that, children don’t “get enough respect from teachers” “children are scared to speak their minds” “some teachers get on to you without listening to what you are saying” (Kilkelly *et al.* 2004, p.186). This large-scale study involving school children and young people ($n=1064$) from mainstream, special, and Irish medium schools and 107 children accessed outside of school through a variety of youth and community groups, utilised a variety of creative methodologies to elicit students’ perceptions on their rights across a variety of contexts such as school, home and community. Findings reveal that children perceive themselves as having no say or influence on decisions which affect them. Issues such as lack of respect, injustice, lack of consultation, participation and power permeated all aspects of this research.

Results from the two preceding studies indicate that children’s views are not sought or listened to, or worse are only afforded tokenistic opportunities to engage meaningfully with adults on matters with affect them. Gileece and Cosgrove (2012)

caution that, although students are afforded increasing rights to a voice and a say through international conventions such as the UNCRC and the UNCRPD, they have in reality little opportunity to exercise these rights in the Irish school system. Lundy (2018) recalls Hart's (1992) prophetic declaration that there are 'many more instances of tokenism than there are genuine forms of children participation' (Hart 1992 cited in Lundy 2018, p.340).

The hierarchical nature of post-primary schools in Ireland has been well documented (Lynch and Lodge 2004; Smith 2009; Gilleece and Cosgrove 2012; De Roiste *et al.* 2021). 'Educational institutions are saturated with inequitable power structures, processes, practices and relations' (Mayes *et al.* 2017, p.1). Power and control are firmly in the hands of the board of management, principals and teachers as the voices of students do not have the same prominence or influence as afforded to adult voices (De Roiste *et al.* 2012; Mitra 2018). Issues of power are a recurring theme in research and practitioner work about student voice (Mayes *et al.* 2012). The aim for students to become 'change makers' (Hargreaves 2018, p. 9) who exert influence on their own learning, to have agency, control and authorship in their lives. It is not intended to replace the authority, views and opinions of adults (Cook-Sather 2020), but rather for students and teachers to work together to create a complete picture of life in classrooms to improve outcomes for all (Cook-Sather 2002).

Student voice should not be viewed as an either or, rather participation is on a continuum (Fielding 2001, 2004; McCormack *et al.* 2019) where students and teachers work together towards a common aim. It cannot be assumed however, that schools and teachers have the necessary skills and competencies to support staff and students to move along the continuum to increase participation. Recent policy and curricular developments in Ireland, all create the possibilities for enhanced student engagement, but voice is not enough. Teachers and schools must be supported in their endeavours to enhance inclusive student participation which brings about meaningful change.

3.7 Conclusion

The rights of children to have a say on all matters concerning them is an indisputable right. However, children and particularly children with SEND can be denied this right in legislation and policy, practice and research. The voice of children is largely dependent on adult's willingness to support their participation as right holders. This support is, however, contingent on how adults view children and childhood. A 'being-becoming dichotomy' (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2013, p.117) exists. The theory and conventional understanding that children are awaiting competence and maturity justifies the child's lower status compared with adults (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2013). It is this perceived inferior positioning of children which legitimises the exertion of adult power and control which permeates society. Children's perceived incompetence which is further exacerbated for children with disabilities becomes the reason for treating them differently and denying their rights (Lee 2005).

However, the new paradigm of childhood (Motherway 2009) coupled with an emphasis on the codification of children rights in legislation and policy repositions the status of children as equal right holders. The challenge then is for society to support children to enact their rights through meaningful participation. Given that children spend approximately 15,00 hours in school by the time they finish their education (Rutter *et al.* 1980), schools are ideally positioned to support and facilitate their participation in all matters concerning them. Education and participation are synonymous with empowerment. However, those working with children need clarity and support to understand what meaningful participation entails and how it can be enhanced (Moloney *et al.* 2021). It cannot be assumed, that schools and teachers have the necessary skills and capacities to support the participation of children in educational matters. Questions remain therefore, how can schools and teachers enhance the participation of children in a meaningful manner?

The new sociology of childhood recognises that children are insiders and have a knowledge and understanding of their own lives and experiences. There is a need therefore, to elicit their perceptions on matters which concern them with the view to making changes to their educational experience. While all aspects of participation

are valuable, the involvement of children at classroom planning level is considered to have the most meaning for students and impact on future outcomes (Fitzpatrick, Grady and O'Reilly 2018). However, eliciting the perspectives of children particularly children with SEND has its challenges. Inclusive participatory research approaches have been used to overcome some of these challenges by involving children in the research process in an accessible, meaningful, collaborative manner. Participatory approaches support children to be meaningfully included in the decision-making process of a classroom. This shifts the balance of power as children and adults work together as collaborators in democratic collegiality. When adults consult and collaborate with children and create opportunity and space to share their perspectives and insights, children gain the sense that their voice matters (Cook-Sather 2014; Pazey 2021). Promoting student agentic engagement, therefore, can facilitate student-teacher relationships, empowerment, agency and wellbeing.

Chapter Four

Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapters provided a comprehensive review of the literature pertaining to inclusive education, the developments of children's rights and the emergence of a student voice discourse. This chapter reviews the research process from a methodological standpoint. The research aims and questions are initially presented. This is followed by an examination of the transformative paradigm which underpinned the research design from conception to completion. Lundy's Framework of Participation (2007) provides the theoretical framework for which the researcher conceptualises children's right to be heard in all matters concerning them. The characteristics of the transformative paradigm (Mertens 2020) place significant emphasis on reimagining power and control in the research process. Lundy's Model supports the reimagining of children's role in this process. Therefore, this chapter examines children's role and participation in research. The ethical demands, and the benefits and challenges of involving children in the research process are explored. The absence of the voice of children with SEND from research is highlighted. Inclusive participatory research is examined and the use of conventional methodologies to involve children in the research process is scrutinised. Photovoice as a methodology is explored to ascertain whether it can be used to increase participation, give voice and agency to children who are often denied their right to use their voice due to their SEND.

Following this, the challenges of gaining access to research sites and participants are outlined which serve as justification for the researcher's sampling strategy. The data collection procedures and analysis are illustrated followed by critical examination of the efforts to enhance the quality and trustworthiness of the research.

4.2 Research Aims and Questions

This research contributes to the body of understanding on the role of student voice in inclusive education. It is situated in the context of international and national reform with a focus on inclusive education and children's rights. This research

situates students with intellectual disabilities (ID) as key informants who can support and shape our understanding of inclusive practice in post-primary schools in Ireland. This study set out to explore the educational experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. The focus on this study throughout, is on the voice of students and this is reflected in the main research question:

- What are the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in the Irish context?

However, ascertaining the voices of students is not enough. This study aims to understand the extent to which these experiences are barriers or facilitators to participation in decision making/ life of the school. Participation relates to the quality of student experiences and must incorporate the views of the students themselves and a willingness for adults to listen (Rudduck and Flutter 2000; UNESCO 2005). This was crystallised in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Critically, this research sits within the transformative paradigm and participatory theoretical framework. This philosophical and theoretical lens acknowledges children as right bearing citizens and creators of social change. Furthermore, students as social actors are co-creators of knowledge and must be involved in the making of meaning. Their insider epistemology can provide insights to post-primary schools to enhance inclusive practices for students with ID. Table 4.1 outlines the research aims and key research questions which endeavour to answer the main research question above.

Table 4.1. Research Aims and Questions

Research Aims
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explore the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in post-primary mainstream schools in Ireland; • To operationalise students’ rights to express a view and to have their views heard; • To explore the barriers and facilitators to participation in decision making/ in the life of the school;

- To work with students as co-creators of meaning to develop insights for post-primary schools to enhance the participation of students with ID in decision making;
- To use findings to potentially inform policy and practice to advance inclusive practices in post-primary schools in Ireland.

Embedded Questions

1. How do students with ID describe their educational experiences in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland?
2. What are the barriers and facilitators which influence students' participation in mainstream post-primary schools?
3. What insights can students with ID give to enhance the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools?
4. What are the barriers and facilitators which influence students' participation in decision making in mainstream post-primary schools?
5. What insights can students with ID give to enhance the participation of students with ID in decision making in mainstream post-primary schools?

The transformative paradigm which guided the current research and underpinned the research design with its axiological, ontological and epistemological implications will be discussed in the next section. These provide the rationale for the methodology including the choice of Photovoice as an inclusive data collection method for students to voice their experiences as experts in their own lives.

4.3 Research Paradigm

The concept of paradigm was first applied in the groundbreaking work of the American philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1962) as a 'way of looking at or researching phenomena' (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison 2018, p.8). Paradigms are neither right nor wrong (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011) as they reflect the researcher's worldview which is shaped by their philosophical assumptions, beliefs and principles (Denzin and Lincoln 2018; Mertens 2020). Paradigms are elusive and difficult to define as they are abstract concepts which shape (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017) how researchers

see the world and act in it (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). Paradigms have particular significance as they support researchers to examine the ‘methodological aspects of their research project to determine the research methods that will be used and how the data will be analysed’ (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, p.26). Paradigms, however, have a broader significance as they shape and support a researcher’s conceptual framework (Ravitch and Riggan 2017) which drives ‘what should be studied, how it should be studied, and how the results of the study should be interpreted’ (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, p.26). Research design and investigation is therefore guided by four basic belief systems, which are discussed in relation to the current study in Section 4.31. These belief systems are characterised by the following questions which help define a paradigm (Guba and Lincoln 2005; Mertens 2020).

1. The axiological question asks, “What is the nature of values and ethics?”
2. The ontological question asks, “What is the nature of reality?”
3. The epistemological question asks, “What is the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and the would be known?”
4. The methodological question asks, “What is the nature of systematic inquiry? How can the knower go about obtaining the desired knowledge and understandings?” (Mertens 2020, p. 10)

Building on the work of Lather (1992) and Guba and Lincoln (2005), Mertens (2020) presents a taxonomy of major paradigms which includes the transformative paradigm in which this study is situated. The transformative paradigm is a development of theories such as Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory and the emancipatory paradigm (Mertens 2020). The emancipatory paradigm has overtones of liberation and perpetuates the power of the liberator granting freedom to the oppressed. The transformative paradigm, by distinction, advocates a consciousness-raising, advocacy, participatory approach which emphasises that ‘agency for change rests in the persons in the community working side by side with the researcher toward the goal of social transformation’ (Mertens 2020, p.8).

It is for this reason that the transformative paradigm was adopted in this study as it allowed me to address issues of social justice through the promotion of social change led by participants for participants. A transformative paradigm was chosen over a

constructivist paradigm, which is also concerned with issues of social justice. Critically though, the transformative paradigm allows me the researcher to address the power imbalance which can result from conducting research with marginalised groups (Mertens 2020). Historically children were treated as research subjects (research on) rather than research participants (research with). Moreover, children with SEND are largely absent in research and their views are seldom sought (Moloney *et al.* 2021). Therefore, transformative researchers shift the focus from deficit (we need to help) to an awareness of the benefits that researchers and research gains from realising the strengths and wisdom that are inherent in marginalised groups (Mertens 2011). As a result, transformative researchers reposition participants as co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge as they 'explicitly position themselves side by side with the less powerful in a joint effort to bring about social transformation (Mertens 2020, p. 21). Researchers employing a transformative worldview bring forth an action agenda for participatory reform that can change the lives of participants, researchers and the workings of institutions (Creswell 2018). Therefore, issues of 'empowerment, inequality, oppressions, domination, suppression and alienation' (Creswell 2018, p.9) are guiding forces for transformative researchers.

Interestingly, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) question the use of the word research when the need for social justice has never been greater. Research is considered a "dirty word" among indigenous people, as it is historically linked to imperialism, colonialism, oppression, distrust and silence (Smith 1999 p.1 cited in Denzin and Lincoln 2018). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) suggest inquiry may be more suitable as 'it does not carry the trappings of the word research, which is tainted by a lingering positivism' (p.11). Rather, 'inquiry implies an open endedness, uncertainty, ambiguity, praxis, pedagogies of liberation, freedom, resistance' (Denzin and Lincoln 2018, p.11). Transformative inquiries can therefore move people to subvert inequalities and challenge oppression (Denzin and Lincoln 2018) by addressing the politics in research (Mertens 2020).

Mertens (2020) identifies that although no unified body of literature is representative of the transformative paradigm several characteristics are shared between the various perspectives within it. These include, the focus of the

transformative paradigm is placed on the lived experience of marginalised groups, such as women, persons with disabilities and minorities. Therefore, the role for researchers is to examine how oppression is structured and reproduced. This includes studying the impact on individual and collective lives affected including strategies used to resist, challenge and subvert oppression. Researchers must focus on the oppressors' means of dominance. Mertens (2020) continues to explain that the transformative paradigm analyses how and why inequalities are 'reflected in asymmetric power relations' (p.21). Finally, the results of research underpinned by the transformative paradigm are linked to political and social action. This research approach is informed by a transformative theory which encompasses a set of beliefs about why a problem occurs (Mertens 2020). These commonalities distinguish a transformative paradigm from postpositivist and constructivist paradigms (Mertens 2020). These characteristics combine the philosophical beliefs of axiology, ontology and epistemology evident in transformative research. As paradigm is the interrelationship between these building blocks of research (Grix 2002; Hays 2002) the axiological, ontological and epistemological assumptions within the transformative paradigm will be discussed next.

4.3.1 Axiology, Ontology and Epistemology

Axiology relates to the ethical concerns which need to be considered when planning a research project (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017; Denzin and Lincoln 2018). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) acknowledge the critical importance of 'embedding ethics within, not external to paradigms' (p.132). Axiology involves 'defining, evaluating and understanding concepts of right and wrong behavior' in the research process (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, p.28). The ethical concerns in conducting research with children are scrutinised in Section 4.6.1. Mertens (2020) identifies the significant priority placed on ethics in the transformative paradigm. The starting point for transformative researchers is inquiry which is concerned with human rights, social justice, respect for cultural norms and reciprocity (Mertens 2020). These serve as a driving force for subsequent research decisions including the greater involvement of participants in the research process (Mertens 2020). This reflects the central aim of the current study; to explore the experiences and perspectives of students with ID

in mainstream post-primary schools using a participatory approach. Research on student voice whose purpose it is to enact change sits within the transformative paradigm. The transformative approach allows me the researcher to support the rights of children under international law (Article 12 UNCRC; Article 7(3) UNCRPD) to express their views and importantly have their views heard with a view to bringing about change in inclusive practice in mainstream schools in the Irish context.

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality (Creswell 2018; Guba and Lincoln; Mertens 2020) and the assumptions we make in order to believe that something makes sense or is real (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). Reality here is conceptual (Mertens 2007); for example, when is participation real or when is a school inclusive? Reality therefore can be assumed when one decides what type of evidence one will accept to believe that a school is inclusive or that a student is participating. A researcher's ontological assumption helps frame the research problem, its significance and how it might be best approached in order to contribute to its solution (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). The transformative paradigm takes account of the complexity of context and how it impacts on social positioning and truth. In this sense transformative researchers have an ontology of historical realism (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). As such transformative researchers acknowledge that there are multiple versions of reality that come from positions of power and oppression. Realities are shaped by social, cultural, political, race, gender, ethnic, religious, age and disability values (Creswell 2007; Mertens 2020). Traditionally, reality belongs to the privileged. It is the job of researchers to peel back the versions of reality which sustain oppression and make visible the realities for social justice (Mertens 2020). This research focuses on the reality of the lived experience of students with ID who have been traditionally marginalised without a voice; whose educational experience is determined by policy makers, teachers and other stakeholders. What is needed is an examination of this reality in search of participants' truth in order to bring about positive change.

Epistemology according to Guba and Lincoln (2005) is the process of thinking or the meaning of knowledge (Mertens 2020). It relates to the foundations of knowledge, its nature, form and acquisition and how it can be communicated to others (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). It involves the relationship between what we know and what we

see, the knower and the would be known (Guba and Lincoln 2005; Mertens 2020). The transformative paradigm acknowledges the impact of cultural influences and power structures in the 'determination of what is considered legitimate knowledge' (Mertens 2020, p.31). The transformative paradigm 'assumes a transactional epistemology' (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, p.35). The search for knowledge involves an interactive relationship between the researcher and research participants and an awareness of the cultural complexities which impact on this relationship (Mertens 2020). It is important therefore that participants feel safe, valued and listened to while engaging with the research process. Trust is an important aspect in this relationship. To build this trust researchers must position themselves from the point of view of participants. This can be achieved by researchers using a methodology that starts from the vantagepoint of marginalised people (Mertens 2020).

My epistemological stance has its origins in the new paradigm of childhood (Motherway 2009) and in the emergence of children's right discourse framed within an inclusive backdrop. Children in this view are seen as insiders and experts in their own lives who have indisputable rights to express views and have their views heard. My years of experience as a special education teacher in diverse settings taught me the importance of building trusting, collaborative, participatory relationships with students to hear their voice and bring about change. For me, all voices matter and matter equally. However, my experience has also taught me that children with ID are among the most marginalised in our education system. Many have no voice, no agency and no power to bring about change. Education is something done to them rather than a democratic, participatory endeavor. Issues of empowerment, participation, voice, children's rights, democracy and inclusion are central to my philosophical assumptions. This positionality not only shapes and influences my teaching, rather it influences all I bring and learn in this research process. Acknowledging our philosophical assumptions on the construction of reality, truth and knowledge uncovers our biases (Flynn 2013) and is critical to understanding how a researcher makes meaning of the data gathered (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). I therefore acknowledge that truth, knowledge and understanding are subjective and personal and are subject to social, cultural and historical influences of power and

control (Mertens 2007; 2020). To counteract and subvert these influences of power and control to discover participants truth and reality, and to bring about change, it is necessary for researchers to empower participants in the research process. This necessitates the use of dialogic, participatory, inclusive methods to engage with participants from diverse groups in the planning, conducting, analysing and interpretation of research (Mertens 2018)

4.4 Theoretical Lens

The transformative paradigm acts as a springboard to the theoretical framework of this study. Lundy's Model of Participation (Lundy 2007) operationalises the axiological, ontological and epistemological beliefs of the transformative paradigm. This model provides a means of conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC (Chapter Three, Section 3.4). It identifies four conditions: space, voice, audience and influence which are necessary for students as right bearing citizens to express their views and have their views heard. This research sets out to 'understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it' (Mertens 2015, p.13), by investigating these lived experiences and their impact on the participation of students with ID in post-primary schools in Ireland. Using Lundy's Model of Participation, the research design provides space, voice, audience and influence for students to express their views and have their views heard as right bearing citizens in an inclusive participatory manner (Figure 4.1). The following sections outline how Lundy's Model shapes the participation of students in all stages of the research process.

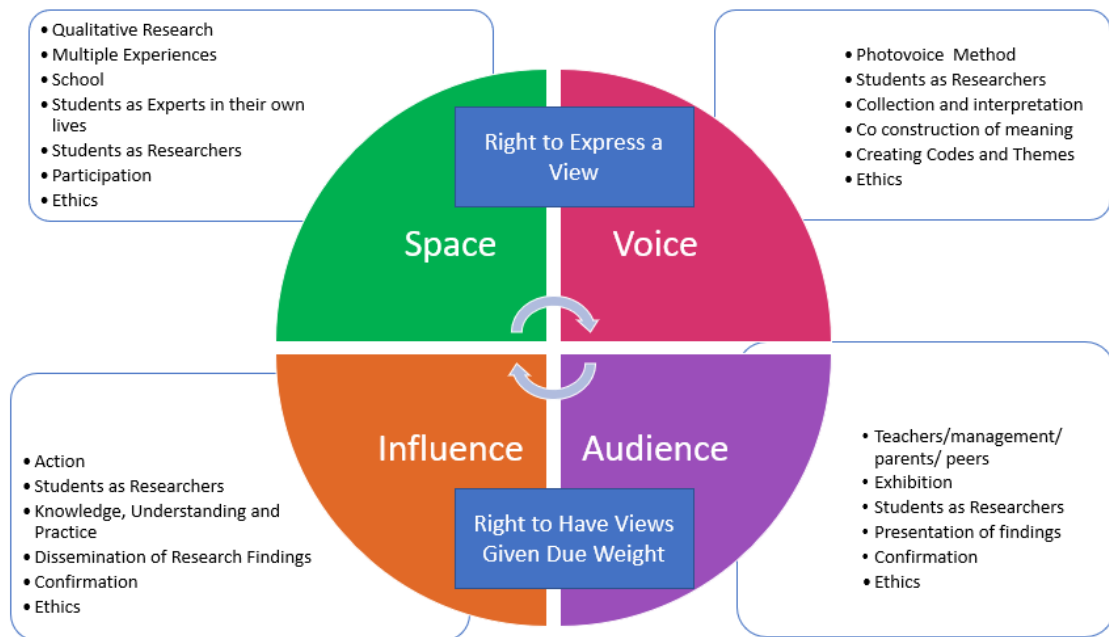


Figure 4.1. Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) applied to the research design process

4.5 Research Design

Research design is the umbrella term for the collection, measurement and analysis of data (Gray 2014). Fitzgerald (2020) advises the research design for qualitative school-based research requires considerable thought. Critically, ethical considerations must shape each step of the research process (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018). Research design requires the researcher to bridge theory and concepts with the development of research questions, data collection methods and analysis for a specific study (Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carol 2021). Research design is the embodiment of a researcher's conceptual framework which is shaped and formulated through an examination of theories, concepts, goals, and beliefs. This, according to Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carol (2021) is an interactive, dynamic, inductive process that is further shaped by our understanding of participants and the contexts of a study. Figure 4.2 outlines the various elements in the research design process. This, however, is not a linear approach rather, qualitative research design is 'fluid, flexible, interactive, and reflexive' (Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carol 2021, p.63).

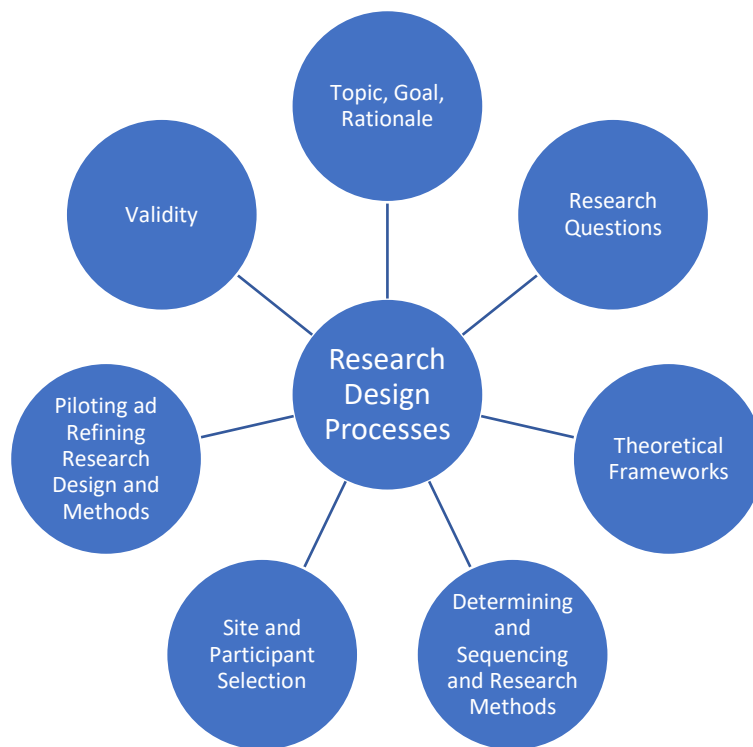


Figure 4.2. Overview of Research Design Processes (Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carol 2021, p.64).

The research aims, philosophical and theoretical framework which underpin this study have already been discussed above. Data Collection Methods, Sampling and Analysis will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

Firstly, however, the significance of ethics in the design process is highlighted by numerous researchers (Clegg and Slife 2009; Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018; Mertens 2018; Alderson and Morrow 2020; Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carol 2021). The literature on ethics in educational research demands consideration of a vast range of issues, including but not limited to, consent, confidentiality, anonymity, storage and retrieval of data access and power differentials (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018). Furthermore, the principles of non-maleficence (do no harm), munificence (which requires participants to be fully aware that their participation is fully voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time), and beneficence (what benefits will the research bring, to whom and how) are central to the research process (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018). Additionally, research with vulnerable population such as children with ID is identified as sensitive research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018) which requires additional safeguarding and risk assessment.

Munroe *et al.* (2004) cautions of the dangers of adding to the powerlessness of vulnerable populations when conducting research. Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carol (2021) call for a relational approach to research which requires researchers to become reflexively engaged in their interaction with others. Relational considerations are therefore framed as ethical issues (Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carol 2021). Consequently, ethics in this research project is interdependent and interconnected with the conceptual, philosophical and theoretical framework and, as such is to the fore of every decision and every step in the research design. It is, therefore, pertinent to review the literature on ethics and outline my ethical commitments in this research process.

4.6 Children's Participation: Research Informing Practice

Children's policy developments in national and international contexts (Chapter Three, Section 3.2; 3.3) insists that the inclusion of voices of children and young people are necessary to ensure their lives are better understood and their rights upheld. Yet the perspectives of students, and in particular, of students with SEND are rarely consulted (Porter and Lacey 2005; Lundy and Cook-Sather 2016; Alderson and Morrow 2020). Children and young people are frequently described as the missing voice in educational research (Cook-Sather 2002) and children with SEND largely remain invisible (Alderson and Morrow 2020; Moloney *et al.* 2021). Researchers say it is 'too difficult, too time-consuming, too resource intensive to include them or that it will not generate valid data' (Alderson and Morrow 2020, p.2). Indeed, children's and young peoples' participation in research, particularly children with SEND can present ethical and methodological challenges (Keenan 2016). However, researchers have a duty to include children with SEND as it is their right and because findings can potentially be different when they are included (Alderson and Marrow 2020). The quality of research is improved when children and young people are involved in the research process (Shaw *et al.* 2011). Along with other disenfranchised groups, children have long been the victims of research in medical and social sciences which have been conducted in the best interest of the researcher, not the child (Coady 2001 cited in Harcourt and Conroy 2005). Involving children in research affirms their role as competent 'social actors, the experts in their own lives'

(Crivello, Camfield and Woodhead 2008, p. 52). The paradigmatic shift from seeing children as objects to subjects and more recently as social actors has implications for how research is conducted with children (Christensen and Proust 2002).

Although not a specific provision of the UNCRC (1989), the right to participate with research is derived from several articles including;

- Article 12, the right to provide opinion;
- Article 13, the right to freedom of expression using a medium of children's own choice
- Article 36, the right to protection from forms of exploitation not addressed in other articles;
- Article 3.3, the right to highest possible standards used in work with children (Beazly *et al.* 2009, p.370).

This has implications for children and researchers. Children as participants have the right to express their view using a medium of their choice. It is therefore the researcher's responsibility to support children to express their views and to protect them from harm during the research process. Prior to engaging in any research, rigorous ethical safeguards must be in place to protect and promote the rights, health and safety of all participants (Dalton and McVilly 2004)

The possibility of exploitation and abuse of participants by the researcher and the research process is present in every research relationship (Thomas and O'Kane 1998). Therefore, the researcher must consider the impact of research on children, including potential risks, and take responsibility for the effects of research (Kirby 2001; Keenan 2005). An assessment of potential risk and benefits is necessary to ensure the risk of harm does not outweigh the intended benefits (Keenan 2005). Steps can therefore be taken to protect the child from harm while at the same time respecting their right to participate (Keenan 2005). Issues regarding consent to participate, confidentiality, and imbalance of power are key themes in the research and particularly in research with children (Cree, Kay and Tisdall 2001). Concerns around these issues have led to the exclusion and absence of children with SEND from research (Yan and Munir 2004), and in particular, participatory research

(Marshall *et al.* 2012). Researchers therefore must find the balance between protection and participation to enable the voices of children and particularly those with SEND to have their voices heard.

4.6.1 Ethical Considerations: Researching with Children

4.6.1.1 Consent

Under Irish law (Child Care Act 1991, Children Act 2001 and Mental Health Act 2001) a child is defined as anyone under the age of 18 years and thereby, cannot give consent to participate in research. Therefore, informed consent from parents and legal guardians and informed assent from minors is a fundamental principle in conducting research with children (Cree *et al.* 2001; Moolchan and Mermelstein 2002; Harcourt and Conroy 2005; Marshall *et al.* 2012; Alderson and Morrow 2020). However, informed assent from children and particularly children with SEND is a complicated issue due to 'beliefs about how cognitive differences might influence the ability to provide consent that is truly informed' (Marshall *et al.* 2012, p. 24). Therefore, children should be consulted and informed in terms they understand (Alderson and Morrow 2020). Adequate information regarding research aims, methods and potential outcomes must be presented to children in a manner accessible to their cognitive abilities (DCYA 2012; Marshall *et al.* 2012). Time must be given for children to assimilate the information, ask questions and consult with others (DYCA 2012). Only then can participants decide if it is their best interest to participate and collaborate (Harcourt and Conroy 2005). To do so participants must be fully informed of:

- The nature of the research
- Exactly what will be expected of them
- Any possible risks of the research
- Their rights to withdraw at any time
- What will happen to the data collected and any possible audiences for the research

(MacNaughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford 2001 cited in Harcourt and Conroy 2005, p.569).

Moolchan and Mermelstein (2002) have also noted that participants must be given an alternative to participation. Furthermore, if at any time a child withdraws their assent, parental consent should not override their right to withdraw (DYCA 2012). Confirmation of consent and assent may be necessary during long and complex research projects due to children's level of understanding during each stage of research (Alderson 1995; DCYA 2012). Assent which straddles the age of consent is negated and it is the researcher's responsibility to seek consent from the participant once they reach 18 years. To proceed without ensuring consent is confirmed 'could be deemed akin to proceeding without consent' (Spriggs 2010 cited in DCYA 2012, p.3).

Anderson (2008) asserts that no participant should feel pressurised into participating because they know the researcher. To alleviate this, Marshall *et al.* (2012) recommend that recruitment to participate should be conducted by those who have no vested interest in the research. However, Cree, Kay and Tisdall (2002), outline that parents are likely to consent to research with a professional or organisation whom they trust, likewise children will consent if their parents seem supportive. Consequently, researchers can never be certain that children and young people make their own 'freely given' decision to participate (Cree *et al.* 2001). This is a particular difficulty for practitioner researchers, who as a result must be acutely aware of the power differential and the impact their relationship has on a participant's decision to any research (Marshall *et al.* 2012).

Further ethical concerns in relation to informed assent with children can emerge if it is not in the child's best interest for their parents or legal guardians to be aware that their child is participating in research, particularly if it relates to sensitive research, for example, where parents are unaware of their child's sexual orientation and participation in research reveals such information (Mertens 2020). Dilemmas occur where there are significant gaps between the principles of good practice and the practical realities of conducting research with children (Cree, Kay and Tisdall 2002). As a result, researchers must be aware of issues 'related to cultural complexities and differences in parental expectations that need to be considered when conducting research with children' (Mertens 2020, p.370). Furthermore, issues of consent are

intertwined with the complexities of confidentiality when seeking to involve children and young people in the research process.

4.6.1.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity are core ethical concepts in research (DCYA 2012). Mertens (2020) provides a useful distinction between confidentiality and anonymity. Confidentiality is synonymous with privacy. Here, the data provided must be processed and reported in a manner which cannot be associated with the research participants. Anonymity requires that all identifying information attached to the data is removed to ensure no traceability (Mertens 2020).

Confidentiality when dealing with children and young people is more complicated than with adults due to the possibility of disclosures which give rise to child protection and welfare concerns (Keenan 2005; Alderson and Morrow 2020). To ensure child protection, research with children in Ireland must be carried out in accordance with *Children First, National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (DCYA 2017). In this study, a Child Safeguarding Statement was developed (Appendix A). This included a risk assessment outlining potential risks of harm to a child while engaging in the research as well as measures which were put in place to mitigate risks. This was approved by Mary Immaculate Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) in June 2022 (Ref: A22-028).

Research organisations should have a child protection policy in place, as well as a Designated Liaison Person (DLP) or a member of staff responsible for the implementation of this policy (Tusla 2021). Confidentiality is key to research practice but there are limitations to child related research. Therefore, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed to children and young people and as such is identified as a barrier for researchers seeking to involve children and young people in research (Cree, Kay and Tisdall 2001).

As evidenced above, children have a right to be involved in all matters concerning them, including research. Research with children requires that certain ethical considerations must be adhered to. However, in the context of research which involves the participation of children, ethics and effective methodology go hand in

hand (Thomas and O’Kane 1998). Ethical considerations coupled with effective methodologies result in children having control over their involvement in the research process (Thomas and O’Kane 1998). Therefore, developments in participatory methods support children to be involved in all stages of the research processes, moving children from research subjects to active partners (Fleming 2010; Montreuil *et al.* 2021).

4.6.1.3 Data Protection

The General Data Protection Regulation (2018) in the European Union, of which Ireland is a member, sets out the laws for data protection, storage and retrieval. Children, however, need specific protection to safeguard their data and studies which employ an alternative method to data collection such as photography require a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA (Appendix B). The DPIA identifies possible risks, measures to reduce risk, likelihood of harm and severity of impact should harm occur. Data were stored on a personal laptop, secured with a password. I, the researcher had custody of this personal laptop and access to data on this laptop was not granted to any person other than my supervisors. Audio recordings from interviews were transcribed as soon as practicable onto my password-protected device, with a pseudonym assigned to each participant. The original recording was deleted from the recording device. All data were later transferred to NVivo 12, which is password-protected. Photographs taken by participants were saved onto my password-protected device. The original photographs were deleted from the digital device. Issues of confidentiality, anonymity, storage and ownership of photographs can pose significant challenges in a school or community context particularly with children under 18 years of age. These issues need to be clearly addressed prior to engaging in any Photovoice Project. How I overcame these challenges when using Photovoice will be detailed below. In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College (MIC) Record Retention Schedule, all data and research records of this study were anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop.

4.6.1.4 Methodological Considerations

The emergence of the new social studies of childhood (James *et al.* 1998) and the focus on children’s rights, where children’s views are valued and sought as experts

in their own lives has resulted in an increase in research involving children. How researchers view children and childhood has implications on how research is conducted (Lundy 2011). Darbyshire *et al.* (2005) caution against accepting findings on research approaches that are grounded in research on children rather than with children. Traditional evaluative approaches that use data collection methods which do not authentically capture the voice of children but rather impose adult interpretations, may produce inaccuracies in findings (Darbyshire *et al.* 2005; Porter and Lacy 2005). Furthermore, extractive research which drills or mines children (Petrie 2006 cited in Fleming 2010) as data informants without any resultant change may constitute an abuse of children's involvement (Fleming 2010). Research with people with SEND has been coined inclusive research (Iriarte, O'Brien and Chadwick 2014). This type of research activity furthers the interests of people with SEND, it 'is accessible to them and collaborative, and where they are able to exert some control over the process and its outcomes' (Wamsley and Johnson 2003 cited in Iriarte, O'Brien and Chadwick 2014, p.149). However, Cluely (2016) identifies a need to reframe inclusive research, from a focus on individual limits to limits of the chosen methodology. The exclusion of children with SEND from research and consultation reveals more about the unsuitability of the research, the chosen methodology and the adults not knowing how to relate to them than of any limitations on the part of participants (Rabiee, Sloper and Beresford 2005). Goodley and Moore (2000) previously called for a bottom-up approach to research, where studies are situated in the lives of people. The social model of disability identifies the limits of possibilities are a result of social constraints. Therefore, inclusive participatory research calls for a breakdown of barriers to participation which makes research open, accessible and meaningful for all. As a result, a common concern among researchers has now emerged. How can researchers engage with the voice of children without imposing their own views? How can children be supported to express their views to an adult researcher? How can their views go beyond the data gathering stage and onto the data analysis and further onto dissemination of research findings? (Ryan 2009; McTavish, Streeklasky and Coles 2012; Cluely 2016).

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) or Participatory Appraisal (PA) is the term coined for child-focused research using participatory methods (Kirby 2001). This approach necessitates a methodological shift, not only involving the development and expansion of participatory research methodologies (Fargas-Malet *et al.* 2010), but rather in participatory research approaches (Montreuil *et al.* 2021). These approaches tend to be vivid, graphic, and concrete and, unsurprisingly work well with children (Thomas and O’Kane 1998). Participatory research with children is an umbrella term which incorporates a spectrum of participation from researching with children, to children’s participation in making decisions in some or all levels of the research process (Montreuil *et al.* 2021). Participatory methods involve directly collecting data from children using a variety of approaches. Participatory research, in contrast, involves children actively making decisions related to the research process itself (Montreuil *et al.* 2021). Much has been done to date to progress and develop the field of children’s participation, but this has, to some extent, been limited to data collection methods and the voices of children with SEND are largely absent in this research. If researchers are not willing to step outside the conventional methodological field and incorporate inclusive methodologies, there remains a real possibility that children with SEND will remain absent and overlooked in research studies (Aldridge 2007).

Finding ways to involve all children in stages of the research process can be a challenge (Porter and Lacey 2005). Children and young people must be included systematically (Fleming 2010) in the design, undertaking, interpretation and dissemination of their research (Fleming 2010; Montreuil *et al.* 2021). Children as student researchers (Fielding 2001) encapsulates definitions of participation, as outlined by Fletcher (2005) and DCYA (2015) which support the enactment of children’s rights. Providing opportunities to be involved in the research process provides a sense of empowerment, agency, control and self-actualisation which promotes human flourishing and wellbeing (Long *et al.* 2012; McTavish, Streelasky and Coles 2012; Budig *et al.* 2018; Montreuil *et al.* 2021).

However, significant methodological challenges remain when researching with children, particularly children with SEND (Porter and Lacey 2005). Interviews,

questionnaires, focus groups and oral histories can be problematic research methods when including people with SEND (Booth and Booth 1996). Conventional research methods contain rules and structures which inherently discriminate against people with SEND (Aldridge 2007). Focus group interviews require participants to have the ability to: (1) 'reflect about their own and other participants' views, (2) engage communicatively with each other, and (3) explore a given issue with minimal guidance from each the moderator' (Kane and O'Connell 2010, p.138). However, the characteristics of some people with SEND such as social and communication needs, and challenges processing abstract concepts and questions (Cluely 2016), pose significant methodological challenges to participating in a meaningful manner. Inclusive participatory research demands that the methodology and processes involved are accessible, meaningful, collaborative, and bring about change (Booth and Booth 2003; Porter and Lacey 2005). These challenges must be overcome, and the data collection methods need to be adapted (Aldridge 2007) if we are to authorise and empower children as right holders to become makers of meaning in all stages of the research process from inception of the research question to dissemination of results (Beazley *et al.* 2009; Fleming 2010; Montreuil *et al.* 2021).

Porter and Lacey (2005) discuss the challenges for researchers who wish to authentically engage with the voice of children in a participative partnership, which include the need to ensure that:

- The agenda is meaningful for the person, or indeed set by them;
- A relationship is established by which people feel empowered to have a view and time and opportunity are given;
- The context in which the research takes place reduces the cognitive and linguistic demands of participation;
- A systematic approach is taken to verifying the views (Porter and Lacey 2005. p.91).

Participatory research methodologies incorporate the expansion of more traditional approaches such as interviews, questionnaires and observations (Kirby 2001; Fargas-Malet *et al.* 2010) thereby, addressing a number of identified problems listed

previously. Participatory visual methods such as the Photovoice (Wang and Burris 1997), Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss 2001), Talking Mats (Murphy and Cameron 2008) and the Fishbone Technique (Hopkins 2008) provide multimodal opportunities to participate. Multimodality acknowledges communication in the widest sense (McTavish, Streelasky and Coles 2012) and supports a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST) 2018) framework for engagement. The incorporation of drawings, photography, paintings, role play, visualisations, mapping and timelines supports active engagement and participation of children while reducing the cognitive and linguistic demands of more traditional approaches (D'Amico *et al.* 2016). Multimodality affirms that 'societies use many modes of making meaning beyond those of speech and writing' (McTavish, Streelasky and Coles 2012, p.252). Images and signs can be used by children to produce and convey meaning reflecting their lived experience. Images can stand alone and can provide an insight into the lived experience in ways that other traditional methodologies cannot (Pink 2007 cited in Cluley 2016).

The flexibility and adaptability of visual participatory approaches to elicit students' responses was illustrated in a study conducted in Northern Ireland. Visual narratives were used to elicit the views of students with SEND from mainstream primary, post-primary and special schools in relation to their perceptions of belonging and inclusion (Ryan 2009). In Ryan's study, an initial research aim was identified and all schools in Belfast Education and Library Board were invited to attend a meeting outlining the project brief and expression of interests were sought. Eight schools signed up to engage with the research. In keeping with the spirit of participatory research the scope for schools to interpret the research brief was deliberately left open (Ryan 2009). Porter and Lacey (2005) highlight that the first step in participatory research is that the agenda is meaningful and set by participants. Furthermore, participating schools were empowered to choose who participated in the research, how it would be conducted and how findings would be reported. Participants with and without identified SEND were provided with cameras and were 'encouraged to make visual narratives expressing their views about the reasonable adjustments that mainstream schools might make in order to become more

inclusive' (Ryan 2009, p.77). In keeping with the inclusive participatory ethos of the project, findings were reported by participants in a multimodal manner. Some schools used verbal feedback while others used photographs and audio-visual presentations (Ryan 2009). The necessity to involve students in the decision-making process to understand if reasonable adjustments are in fact reasonable was a key finding in this study. The findings from this research have implications for both schools and policy makers when seeking to enhance inclusive practice.

The use of visual methodologies can enhance the participation of people with SEND as they subvert the barriers to communication (Booth and Booth 2003; Aldridge 2007). Images help people to express their views (Murphy and Cameron 2008) as they provide a means of concreting issues and concerns (Booth and Booth 2003). Visual methods produce a 'symbolic means to communicate' while encouraging and supporting children to verbally express themselves (Kirby 2001, p.75). Harper (2002) outlines the difference in using interviews with images and text and interviews with words alone.

'The difference lies in the ways we respond to these two forms of symbolic representation. This has a physical basis: the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal information. Thus, images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilise less of the brain's capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words'

(p.13).

The use of visuals to enhance and support the communications process of autistic children is well documented (Rutherford *et al.* 2020). Visuals, such as those used in participatory research can enhance communication by offering an alternative to speech, signs, gestures or actions (Rutherford *et al.* 2020). Difficulty recalling past events, staying on research topic, delays in processing and responding to interview questions may hamper the meaningful engagement of autistic students in the research process (Harrington *et al.* 2014). Visual supports can promote learning and engagement for autistic children consequently, images can act as concrete visual prompts which support the communication of abstract concepts (Danker, Strnadová and Cumming 2019). Furthermore, the use of images such as photographs may reduce the levels of anxiety experienced by some autistic children when engaging in

interviews. A common issue for interviews with autistic children is a tendency to talk at length on topics of their interest (Harrington *et al.* 2014). The use of photographs can provide a focal point for both the interviewer and interviewee. The benefits of this are two-fold: photographs can help focus concentration and attention on the topic of discussion and they can reduce the necessity for eye contact during the interview process (Danker, Strnadová and Cumming 2019). The need for eye contact can increase anxiety during the interview process (Danker, Strnadová and Cumming 2019). Therefore, traditional research approaches such as interviews may not be suitable for autistic children and other communication needs due to the reliance on verbal language and social communication skills.

Children are a heterogeneous group with diverse abilities and skills but importantly they are all right bearing citizens. Therefore, there is a need to reframe children's involvement in research by what they can do rather than what they cannot do. Inclusive participatory research values the role of children as social actors and safeguards their right to be consulted on matters that concern them and their right to have their opinions heard. The task then for researchers is to collaborate with children in the research process as co-creators of knowledge and makers of meaning. The creation of knowledge is considered one of the key elements of research, but what happens with, and to, the knowledge is equally important (Booth and Booth 2003). The difficulty and challenges of engaging successfully with this task cannot be dismissed but the benefits have the potential to be transformative for policy, practice and quality of life for all children.

Taking the above into consideration, permission to conduct this research was granted from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) on 30 June 2022 (Appendix C). This incorporated all relevant documentation including those specific to conducting research with children, which include Child Safeguarding Statement, Vulnerable Persons Safeguarding Statement and a Data Impact Assessment (DPIA).

As discussed above ethics is synonymous with research design. These represent an interactive symbiotic relationship. As such data collection tools must honour and respect research participants' involvement in the research process. Below is a

description of the data collection tools which supported the participation of students in this research process and which aligns with my conceptual and theoretical framework.

4.7 Data Collection

Photovoice with participating students was the main method of data collection in this study. This was supported by a research journal, field notes and a focus group interview with participating adults. Section 4.10 provides a detailed account of all data collection methods. Firstly, it is pertinent to present a description and critique of Photovoice. It will outline how this approach was used in two different contexts with participants with SEND to support them to meaningfully engage with research. This provided the rationale for choosing Photovoice as the primary data collection method in this study. A discussion on sampling and the challenges of accessing schools, particularly when research with children with SEND will follow. Participating students/ co-researchers will then be introduced, and a description of data collection will ensue.

4.7.1 Critique of Photovoice As a Method to Include All

Photovoice is a participatory visual research method developed by Wang and Burris (1994) to promote empowerment and give voice to vulnerable communities (Booth and Booth 2003; Cluley 2016; Evans-Agnew and Rosemberg 2016). Photovoice involves the use of a camera and photography as a means of sharing knowledge and experience to bring about social change (Wang and Burris 1997; Budig *et al.* 2018). It is a means for users to represent and enhance their community as makers of meaning through photography. It allows them to 'document, reflect upon, and communicate issues of concern' (Budig *et al.* 2018, p.1). Simultaneously, it allows researchers to perceive the world from the perspective of those who traditionally are not in control 'of the means for imaging the world' (Guyer *et al.* 1984 cited in Wang and Burris 1997, p.372).

Photovoice is a flexible tool which can be adapted for specific participatory objectives, for use with different groups and diverse issues (Wang and Burris 1997). Photovoice has three main goals: (1) 'to enable people to record and reflect their

community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large-and small-scale group discussions of photographs, and (3) to reach policy makers' (Wang Burris 1997, p.370). Photovoice builds on Freire's methods of empowerment education (Budig *et al.* 2018) by channelling participants' knowledge to create community action (Booth and Booth 2003). Photovoice has its roots in feminist theory (Wang and Burris 1997), constructivism and documentary photography (Hergenrather, Rodes and Bardhoshi 2009). Furthermore, the agentic nature of the method lends itself to the transformative paradigm. The images produced not only give a window into the social and political world of the user, rather the discussion, interpretation, analysis of those images can also stimulate social action (Wang and Burris 1997). Photovoice gives ownership to people of how they would like to represent themselves and how they would like to depict their reality (Booth and Booth 2003). Participant ownership, control and empowerment challenge the traditional politics of representation typically located in the research process. This shift in power repositions the roles of the participant and the researcher. The researcher moves from the status of privileged voyeur looking in or on, while making value judgements to the role of facilitator of change. Participants and researchers are collaborators, and the collaborative nature of the participatory process provides a bilateral power structure which respects the rights of all.

Wang and Burris (1997) used the term Photovoice to link the use of photographs (documentary evidence) to VOICE 'voicing our individual and collective experience' (p.381). It is this insider epistemology that enhances the use of Photovoice as a means of understanding the perspectives and experience of participants. Furthermore, the multimodal representation of the process evidenced by combining visuals (photographs) with the discussion (voice element), supports the inclusiveness of such an approach. Multimodality acknowledges communication in the widest sense (McTavish, Streelasky & Coles, 2012). It provides voice (Lundy, 2007) by supporting participants to form and express their views. The photographs act as prompts to stimulate discussion on matters which affect them. Furthermore, its use enhances a UDL framework for engagement. The principles of UDL; Multiple Means

of Representation, Multiple Means of Action and Expression and Multiple Means of Engagement; are all experienced using Photovoice method. The stages involved in using Photovoice as a methodology are outlined in Table 4.2 (Booth and Booth 2003; Latz, 2017).

Table 4.2. Steps involved in Photovoice Projects (Booth & Booth, 2003, p.432; Latz, 2017, p.4).

Steps involved in Photovoice Projects	
Booth & Booth (2003)	Latz (2017)
Setting up the group	Identification and invitation (place people and purpose of the study)
Agreeing the theme(s) of the project as a group	Education (consent to participate, photography basics)
Taking pictures	Documentation (taking pictures guided using prompts)
Selecting the photographs to use (either individually or as a group)	Narration (PHOTO guide Graziano 2004; Hussey 2006)
Contextualising the images/ telling the stories contained in the pictures (where people explain what the photos, they have taken mean to them)	Ideation Participatory Visual Analysis (identification of thematic strands within the narrations to co-construct meaning)
Codifying the themes or messages linking the photographs (a group process of naming and acknowledging the collective experience to which the photos bear witness)	Presentation (Exhibition)
Targeting the audience beyond the group	Confirmation (impact of the project on audience)

In expanding the steps outlined by Booth and Booth, Latz (2017) added a final stage which she coined confirmation. During this stage the researcher should endeavour to capture the views of the audience (those who engaged with the exhibition) to

ascertain their perceptions and intentions to bring about change arising from findings. The presentation and confirmation stages (Latz, 2017) provide audience (those with the power to make change) and influence (due weight) (Lundy, 2007) for participants to express their views and have their voices heard. Furthermore Latz (2017) emphasises the importance of sustaining the voices of students involved in the project through further dissemination of research. This broadens the reach of participant voices and further enhances the opportunity for participant views to have influence (Lundy, 2007).

Consequently, Photovoice as a data collection tool and methodology can successfully be utilised to provide the space, voice, audience and influence identified in Lundy's Framework of Participation (2007). In this sense it is ideal for use in schools for seeking the perspectives of students to facilitate change. The images represent the subjective reality of the lived experience which students can interpret verbally, and which reduces the cognitive and linguistic demands that are found in other types of qualitative research.

The potential for Photovoice to be used to elicit the views of autistic students on wellbeing in school was explored by Danker, Strnadová and Cumming (2019). Although there is a significant body of literature on wellbeing in school, the authors of this study identified a shortage of literature on wellbeing of autistic students. Fifteen boys and one girl from seven mainstream high schools in Australia participated in this study. Two of the students had co-morbidities, one in the form of ID and one with attention-deficit, hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), three had a diagnosis of Asperger's Disorder (term used at the time of the study) and the rest were autistic. An initial introductory meeting was used to establish a rapport with the students; to provide an explanation of their involvement in the project; to ensure students could take photographs and importantly to discuss the ethical concerns about taking photos in school. Students were given further guidance on transferring photographs to a USB flash drive, and they were instructed to take no more than 10 photographs. The 10 photographs were to cover three aspects (a) what is a good life in school? (b) what assists them in having a good life? (c) what stops them from experiencing a good life in school? A good life was used in lieu of the term wellbeing

and is used according to the researchers as a general expression for students to define welling in their own terms. Students were given a week to take the photographs and were informed that they could substitute web-based images for photographs if necessary. This is in keeping with the flexible nature of Photovoice as a data collection tool. The authors in this instance recognised that the protocol may have required adaptation to allow autistic students to participate more meaningfully in the study. Therefore, if a student wanted to report on an issue such as bullying it may not have been safe to take photographs of such an event. In such an instance a web-based image was recommended as more appropriate.

Findings from this study support the use of Photovoice as a participatory methodology to elicit students' perceptions on matters concerning them. However, a limitation of this study is the decision by the authors not to involve students in the coding and creating of themes which emerged from the photographs and interview process. This, according to the authors would have been too time consuming. However, data analysis is influenced by the perspective of those conducting the analysis 'even data collected or reported by children can be misrepresented if children, themselves, are not involved in defining the meaning behind the data' (Foster-Fisherman *et al.* 2010, p.75). Furthermore, students were not involved in the process of verifying findings from the research process when completed. Authenticating students' representations is essential when conducting research with children as there is a real danger of data being adulterated (Flynn 2017) when they are not engaged in this process. However, this limitation was not a result of students or researchers being unwilling to engage but rather as a result of the complexities of conducting research in schools where teachers and principals are gatekeepers who govern student's participation (Danker, Strnadová and Cumming 2019). The teacher who was tasked to coordinate the meeting to verify the data lacked 'time, commitment and interest in the study' (Danker, Strnadová and Cumming 2019, p.139) despite students wishes to be involved. Teachers as gatekeepers has emerged as a concern in previous empirical research (Fitzgerald 2020). Teachers can be reluctant to engage with the research process (Danker, Strnadová and Cumming 2019). This can result in a loss of access to the research site and/or undue influence

on the research process (Fitzgerald 2020). In this instance students did not get an opportunity to verify their perceptions, which prevented the rigorous application of Photovoice in this study (Danker, Strnadová and Cumming 2019).

A further limitation relates to the dissemination of research findings. Students were not involved in presentation of research findings to policy makers. Participatory research identifies that participants should be involved in all stages in the research process from design to dissemination (Fleming 2010; Montreuil *et al.* 2021). Likewise, Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) recognises for students to express their views and have their voices heard they must be listened to by those with the power to make change. Therefore, audience and influence are key elements in participatory research. However, the authors felt that this may have been too uncomfortable for the students to be involved in this process. Instead, the views of the students were conveyed to the school via a report. To counteract this, and to protect students from unnecessary stress, participants could have created an audio-visual presentation of their research, as computer aided presentations which combine pictures and text, or an exhibition are considered effective for children to express their views (Montreuil *et al.* 2021).

All research has limitations, it is the explicit acknowledgement of these limitations that adds rigour to findings (Ross and Zaidi 2019). Although the authors did acknowledge some limitations such as, teachers as gatekeepers, this study would have benefited from authors explicitly acknowledging limitations, such as time constraints which prevented the full implementation of Photovoice as a methodology.

Despite the limitations in this study, autistic students were meaningfully able to participate as co-creators of meaning. The use of Photovoice moved these participants beyond data sources to researchers (Fielding 2001). The use of images provided an opportunity for participants to voice their world visually (Cluely 2019), thereby counteracting some of communication difficulties experienced by autistic students. The use of the Photovoice as a method to elicit the perceptions of autistic students on wellbeing successfully contributed to the depth and breadth of knowledge on the wellbeing of autistic. The findings of this study were presented to

policy makers in schools therefore, Photovoice in this study provided the space, voice, audience and influence to bring about social change.

The use of conventional qualitative methods in inclusive participatory research has been questioned (Koltz 2004; Aldridge 2007). Qualitative research methods such as focus groups and interviews can discriminate against people with SEND (Aldridge 2007). Therefore, tensions can exist between research which is academically rigorous and research which is beneficial to participants (Walmsley and Johnson 2003). Booth and Booth (1996) argue that the traditional data collection methods employed during qualitative research may not support students with SEND to meaningfully participate. This calls for 'a radically different approach' (Koltz 2004, p.99) to inclusive research, one beyond traditional methods.

The need to supplement language as the main means of data collection in conducting research with children with SEND is widely recognised (Porter and Lacey 2005). Furthermore, most people with SEND need allies to participate in research (Walmsley 2001). Cluely (2016) advocates a mediated and flexible approach to inclusive research. A flexible approach to the research process was successfully utilised in the study by Danker, Strnadová and Cumming (2019). Photovoice via a mediated approach was utilised in an earlier study conducted by Cluely (2016) to involve people with profound and multiple ID and their carers in the research process. A mediated approach incorporating the voice of carers is not the antithesis of inclusive research nor is it a limitation, but rather a necessary condition of the research. When conducting research, flexibility in the data collection method to support the abilities and needs of participants must be prioritised (Cluely 2016).

Cluely (2016) utilised Photovoice as a method to elicit the perceptions of adults with profound and multiple disabilities on their understanding of the term disability. Sixteen participants with a range of disabilities including six with mild learning difficulties, four with moderate learning disabilities and six with profound and multiple disabilities took part. Only one participant communicated verbally, all used an electric wheelchair and most had a personal carer who supported them with their daily living skills. The carers were seen as fundamental to the lives of participants and were therefore included as co-researchers, as 'necessary and integral allies for

the people with learning disabilities' (Cluely 2016, p.45). In line with Wang and Burris' (1997) vision the Photovoice sessions were adapted to meet the needs of individual participants. In the spirit of participatory research and in line with the Photovoice method, the brief for photographers was unrestricted. Participants were asked to take photographs of anything that showed their life and were given a week to do so (Cluely 2016).

One of the dangers of participatory research with vulnerable populations is authenticating participants own involvement (Porter and Lacey 2005). Fielding (2004) asks us to consider who is talking for whom? To authenticate participants involvement in this study carers suggested that photographs should be taken from the vantage point of the person sitting in their wheelchair. Furthermore, carers only took photographs when the participants showed signs that it was ok. Photographs depicted a range of images, including pictures of bedrooms, shared living spaces, mobility aids and everyday objects which were meaningful to participants such as fish tanks, bedroom wallpaper and Christmas decorations (Cluely 2016). When discussing the meaning behind the pictures the carers as co-researchers added an extra layer of meaning to the visual images in a way that the participants were unable to without support. In one instance, a photograph of a bank may have led researchers to assume that the people or money were meaningful to the participant. However, the carer added clarity to the visual image by describing how the participant liked the sound of high heel shoes on the wooden floor in the premises. The photograph was taken at ear level to reflect the aural experience. The added detail provided by the carer transformed the image into a sensory journey (Cluely 2016). The flexible approach employed by the researchers allowed for additional voices of the carers to support the inclusion of participants. Furthermore, these voices facilitated the development of data rich findings which added a detail that would have been absent without. These findings revealed much more about the lives of participants in the study (Cluely 2016). The researcher in this study identified the challenges of utilising Photovoice with individuals without speech. The voices of carers in this study were not taken as an absolute representation of views and perceptions of participants. Rather they were considered necessary as co

researchers to garner further details. This therefore reduced the imbalance of power and possibility of speaking for or on behalf of research participants (Fielding 2004).

Despite the obvious advantages of incorporating visual methods such as Photovoice as a data collection tool and a methodology, several challenges revolve around its use with vulnerable populations. There is a need to consider whether the use of cameras is too intrusive, as 'the camera reveals more than other methods' (Prosser 1998 cited in Wright *et al.* 2003, p. 73). Issues of privacy, copyright, possession of originals, authorship and confidentiality are identified as key concerns (Alderson and Morrow 2020). Ethical guidelines on how, where and when to take photographs are identified as necessary steps in the Photovoice process (Wang and Burris 1997; Booth and Booth 2003; Danker, Strnadová and Cummings 2019).

Choice is an integral element of research incorporating the use of Photovoice (Booth and Booth 2003). Participants choose which photographs to take, but the choice of which photographs to include and which to discard is problematic (Porter and Lacey 2005). Some researchers clearly identify the criteria for exclusion of certain photographs. Criteria by Obrusnikova and Cavalier (2010) included images being unclear; not taken for the purpose of the study; taken due to the influence of others. However, Wang and Burris (1997) identify that it is the participants who choose which photographs to include. It is necessary to consider, therefore, what happens when participants do not want to include certain photographs or wish to keep photographs. This may pose significant challenges in a school or community context particularly with children under 18 years of age. Therefore, issues of privacy and confidentiality, ownership, taking, sharing and storage of photographs by participants needs to be clearly addressed prior to engaging in any Photovoice project.

The level of involvement of participants in Photovoice projects can vary (Catalani and Minkler 2010). Researchers are encouraged to strive for the highest level of participation that is feasible and practicable (Catalani and Minkler 2010). Therefore, a flexible approach to its application is recommended (Wang and Burris 1997; Booth and Booth 2003; Catalani and Minkler 2010; Danker, Strnadová and Cummings 2019). People with SEND may possess characteristics that make the level of

participation required for co-construction of meaning (Fielding 2004) difficult. Consequently, as highlighted above people with SEND may need to express their views in a multimodal fashion (Mitra 2018). It is the researcher's responsibility therefore, not only to provide opportunities to participate but also to adjust the processes as necessary if research is to be truly inclusive.

4.8 Sampling

4.8.1. Access to Schools

Accessibility to a sample or population is an important consideration when selecting sampling designs (Mertens 2020). Accessing educational settings such as schools requires cooperation, negotiation and consent from a range of gatekeepers (Fargas-Malet 2010; Mertens 2020) such as Boards of Management (BOM), principals, teachers, and parents. Consequently, a pragmatic approach needs to be adopted (Ainscow 2021). The issue of consent with children was previously discussed in Section 4.6.1. However, access and consent can be problematic and 'fraught with hurdles' (Collings, Grace and Llewellyn 2016, p. 499). The busy nature of schools and power dynamics between researchers and gatekeepers (Fitzgerald 2020) can prevent access and cooperation.

Of greater concern is, however, the discourse that frames children and particularly children with SEND as vulnerable and in need of protection. Participation and protection continue to be presented as binary concepts. Protection and prevention supersede the need and right of children to participate in research. The necessity to move from a child protection and welfare paradigm to a rights-based participation model was discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.4. Gatekeepers, however, continue to control and limit researchers' access to participants (Coyne 2009). Although this may be with good intent, 'an unanticipated consequence is that it can contravene their [students] rights' (Collings, Grace and Llewellyn 2016, p. 499). It is essential therefore that researchers plan and negotiate how to access the research site and maintain access by pre-empting any difficulties early in the research design (Fitzgerald 2020).

Researcher skills and time are key elements necessary for conducting in-depth qualitative research in schools (Fitzgerald 2020). Participatory Research especially with children with SEND takes time (Rose and Grosvenor 2001; Booth and Booth 2003). The steps involved in a Photovoice project takes time. Furthermore, ethical considerations, including child protection concerns, which arise from placing cameras in the hands of students may needs careful consideration (Ryan 2009). Therefore, Fitzgerald (2020) recommends, identifying schools who may be willing to participate in the study as early as possible. Additionally, she recommends building open and honest relationships with key adult stakeholders, prior, during and after data collection to reduce feelings of intrusion, inspection or scrutiny that may arise from a researcher researching with students at the school.

4.8.2 Sampling Strategy

As a result of these recommendations a mix of convenience and purposive sampling was originally planned for in this study. As Photovoice projects requires time spent in the field to conduct the various stages of the Photovoice project a convenience sampling strategy was employed to choose schools located conveniently to me, the researcher. Although this is a the least desirable sampling method (Patton 2015) it is the most used (Mertens 2020). A purposive sampling strategy was further employed to select schools in the West and Mid-West who utilise the Level Two Learning Programmes (L2LP) (Chapter 2 Section 2.9.2) to support the needs of students with upper mild to lower moderate ID in their school. Although it would be interesting to hear the voice and gain the perspectives of all students with an ID in post-primary schools in Ireland, this would be beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, strategic purposive sampling of post-primary schools who support students with ID allowed me to reduce the number of participants while maintaining a representative sample.

Furthermore, purposive sampling with key informants (Patton 2015) is identified as most appropriate for studies involving Photovoice as a method of data collection (Latz 2017). Patton (2015) defined key informants 'as people with great knowledge.... who can shed light on the inquiry issues' (p.268). Additionally, a purposive sampling strategy reflects my conceptual understanding of the child and children's rights. Crucial to this understanding is the view that children are experts in their own lives

and have in-depth knowledge and understanding of their lived experience. Moreover, children have a right to express their views and have their views heard (Article 12 UNCRC 1989). Purposive sampling with children with ID using Photovoice provides space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy 2007) for children to express their views and have their views heard.

To operationalise this sampling strategy a list of registered schools who offer the L2LP was obtained from the Post-Primary Online Database (P-POD). This information was requested by phone and by email and was subsequently provided to the researcher (Oct 2021). From this database, schools in the West and Mid-West of Ireland who utilise the L2LP were identified. An invitation to participate (Appendix D) was sent to principals (as gatekeeper) of these post-primary schools via email. This letter outlined the aims of the research, an outline of the steps involved, duration of the study, confidentiality, data and child protection arrangements as well as the right to withdraw from the study. In accordance with the guidance from Fitzgerald (2020) an offer to visit the school to discuss the research process with the principal and staff was given. Despite this, accessing schools proved a significant obstacle to undertaking this research. Consequently, the sampling strategy needed to be expanded. The researcher utilised the MIC Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) Forum to recruit schools. This Community of Practice (CoP) provided a platform for me, the researcher to advertise her study to Special Education Teachers (SETs) and SENCOs. This had a snowball effect which resulted in the researcher being contacted by schools interested in participating. However, only schools where a staff member was personally known to the researcher or her supervisors, through their work as teacher educators, agreed to take part. Trust appeared to be an integral part of this decision. Concerns over the use of cameras as a data collection method were raised by one principal. Despite the researchers adhering to Child Protection and Data Protection Legislation which minimise any risks associated with the use of cameras in a school, these fears remained, and this principal chose not to participate.

Once schools agreed to participate a letter of invitation was sent for the principal as secretary of the Board of Management (BOM) (Appendix D), a letter of consent for

the principal (Appendix E) a participant information letter for parents (Appendix F), letter of information for students (Appendix G), letter of consent for parents (Appendix H) and letter of informed assent for students (Appendix I) were included. A number of schools accepted the offer for me to visit and meet with SETs/SENCOs, the principal and parents. The main criterion for participation was that participating students had an identified ID. As this study was not seeking to compare or contrast on gender, age, year group or school type the schools who met the criteria were accepted to participated in this study. More than one student from a school could be selected. The sample size and profile of participating students will be discussed below.

4.8.3 Sample size

Rates of attrition in Photovoice projects need to be considered as they can be high (Latz 2017). Initially consent and assent were obtained for 16 students to participate. From this number, 13 completed the process. Two withdrew their assent at the beginning of the process, one explained that he did not want to take part and only signed the letter of assent because he was told to and the other expressed concerns about taking photographs in school. The third student withdrew her assent in the second meeting. Ensuring assent at each stage supported these students to withdraw from the process. The importance of ensuring assent is freely given was discussed in Section 4.6.1.1. The next section will present a profile of the schools and students who participated in this Photovoice Study.

4.9 Profile of Schools and Student Participants

Thirteen students with ID in four mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland, which cater for students from 12-18 years of age took part in this Photovoice study. As noted in Section 4.8.2, the main criterion for participation was that participating students had an identified ID. Schools identified students based on formal diagnosis of ID outlined in the students' Educational Psychological Report which the school possessed. I the researcher did not have access to these reports, rather the SET/SENCO reported their ID range to me. Twelve of the 13 students' ID fell within the Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD) range. MGLD according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) 5 (American Psychiatric

Association APA 2013) falls within an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) range of 50-69. One student had a diagnosis of Moderate General Learning Disability where the IQ range fell between 35 to 49. Confirming that each student had a formal diagnosis of ID ensured that each student met the criteria for participation. Table 4.3 provides a brief profile of each participating school to provide some context to where the research is situated.

Table 4.3 Profile of Participating Schools

School Name	School Size	School Category	Gender	DEIS/ Non DEIS	Number of Students in Special Class
A	874	Community College	Co-Educational	Non DEIS	4 Autism classes (24 students)
B	750	Voluntary	Co-Educational	Non DEIS	1 Autism Class (6 students)
C	249	Voluntary	Male	Non DEIS	2 Autism classes (10 students)
D	203	Community College	Co-Educational	DEIS	2 Autism classes (12 students) 1 EBD class (6 students)

Additionally, some students have varying complex needs including Autism ($n=5$), Down Syndrome ($n=2$), Physical Disability ($n=1$). A pseudonym was generated for each participant, and this will be used to report findings and to present a profile of each student co-researcher. Table 5.1, Chapter Five details the category of disability and provision of support for each student in their school.

Paula

Paula is a 17-year-old girl with Down Syndrome and Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD). She is interested in music, fashion, hair and makeup, TikTok and sport. She loves Home Economics, and PE, although she finds Woodwork hard at times, she enjoys this subject too. At the time of data collection, she was in her final year of

post-primary education, completing a school designed programme of learning. She had full-time access to an SNA. She accessed the autism support class (ASC) in her school and attended some mainstream classes. During her final year she was sampling a number of post-school placements and was engaging in work experience in the primary school she attended. The Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) reported since the beginning of the school year there had been an increase in Paula's absenteeism from school and an increase in her reporting feeling sick and asking to go home while in school. The SENCO expressed concern that for the first time in school it appeared that Paula saw herself as different from her peers.

John

John is a 14-year-old boy with MGLD. He is very friendly and sociable. He responds well to praise and encouragement. He loves sport and plays hurling and soccer. He was in first year and he was on a modified curriculum with a reduced number of subjects at the time of data collection. He had access full-time to an SNA. He accessed the ASC and attended some mainstream classes. His favourite subjects were Woodwork and PE. He was small for his age and had difficulties with fine motor skills. The SENCO reported that unstructured break times were difficult for him as the gap between him and his peers became more evident. He really enjoyed activities which the school provided for all first-year students on Friday afternoons.

Jane

Jane is a 16-year-old girl with MGLD. She is very friendly and loves having fun with peers and staff. She loves animals and is very artistic. She takes pride in her artwork, although she does not appear to know how talented she is. She loves sport and enjoys playing badminton. She was in third year of school and was following the Level Two Learning Programme (L2LP) at the time of data collection. She accessed the ASC and attended some mainstream classes for Religion, Home Economics, Civic Social Political Education (CSPE), Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and History. Her favourite subject was History. She also had the support of an SNA both in the ASC and mainstream classes. The Special Education Teacher (SET) expressed concerns over her vulnerability particularly in relation to social media.

Sam

Sam is a 16-year-old boy with MGLD. He is a wheelchair user due to a physical disability. He is very friendly and chatty and loves farming. He is interested in horticulture and likes growing vegetables. He loves project work and using his hands. He was in third year of school and was following the Level Two Learning Programme (L2LP) at the time of data collection. He accessed the ASC for most of the day but attended some mainstream classes such as History, CSPE, SPHE, and Religion. He also had access to an SNA, who supported him in the ASC and mainstream classes. The SET reported that he had been sent back to the ASC class on occasion when he was due to attend mainstream class because the teachers reported that they had nothing for him to do. This was very upsetting for him.

Mary

Mary is an 18-year-old girl with Down Syndrome and MGLD. She is very friendly and chatty. She loves listening to music and watching YouTube. She enjoys mindfulness and playing sport. She is an active member of her community and attends local hurling and football matches with her family. She was in her final year of post-primary education completing a school designed programme of learning. The school was focusing on life skills and personal care to prepare her for life after school. During her final year she engaged in work experience in a local hotel and school-based work experience. She accessed the ASC for most of the day but attended some mainstream classes such as Irish and PE and Home Economics. She had full-time access to an SNA whom she had an excellent relationship with.

James

James is a 13-year-old boy with MGLD and Dyspraxia. He is friendly and very interested in sport, particularly hurling. He plays with the school and his local hurling team. He was in first year of school and was following the L2LP. When he started school in September, he was accessing mainstream classes with support provided through the Continuum of Support (CoS) (DES 2007) and was following the L2LP, however, the SET reported this was not working. Teachers were struggling to implement the L2LP alongside mainstream subjects and James was becoming

disillusioned with school and his absenteeism was increasing. James was moved to the ASC class. The SET reported he was engaging well in this environment and continued to access PE and SPHE in mainstream classes.

Tom

Tom is a 15-year-old autistic boy with MGLD. He loves music, playing the guitar and horticulture. He loves asking questions and he loves facts. He likes reading but struggles with comprehension and he does not like being asked too many questions. He is excellent at hurling and loves to talk about hurling. He was in third year of school and was following the L2LP. He accessed the ASC for most of the day but attended PE in mainstream. He had access to an SNA both in the ASC and when in mainstream classes. The SET reported he was attending English and Maths in mainstream classes, but it was not working. The SET noted that he was much happier accessing the ASC. He struggles at times to manage his emotions but responds well to guidance from staff in the ASC.

Rory

Rory is a 14-year-old autistic boy with a Moderate General Learning Disability. He is kind and gentle. He loves history and has a particular interest in kings, castles, queens and princes. He loves horticulture and water. He likes to read but only on topics of interest to him. He was in third year of school and was following the L2LP. He did not access any mainstream classes. He had access to the SNAs in the ASC. He struggles with verbal communication and engages in echolalia. The SET reported that although he had become more verbal since starting post-primary school his use of verbal language remained limited. However, he tended to use verbal language to communicate needs. He did, however, communicate verbally more frequently with staff he was more familiar with.

Avril

Avril is a 14-year-old autistic girl with MGLD. She is kind, gentle and friendly to peers and teachers. She is very articulate and notices the beauty in the world around her. She enjoys Art and has strong ICT skills. She loves gardening and likes having plants around her. She struggles with noises, crowded spaces, and bright lights. She was in second year of school and accessed mainstream classes with the

support of an SNA. She accessed the ASC for social activities and often went there during breaks.

Colm

Com is a 13-year-old autistic boy with MGLD and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). He is quiet, kind and gentle. He likes being with his friends and loves playing the card game Uno. When anxious he struggles with verbal communication and points or uses other non-verbal cues instead. He was in first year of school and accessed mainstream classes and the ASC with the support of an SNA.

Daniel

Daniel is a 15-year-old autistic boy with MGLD. He is friendly and kind. He works hard in school and likes to do his best. He loves talking and playing soccer with his friends in school. He also enjoys playing the card game Uno especially during break times in school. He was in second year of school and accessed a mix of mainstream classes and the ASC. He was on a modified curriculum with a reduced number of subjects and went to the ASC during times when he did not have mainstream subjects. He also accessed the ASC during break times.

Oliver

Oliver is a 15-year-old autistic boy with MGLD, Dyspraxia and Dyscalculia. He is quiet, but friendly. He loves Irish music and sport. He is interested in Digital Technology and the SET reported that he engaged really well with online learning when the schools were closed due to the Covid 19 pandemic. He struggles with crowded spaces and needs support with organisational skills. He was in second year of school and accessed a mix of mainstream classes and the ASC.

Evan

Evan is a 14-year-old boy with MGLD, Dyslexia and Dyscalculia. He is very friendly and chatty. He has good relationships with his peers and teachers. He is excellent at sport and plays with the school and his local football team. He was in second year of school and followed the L2LP. He accessed a special class designated as Emotional Behavioural Disorder (EBD). He also attended mainstream subjects such as Science, History, Geography and Woodwork. He enjoys Woodwork and excels in this subject.

He has significant literacy needs which cause him anxiety. He compensates for difficulties he experiences in learning by excelling in Sport.

4.10 Data Collection

The primary method for data collection in this study was through Photovoice. Table 4.4 outlines the Photovoice method, including the steps involved, a description of the activities undertaken, and the research questions answered. A reflexive research journal (Section 4.10.2) and field notes (Section 4.10.3) and a focus group interview with SETs and SENCOs from participating schools supported this process (Section 4.10.4). These will now be discussed.

4.10.1 Photovoice Method

The researcher met with students on approximately four different occasions at times that suited the school and students. Adaptations were made to the process throughout to enable student engagement and included extra visits to work with students as well as the incorporation of additional supports to aid communication. A pilot enabled the researcher to trial the process and adapt as necessary based on student feedback. The following outlines how the steps of Photovoice were combined to make it practical to complete in schools, including a description of activities and research questions answered.

Meeting 1: Identification, Education and Documentation

The principles of UDL; Multiple Means of Representation, Multiple Means of Action and Expression and Multiple Means of Engagement (Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST) (2023) guided each step of the method. UDL is an inclusive approach to supporting diversity by purposefully and intentionally utilising multimodal methods to enhance students' understanding of and engagement with the research. The use of written, digital, visual and verbal methods to support communication were incorporated throughout the various stages.

The first meeting combined the first three steps identified by Latz (2017); identification, education and documentation. Using a UDL approach, students were informed of the purpose of the project and their assent to participate was re-sought. Revisiting assent at various stages of the research process built in opportunities for clarification and understanding for participating students which supported them to decide if it is in their best interest to participate in an informed manner. Students were provided with a break card (Appendix J) which they were told to use if they wanted a break or to signal they no longer wish to participate in the process. Students engaged in a short semi-structured interview to gather details about likes, dislikes, subjects, and challenges they encounter in school (Appendix K). This allowed the researcher to establish a rapport and relationship with participants which is paramount for engagement (Waterhouse 2011). Participants were provided with basic rules and guidance for taking photographs (Figure 4.3) (Appendix L). These included specific guidance in relation to confidentiality and anonymity of data. All guidance utilised multiple means of representation using written, visual and verbal methods to support students' engagement.

Always **ask permission** before taking photographs



No photographs of people's faces



Photographs of **learning activities**



Figure 4.3. Sample of Guidance and Rules for Taking Photograph

They were also provided with a checklist of prompts for suitable photographs they may wish to take (Table 4.5) (Appendix M). Students could tick these off once they took pictures in each category.

Table 4.5. Sample for Prompts Suitable Photographs

These prompts might help you when deciding what photographs to take. Tick when you have taken a photograph of the following:

What do you like best about school? (take some pictures to describe)	
What is your favourite thing to learn? (take a picture to describe)	
Describe how you learn best? (take some pictures to describe)	

Participatory research involves participants actively making decisions related to the research process (Lienbenberg 2018; Montreuil *et al.* 2021). Consequently, adaptations were made throughout, based on feedback from students, which supported them to engage with the research. Adaptations included reducing the number of photographs and the types of photographs students could take. Initially students were asked to take three photographs of each category/type. The purpose of this was to get a varied sample of what students liked about school or their favourite things to learn, for example. However, this was problematic as it resulted in too many photographs for students to describe and the instruction was too vague. One autistic student took three pictures of each category. Furthermore, the wording of questions in the semi-structured interview was adapted, reflections in Field Notes noted *'some of them [questions] are too closed, they need to allow a student to expand without too much prompting'* and, *'the question "do you receive extra support with learning", needs to be broadened to, "are there other areas that you would like support with, can you tell me more about this?"'* (NM 2023). These were once again adapted to support students who struggled with verbal communication. A booklet called 'All About Me in School' was devised, questions were presented visually using emojis and in line with the principle of multiple means of action and expression students had the opportunity to draw, write or say their answers (Figure 4.4) (Appendix N).

All about Me in School

You can write, draw or tell Nicola the answers to the questions.




My name is _____.


I am _____ years of age.

I am in _____ class/year.


In school I like _____.

In school I don't like _____.

What do you find  difficult about your school day?

What would help to make your school day better? 

Do you have the support of an SNA?

What is  about it.


What is  about it.

Figure 4.4. Sample Questions from All About Me Booklet

Additionally, efforts to involve students in developing the research questions were incorporated throughout. For example, students were asked if there were aspects of their education or their school experience they would like to explore. They were also asked who they would like to tell about their experience in school and how they would like to inform them. These are complex concepts and students needed explicit, concrete scaffolding throughout to support them with this process.

Students were provided with an iPad to take photographs. Students agreed that photographs would not be shared with others or uploaded to social media. To minimise this risk, the iPads did not go home with students; rather they stayed on the school premises, and students were supervised by staff when taking photographs. Students and staff decided that a week would be sufficient to take the photographs. Each meeting concluded with participants completing a Children and Young People's Feedback Form (Lundy 2021) (Appendix O) to ensure they felt they had the appropriate space, voice, audience and influence necessary for them to have their voice heard at each stage of the process.

Meeting 2 Narration (Photo-Elicitation Interview)

Informed assent was considered an ongoing process at each stage of this Photovoice study. The importance of seeking assent at each stage was emphasised on one particular occasion. A student no longer wished to participate but did not want to tell the school staff for fear of causing disappointment. By asking for her assent to continue, it allowed her to withdraw from the research safely. Providing an environment where participants feel safe to express themselves is crucial for eliciting children's voices (Lundy, 2007; Blanchet–Cohen and Di Mambro 2014)

This meeting also provided an opportunity for the researcher to establish if participants had any challenges or difficulties with taking photographs (Appendix P). Participants identified challenges in maintaining anonymity, particularly when taking pictures which represented favourite places/spaces in school. Others noted difficulties in remembering to take photographs, citing the busyness of the school day as an inhibiting factor. Therefore, a mediated approach (Cluely 2016) was

adopted, whereby staff provided verbal reminders to participants to take photographs each day.

Pictures on the iPad were used as visual prompts for the Photo-Elicitation Interview. Students were asked to narrate the contents of the photographs and were supported in this process by the researcher asking questions about each picture, using an adaptation of the mnemonic device PHOTO used by Granziano (2004) and Hussey (2006) (Table 4.6).

Table 4.6. Adaptation of PHOTO (Granziano (2004) Hussey (2006))

PHOTO Granziano (2004) and Hussey (2006)	PHOTO adapted Mannion (2023)
Describe your P icture	Describe your Picture
What is H appening in your picture?	What is H appening in your picture?
Why did you take a picture O f this?	Why did you take a picture O f this?
What does the T ell us about your life?	What can this picture T ell teachers and SNAs about you?
How can the picture provide O pportunities for us to improve your life?	How can the information in this picture be used by O thers such as teachers and SNAs to make your school day better?

The purpose of these questions is to identify the image, its significance to the student and possible strategies to enact meaningful change. Students provide the meaning behind each picture. It is not the researcher’s responsibility to interpret the images. Discussing the images provided an extra layer of meaning (Cluely 2016) without which the significance behind and within photographs can be lost. Latz (2017), in contrast to Pink (2007) advises that the photographs in Photovoice studies are not data in and of themselves, rather they serve as data antecedents used to elicit responses from participants. It is the student’s narration of the photographs which is data. Learning for the researcher and the community occurs through dialogue (Freire 1972).

A flexible, mediated approach must be prioritised when undertaking research (Catalani & Minkler 2010; and Cluley 2016). It is the researcher’s responsibility to provide opportunities to participate, and to adjust the processes as necessary if research is to be truly inclusive. Providing multiple means of engagement, the Photo-Elicitation Interview in this study was adapted to support the needs of some autistic learners to engage. Adaptations included an integration of a Placemat Graphic Organiser (Bennett and Rolheiser-Bennett 2001) and use of sentence starters (Figure 4.5) (Appendix Q). Individual photographs were placed in the centre of a placemat and questions, or sentence starters were utilised to support the narrative process. By offering multiple means of action and expression, students, once again had the option to draw, write or tell me their answers.

Using your pictures to help, draw, write or tell Nicola the answers to the questions.

What do you like best about school?

_____ is the best thing about school.	I like it because _____
Picture here.	
This picture shows teachers and SNAs that _____	This can make by day better because _____

Figure 4.5. Sample of Placemat Graphic Organiser with Sentence Starters

Ownership of photographs must be addressed before engaging in any Photovoice project. Latz (2017) recommends that photographs taken by participants during Photovoice Studies belong to participants and must be released to the researcher through a consent and release paperwork process. Students in this Photovoice study signed a Photograph Release Form (Appendix R) identifying which photographs they were happy to use in the research and beyond.

Meeting 3 Ideation (Participatory Visual Analysis)

Although a substantive body of research has emerged since Wang and Burris (1994) first pioneered Photovoice, limited research exists to address how data may be analysed and interpreted. Many studies focus on the results of their interpretations (Samonova, *et al.* 2022) but provide little guidance on the analytic process (Latz 2018). This section seeks to address this gap in literature by outlining how the data were analysed and interpreted with students.

Participatory research requires participants to be engaged in all stages of the research process including analysis and interpretation (Libenberg 2018). However, involving children in this stage of the research can often be overlooked or their engagement can be tokenistic (Montreuil *et al.* 2021). Children should be 'active agents in, not just objects of, interpretation' according to Cook-Sather (2012, p.355). As a result, analysis in Photovoice studies takes a two-step approach, analysis where children are co-creators of meaning and analysis undertaken by the researcher which is informed by the first step. It is this two-step approach which paves the way for the generation of findings and the production of new knowledge (Latz 2018).

Wang and Burris (1997) and Booth and Booth (2003) proposed a three-stage approach to be used with participants in stage one of analysis; selecting, contextualizing and codifying images. This was later developed by Latz (2018) who coined the stage, ideation. In this study, ideation occurred after the photo-elicitation interview when students were given a copy of their photographs and were asked to select which pictures best told their story. With the support of the researcher, students grouped printed photographs into two categories; 'What is working for me in school' and 'What is not working for me in school' (Figure 4.6). The researcher encouraged students to group photographs according to things they felt were common in the pictures or what they felt the photographs meant to them. Photographs with a shared theme or meaning were grouped together under these categories. Themes such as 'this makes me happy', 'how I like to learn', 'something I would like to change' were common. In some instances, students chose to write a caption to describe these themes. The researcher assisted with cutting, glueing and writing when necessary. The photographs were then used to create a visual.



Figure 4.6. Student Grouping Pictures into Categories with Common Themes to Create Visual

Choice is an integral element of UDL and Photovoice studies (Booth & Booth 2003; Latz 2017); students in this study chose which photographs they wanted to use. They also identified the type of visual they wanted to create, aligning with the UDL approach adopted throughout the process. Some chose to make a PowerPoint, others made posters. Brochures, digital story boards, newsletters, websites can also be used. Participatory, inclusive methods which build in choice and flexibility such as those used in Photovoice studies empower participants and reposition power and control throughout the research process.

Meeting 4 Exhibition and Confirmation

The fourth meeting consisted of a 'show and tell' exhibition or presentation, in line with UDL, this was optional. This presentation provided the audience and influence (Lundy 2007) necessary for students' opinions to be heard and given due weight by those who traditionally hold the power to make decisions and impact change in schools. Students selected attendees, who included parents, peers, teachers, and members of school management. During this exhibition students outlined what was working for them, what was not working for them in school and offered advice on changes needed to advance inclusive practice (Figure 4.7).

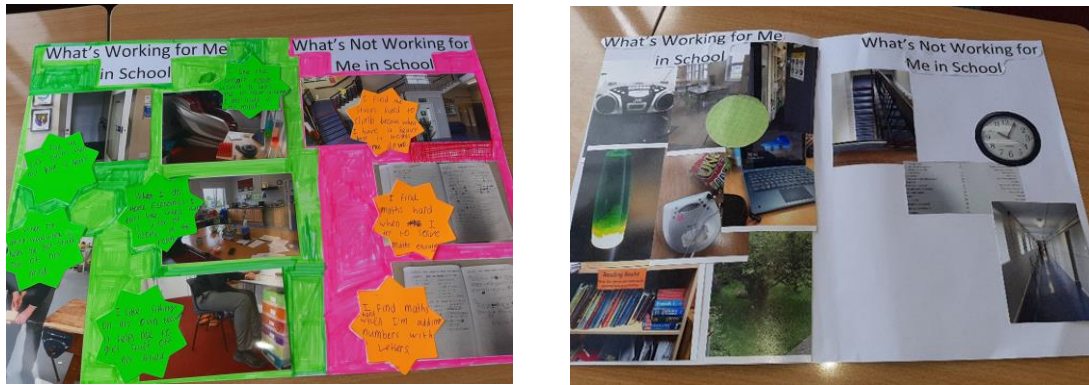


Figure 4.7. Visuals illustrating What's Working for Students in Schools and What's Not Working in the context of the school.

The images in the exhibition can be used to stimulate dialogue about issues important to participants and this dialogue should result in positive change (Libenberg 2018). To determine potential action, and in line with Latz's (2018) last stage confirmation, an impact survey with audience members was used to gauge initial reactions and possible impact on future school practice (Appendix S). The survey asked members to record their initial thoughts of the Photovoice exhibition. They were asked if there was anything in the exhibition which surprised them and what possible actions they might take as a result of the exhibition. In one instance, a member of the student council was in attendance and a student who is a wheelchair user outlined the ongoing difficulty he was experiencing with other students throwing bags on the floor. This was deeply distressing for this student and was an ongoing issue, despite school staff addressing it. The member of the student council said she would bring this back to the council and the wider student body to address the issue immediately.

4.10.2 Reflexive Research Journal

A research journal was maintained throughout the lifespan of the study. Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carl (2021) state that the purpose of a research journal is to develop good research habits as an active reflexive researcher. A reflexive approach underpins the quality, trustworthiness and credibility of a research study. It provides the researcher with opportunities to reflect, develop, enhance, question, examine and explore research questions and ideas. The following excerpt exemplifies how the

researcher used the research journal as a tool to help her process the challenge of developing research questions,

“Trying to narrow down the research questions has proved difficult. I feel I am in a thick fog trying to find my way through. How can I ask questions without imposing my own bias and agenda on students? If this research is truly participatory then the problems/questions/issues need to come from students.”

(NM Research Journal 10/10/21)

Furthermore, the research journal is an important data source to track development in all stages in the journey of becoming a researcher, including the trials and tribulations encountered. Figure 4.8 illustrates some of these which the researcher experienced during her research journey.



Figure 4.8. The Research Journey

4.10.3 Field Notes

Unlike the research journal which was maintained throughout all stages of the research process field notes were written at selected moments in the study. Field notes were utilised during the data collection stage incorporating the Photovoice method. A structured format (Appendix T) provided a template which supported the researcher to reflect on experiences, interactions and observations about participants and the research sites. Furthermore, it supported the researcher to consider changes or adaptations to the data collection tool or techniques to better answer the research questions. Section 4.10.1 outlines some of the adaptations

which needed to be made to support students to engage with the research. Other reflections confirmed the necessity of providing ongoing information and assent throughout the data collection process,

“It became quickly evident to me that although students knew I was coming today they had little understanding of what the study was about or why they were involved. [] A video needs to be incorporated to support them to understand the concept of children’s rights and student voice. [] I took great care to explain they did not have to participate and they would withdraw at any time. [Student] asked me at one stage “so I don’t have to do this if I don’t want to”, I confirmed this and showed him the break card and said he could use this to take a break or to tell me he had enough or that he no longer wanted to participate. I reassured him his participation was entirely voluntary. He appeared really happy with this and was happy that at each visit I would check with him if he was happy to continue with the project.”

(NM Field Notes)

Finally, it allowed the me to reflect on my positionality, biases and assumptions and how these could impact on the data collection and initial interpretations. Field notes recorded mitigating measures which the researcher put in place to prevent this,

“Before each step, I listen to the previous interview and read the transcriptions. This supports me to understand their [students] experiences and perspectives with the information they have already provided me. It also helps me get to know the students and the data. I feel this supports me to scaffold students to participate especially when their language is limited, without imposing my own bias or perceptions.”

(NM Field Notes)

4.10.4 Focus Group Interview

Qualitative data collection necessitates responsiveness on the part of the researcher with methods that are fit for purpose to answer the research question (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018). A focus group interview with Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) from participating schools was deemed necessary to provide a nuanced understanding of developing themes from the data collection process. Although not originally planned in the research design, the necessity to conduct a focus group interview emerged after initial data collection using the Photovoice method to provide some contextual background to students’ lived experiences. Permission to conduct the Focus Group Interview was granted from MIREC in July 2023 (Appendix U). Discussions in relation

to data which highlighted the role of the SNA beyond that of supporting care needs of students, and data which identified the critical role of the Special Class in supporting the participation of students in mainstream schools warranted further exploration (Appendix V). Integrating perspectives from SETs and SENCOs who understand the context in which the data developed provided deeper insight and clarity to the phenomenon.

4.11 Data Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke 2022) framed analysis of data from semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation interviews and the focus group interview. Analysis undertaken by students during the Ideation stage of the Photovoice process informed this process.

The analogy of the traveller on a journey of discovery can be used to describe the recursive, messy, and reflective (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018) process involved in data analysis. The traveller treks along on an adventure, from the data to understanding, explaining and interpreting particular phenomena (Taylor and Gibbs 2010). This journey takes time as it relates to all aspects of the research process (Ravitch and Mittlenfelner Carl 2021). RTA is a means to support this journey. It is a method for 'developing, analysing and interpreting patterns' (Braun and Clarke 2022, p.4) across a dataset

Consequently, Braun and Clarke's (2022) six phases of data analysis (Table 4.7) provided a framework for the researcher to move intentionally and systematically through and with the data to describe, understand, explain and interpret the phenomenon in question (Cohen, Manion and Morrisson 2018).

Table 4.7. Six recursive phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (adapted from Braun & Clarke 2022, p.35)

Phase of Analysis	Research Process	Outcome of Analysis
Familiarisation and Writing Familiarisation Notes	Data familiarisation, transcribe read and reread and write familiarisation notes.	<p>Read and assign meaning</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↕</p> <p>Group data into themes and review</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↕</p> <p>Create a unified story from each theme</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↕</p> <p>Report meaning</p>
Systematic Data Coding	Identify segments of data that appear interesting, relevant or meaningful. Create code labels.	
Generating initial Themes and Codes and Collated Data	Identify shared patterns of meaning across a data set. Researcher is actively engaged with the data in this process.	
Developing and Reviewing Themes	Themes need to tell something about the data. Review all the data.	
Refining and Defining and Naming Themes	Refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story of your analysis in this step- label or name themes	
Writing the Report	Writing the report and locating the data within the wider context.	

The following account details how I applied each phase to ensure a ‘critical, rigorous and valid process’ (Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carl 2021, p.244) was applied to analysing the data. This is supported by a comprehensive audit trail which was developed to illustrate my journey through each of these stages and is presented according to each stage. Furthermore, and in line with recommendations from Braun and Clarke (2022) I continued the reflexive research journal.

4.11.1 Phase One Familiarisation and Writing Familiarisation Notes

Familiarisation of data is the first stage outlined in RTA, as shown in Table 4.3. In response to a lack of clarity regarding data analysis in Photovoice studies (Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg 2016; Latz, 2018; Samonova *et al.* 2022) a particular emphasis will be placed on the familiarisation of data which was collected using this method. Familiarisation is a crucial step in Photovoice studies and should coincide with data

collection. Familiarisation with the entire dataset requires the researcher to engage in two contradictory practices; closeness and familiarity (immersion), and distance (critical engagement) (Braun and Clarke 2022). A third; note making, necessitates the researcher to record thoughts, questions and observations to make meaning from the data presented to you. As such, interviews with students were recorded using a Voice Recorder App on my laptop and transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after the interviews. Similarly, field notes and journal entries were completed as soon as possible after each meeting with participants. Microsoft Word was originally used to support the transcription process. Reflections, comments and initial codes were added using the comment function under the review tab Figure 4.9.

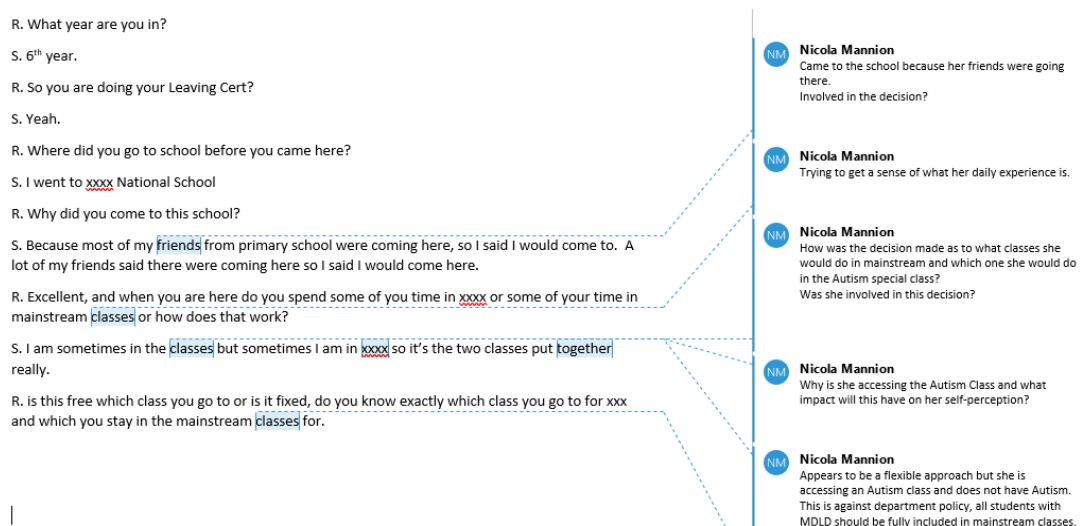


Figure 4.9. Excerpt of Semi-Structured Interview Transcript with Initial Reflections and Comments

Before meeting each participant for the next Photovoice process phase, interviews were listened to and transcripts, field notes and journal entries were read. This is important as it allowed me to familiarise myself with the data and to get to know the participants. Data were used to develop relationships with participants. Furthermore, I was conscious of my influence on the process; getting to know participants allowed me to use their voices to scaffold their participation and increase their engagement, which reduced the researcher's interpretation of responses to questions used in the interview process. This familiarisation phase of Photovoice method was essential as adaptations (Section 4.10.1) based on feedback

from participants, were necessary to enhance the Photovoice process. After this initial familiarisation on individual data items, a second round of note making related the whole dataset (semi structured interviews, photo-elicitation interviews, focus group interview, field notes and reflexive diary) captured potential patterns of meaning, questions and ideas. This provided the opportunity to apply a reflexive critical lens to the complete dataset which facilitates the next phase of data coding.

4.11.2 Phase Two Systematic Data Coding

In the next phase, transcriptions were imported into NVivo 12 (QSR 2017). In this study NVivo 12 (QSR 2017) was used as a data management tool, it was useful for storing, searching, querying data and creating visualisations in an easy, accessible manner. Acknowledging the bias and lived experience which researchers bring to the research process, a fusion of inductive (data driven) and deductive (theory driven) analysis took place. Data were both participant-driven and subjectively interpreted by me. I systematically and iteratively moved through the dataset identifying the smallest units of meaning (code) relevant to the research question. Codes were tagged with code labels which is referred to as a node in the NVivo12 software. Semantic coding explored surface level data which were explicitly expressed by participants. An example of this code is 'projects', this is where students made direct reference to projects they made or were making in school. Simultaneously, latent coding focused on a deeper level of meaning. For example, the code 'special class as a place to socialise' developed from data where participants described playing games or having great fun in the special class. However, focusing on deeper level meaning can move analysis from capturing the specific and particular to a shared pattern of meaning too quickly. The complexity of coding at this stage of analysis can be seen in this extract from my reflexive research journal:

“Developing code labels can be tricky, I find I am thinking of the latent meaning behind what was said. [] The need to honour their [students] voices weigh heavy on me. I know from the participants and from my experiences as a Special Education Teacher, what was said was not necessarily what was meant. The language skills of students were an inhibiting factor in describing photographs or the meaning behind them. Using the mnemonic device PHOTO provided a scaffold for me to ask questions in relation to the picture but some of the questions remained too conceptual despite my best efforts to give examples and provide feedback to support some students to engage with answering these questions. In many instances I know what the student

is trying to say but the words are not there. [T]his results in me jumping to categories rather than codes.”

(NM Reflexive Journal 2023)

To counteract this, I wrote descriptions for each code, this placed a boundary on what was included in the code and kept me from jumping ahead creating categories (Figure 4.10).

Name	Description	Referen	Files	Created
Special Class	Reference made by participants to the special class as being a favourite place/ space	4	4	NM
Special Class (2)	Reference is made by participants to the benefits of the special class	59	20	NM
Special class as a place to socialise	Reference is made by participants to the special class being a place to socialise.	8	5	NM
Special Class can facilitate needs of studen	Reference made to the the specail class as being able to facilitate needs of students.	3	1	NM
Sport keeps you fit	Reference is made by participants to sports keeping them fit	2	2	NM
Sports and friends	Reference is made by participants to engaging in sp	7	6	NM
Sports help me	Reference is made by participants to how the feel sp	2	2	NM
Student strengths	Reference is made by participants to their strengths	18	6	NM
Student Struggles	Reference is made by participants to their struggles	15	8	NM
Students feeling regarding their struggles	Reference made to feelings about	3	1	NM
Students not surviving	Reference made to students not surviving	3	1	NM
Students thoughts about their involvemen	Reference made to participants thoughts about enga	6	5	NM
Talking to friends	Reference is made by participants to talking to friend	8	4	NM
Talking to friends (2)	Reference is made by participants to liking chatting t	3	1	NM
Targeting Students Strengths, Abilities and	Reference made to the necessity to target a student	8	1	NM
Teacher need support to enact inclusive pr	Reference made to teachers need support to enact inclusive practices	13	1	NM
Teachers are friendly	Reference is made by participants to teachers being friendly and approachable	6	4	NM
Teachers are fun	Reference is made by participants to teachers being fun	2	2	NM
Teachers have their ways of doing things	Reference is made to the status quo that occurs with teachers in their classrooms	4	1	NM
Teachers know strengths and weaknesses	Reference is made by participants to teachers knowing their strengths and weakness	2	1	NM
Teachers perceptions	Reference made to the perceptions of teachers to having to teach students with ID in	8	1	NM

Figure 4.10. Codes with Descriptors

One round of systematic coding initially took place, working from the first student participant semi-structured interview through to the focus group interview with SETs and SENCOs. A second and third round changed the order and place of coding, working backwards from the focus group interview through photo-elicitation interview to the semi- structured interviews for round two. While the third round took place on a train journey and started in the middle (photo-elicitation interviews) lopping to the end and back to the beginning. Mixing the order and place of coding disrupted the familiar flow of the data which according to Braun and Clarke (2022) supports an evenly coded dataset. This process resulted in an initial set 197 non-hierarchical codes being created, as outlined in Figure 4.11. The complete Phase Two codebook is available in Appendix W. These codes were further analysed in Phase Three.

Phase 2- Systematic Coding of Data (197 non- hierarchical codes)	Files	Units of Meaning Coded
Accessibility	1	1
Active learning is easier	4	5
Always someone to talk to	1	1
Art room	1	1
Autism	2	2
Being annoyed	1	1
Books help me learn	1	2
Cafeteria	1	1
Choice of learning activities	4	6
Choice of Subjects	6	7
Class size is a barrier	1	4
Class tests	3	7
Classes Student use a Laptop	6	6
Classroom where a particular teacher teaches	1	1
Collaboration	3	6
Coloured copies help with brightness	1	1
Continuous Assessment	1	1
Cooking	8	16
Curriculum is a barrier	1	10

Figure 4.11 Sample from Phase Two Codebook

4.11.3 Phase Three Generating Initial Themes from Coded and Collated Data

In phase three I created initial candidate categories by clustering together patterns of codes in the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2022), the focus of which was on the development of a shared pattern of meaning (theme). Themes in RTA have their own central organising concept (Braun and Clarke 2022). Several different clusters were explored. Codes were merged, pulled apart and combined to create broad patterns that were coherent, meaningful and important (Braun and Clarke 2022) (Figure 4.12).

Photovoice Study.nvp - NVivo 12 Plus

File Home Import Create Explore Share

Clipboard: Paste, Copy, Merge, Cut

Properties: Open, Memo Link, Add To Set, Create As Code, Create As Cases

Explore: Query, Visualize, Code, Auto Code, Range Code, Uncode

Classification: Case Classification, File Classification, List View

Phase 3 Generating Initial Themes from Codes and Collated Data

Name	Description	Reference
Favourite places or spaces in school	This is where students describe their favourite place or space in school	20
Favourite Subjects	This is where students say what their favourite subject is and why	18
Homework	This is when a student speaks about homework	12
Homework in the Special class	Reference made by participants to the the benefits of doing homework	1
Homework is boring	Reference made by participants to homework being boring	1
How students would like to tell others about their school	This is where students identify how they would like to tell others about their school	1
Least Favourite Subjects	This is where students name their least favourite subjects	5
Mainstream classes	This is when a participant makes a reference to mainstream classes	31
Class tests	Reference made to class tests and how students could be supported	7
Learning in mainstream class is hard	Reference made by participants that learning in mainstream class is hard	3
Mainstream class is busy	Reference made to the busyness of mainstream classrooms	7
Mainstream class is loud	Reference made to how loud mainstream classrooms can be.	1
Students not surviving	Reference made to students not surviving in mainstream classes	3
Need to reconceptualise the role of SNA	This is where participants describe the support provided by the SNA	70
Participation in Research	This is where students describe if and why they enjoyed taking the photographs	22
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decision	This is where students describe their role in their education including decision making. It is also where SETS and SEN	93
Possible Actions Resulting from Research	This is where students describe what they would like me to do with the research once completed.	2
Relationships with staff	This is where participants speak about relationships between students and staff	55
Games with the teacher	Reference is made by participants to playing games with the teacher	4
Have a chat	Reference is made by participants to the enjoyment of having a chat with teachers	7

Creating categories from clustering codes

Figure 4.12. Clustering Codes with NVivo

Braun and Clarke (2022) caution that this phase is generative and is part of the messiness of the research journey. Theme development is a process which takes time. It is this process that can cause anxiety for the researcher. The following excerpt from my reflexive diary exemplifies this,

“I entered this phase full I hope and excitement, fear and uncertainty. I grouped codes into categories or initial themes. I am so familiar with the dataset that this stage was relatively quick. However, I quickly felt something wasn't quite right. There were many similar codes in different categories, for example the code Special Class came up in Supports for Learning and Things Students Liked. Should this be the case? Did I rush this stage? Of course, this then filled me with such doubt. This led me to believe that my initial themes were not sufficiently defined. There were no clear boundaries, the central organising concept was weak and lacked depth. I decided to take time and reflect on the process so far. I came to the realisation that I am my own biggest barrier to this PROCESS. I am putting the cart before the horse. I want it right first time from the beginning, I expect that I should have this right. In other words, the process of Reflective Thematic Analysis does not apply to me, I should be able to have it right from the beginning!! Of course, I know this is utter nonsense, the rationale part of me know that it is the journey and embracing the journey that brings the richness and the honesty of the story. My time of reflection (weekend) has given me space, perhaps to trust myself, trust my journey with the process. It is not a race, I don't have to have this right, there is no right at this early

stage. I need to stop seeing the phases as rigid rather as recursive and iterative. I now know I want to go back through the entire data set, I want to double check my code labels and my codes. I want to look at the categories and the data contained within these categories. These may need to be expanded, collapsed and reworked, but that is ok.”

(NM Reflexive Diary)

The aim of this phase was to generate ‘working provisional themes’ (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 84) which provided a scaffold for further analysis to answer the research question. This resulted in the creation of 24 initial categories (themes) in which the 197 codes were placed, as illustrated in Figure 4.13. The complete Phase Three codebook is available in Appendix X.

Phase 3-Generating Initial Themes from Codes and Collated Data (24 initial themes in which 197 codes were placed)	Units of Meaning Coded	Files
Active Learning	167	21
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion	102	1
Difficulties students experience in school	43	14
Favourite places or spaces in school	20	9
Favourite Subjects	18	12
Homework	12	5
How students would like to tell others about their experience	1	1
Least Favourite Subjects	5	4
Mainstream classes	31	7
Need to reconceptualise the role of SNA	70	17
Participation in Research	22	10
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making	93	22
Possible Actions Resulting from Research	2	2
Relationships with staff	55	16
School	15	10
Self-awareness	35	15
Socialisation	46	13
Sports	36	10
Student dislikes	10	5
Student' likes'	86	20
Support with Learning	278	27
Supports for Difficulties which Students Experience	6	5
Who should know about students experience in school	10	7
Worries about the future	2	1

Figure 4.13. Sample from Phase Three Codebook

4.11.4 Phase Four Developing and Reviewing Themes

The focus of phase four was re-engagement with the entire data set. The anxiety I felt in the previous phase evidenced the necessity for this. RTA is a recursive and reflexive process which requires time and space to move in and out of the phases. Immersion in the entire dataset facilitated further merging of codes. Many of the

codes previously identified were thin and there was considerable overlap between themes. At this stage, I found it useful to temporarily leave NVivo to incorporate a manual exploration of candidate themes. Using colour to illuminate the shared pattern of meaning between codes, candidate themes were collapsed and merged while some were discarded Figure 4.14.



Figure 4.14. Manual Exploration of Candidate Themes

The objective of this phase is to review the viability of the initial clusters from phase three and explore whether there is opportunity for ‘better patterned development’ (Braun and Clarke 2022, p.97). The focus was on developing the ‘central organising concept’ (Braun & Clarke 2022, p.35). Here I likened this stage to making a jigsaw puzzle,

“I have come to think of TA like a giant jigsaw puzzle. I am trying to fit all the pieces/codes together to form sections/themes to create a picture/story. Like making a jigsaw, I try lots of different pieces that I think go together. At first, I think yes this goes with this piece but when I step back I see that the picture is not quite right. Something is off, a piece needs to be moved and then I try another. This process goes over and back. At times I need to go back to my original data and my original codes, I need to check the code boundaries. Often times I walk away and reflect on the story that is starting to come together.”

(NM Reflexive Journal)

Through this process, the initial 24 candidate themes were reduced to eight and 197 codes were reduced to 34 (Figure 4.15).

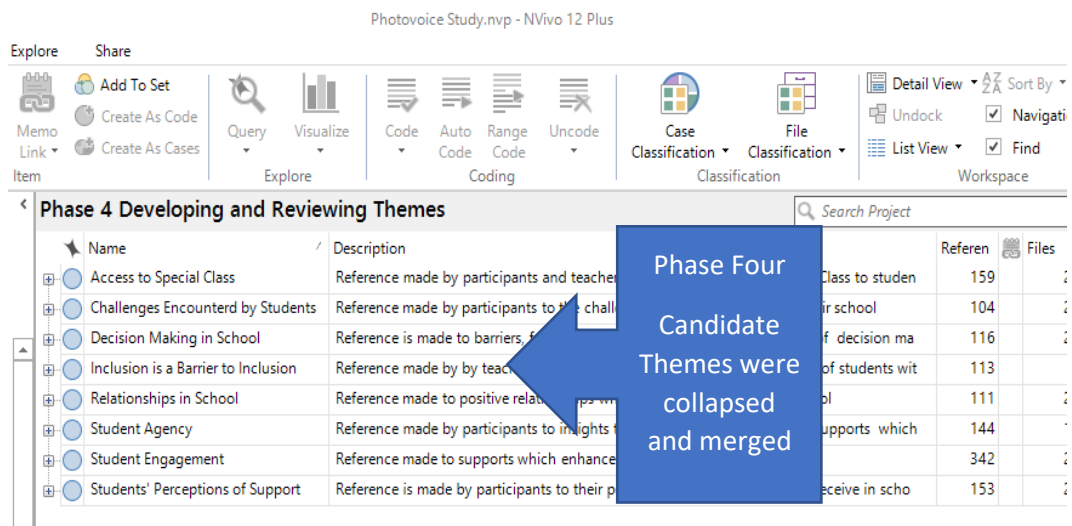


Figure 4.15. Phase Four Developing and Reviewing Themes

The complete Phase Four codebook is available in Appendix Y and a sample is evident in Figure 4.16. Together the eight themes explored ‘the most important patterns across the dataset’ (Braun & Clarke 2022, p.35). At this stage I started to consider how the themes related and fit with each other, what story they were constructing and how they would answer the research question.

Phase 4-Developing and Reviewing Themes (24 initial candidate themes were reduced to eight developing themes and 34 refined codes)	Units of Meaning Coded	Files
Access to Special Class	159	25
Challenges Encountered by Students in School	104	21
Decision Making in School	116	23
Inclusion is a Barrier to Inclusion	113	1
Relationships in School	111	23
Student Agency	144	18
Student Engagement	342	28
Students' Perceptions of Support	153	26

Figure 4.16. Sample from Phase Four Codebook

4.11.5 Phase Five Defining and Naming Themes

Phase five continued the process of critical engagement with the data. Once again, I found it helpful to come out of NVivo 12 to gather corresponding data extracts to match to each code label and theme in a Microsoft Word document Figure 4.17.

<p>T 2.1.3 Access to Special Class T2.1.3.1 Calm Space</p>		<p>Evan 'great to get out class out of class like out of a big class and go to this class it's not such big numbers',</p> <p>James 'It's calmer in XXX [special class]</p> <p>James 'The other wouldn't be quiet. In xxx [Special Class] you have a quiet corner space.</p> <p>John 'it would probably quieter' [Special Class]</p> <p>Oliver 'It's kind of not packed it's just less people' [Special Class]</p> <p>Margaret 'when they're in a special class, you've limited students in the room they have all the resources there'</p> <p>Margaret' There's a safe place for them. You can nurture them, whereas putting them into a big class. I understand it. It's like they're one of 31 of 25, one of 26 whatever <u>it</u> is'</p>
<p>T2.1.3.2 Individual Work Station</p>		<p>James 'I have my own spot where I can be'</p> <p>James 'This is a picture of my desk. Its over in the corner and I just like it there. It's quiet and I have my own area'.</p> <p>James 'if I need some quiet time, I can go in there and <u>it</u> helps'</p> <p>Oliver 'Because like it helps me take my mind off the people the world kind of'.</p> <p>Oliver 'My individual workstation [in response to being asked where he preferred to work]</p> <p>Oliver 'the books are organised into different slots' [in response to being asked why he liked his individual work station].</p> <p>Oliver 'My workspace [in response to being asked where he goes to if he is upset over something].</p>

Figure 4.17. Matching Data Extracts to Codes and Themes in Microsoft Word

This provided me with a bird's eye view of the data which aided me in defining and naming the themes. The process of defining the themes provided clarity as the boundaries for each theme became clearly demarcated. The following extract from the reflexive research diary describes this process.

"I came out of NVivo to define the themes. Reading through corresponding data extracts and grouping them together in a Word document was helpful. The data extracts in each theme provided clarity that the theme was developed around a central organising concept. The next step was to write a brief synopsis for each theme. This again provided further clarity as the boundaries of the theme were clearly demarcated."

(NM Reflexive Research Diary)

This process resulted in the development of three themes Figure 4.18.

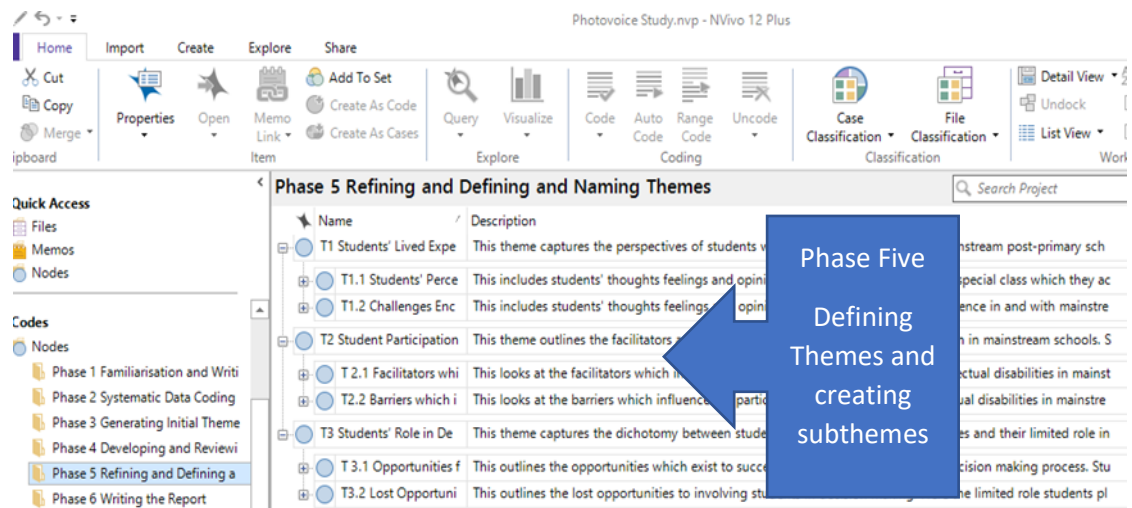


Figure 4.18. Defining and Naming Themes

Naming the themes was somewhat challenging, Braun and Clarke (2022) advocate a name that is ‘punchy informative’ (p.36). This resulted in several iterations of names, each one getting closer to what the theme encapsulated. The following extract from the reflexive research diary captures this process.

“While driving my car, or while I was out walking or making the dinner, I would muse over names. I went through them with anybody who would listen, including my children. I wrote them on paper, I wrote them on sticky notes, I crossed out words, added words or changed the word order. All the time going back to the definition of the theme and data extracts. After this process of percolation, I reached my ah ha moment!”

(NM Reflexive Research Diary)

Each theme consisted of two subthemes which in turn contained several elements. This provided a structure to support me in the write up of the analysis. A thematic map (Figure 4.19) illustrated the connections between the themes and subthemes which developed from the codebook.

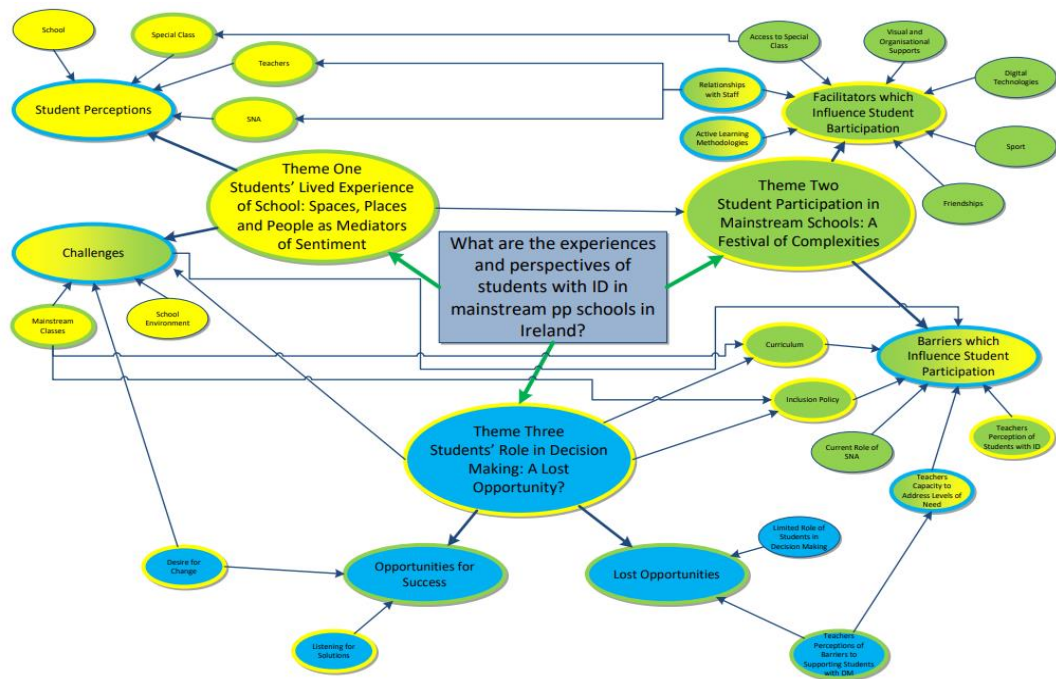


Figure 4.19. Thematic Map of Findings

A sample of Phase Five Code book is evident in Figure 4.20. The complete Phase Five codebook is available in Appendix Z.

Phase Five- Defining Refining and Naming Themes (3 themes refined, defined and named at phase 5)	Units of Meaning Coded	Files
T1 Students' Lived Experience of School Spaces, Places and People as Mediators of Sentiment.	265	28
T1.1 Students' Perceptions of Support	183	26
T1.2 Challenges Encountered	82	20
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.	676	30
T 2.1 Facilitators which influence student participation	555	30
T2.2 Barriers which influence student participation.	121	1
T3 Students' Role in Decision Making A Lost Opportunity	258	28
T 3.1 Opportunities for Success	171	22
T3.2 Lost Opportunities	87	20

Figure 4.20. Sample from Phase Five Codebook

4.11.6 Phase Six Writing the Report

Writing the report is a final stage in the analytic process. It is through this that analysis takes shape in and through writing. However, writing is a key component of all stages of RTA. I made use of, annotations, memos, reflexive journal entries throughout the process which documented the research process and her journey in becoming a researcher (Appendix AA). Phase Six provides the opportunity to pull these together to finalise the report to bring the story to life (Braun and Clarke 2022). This story was brought to life in Chapter Five as the experiences and perspectives of participating students were presented and illustrated using their voices and photography. The story was further developed by ascertaining the perceptions of SETs and SENCOs from participating schools. This report honours these voices in a trustworthy and credible manner.

4.12 Trustworthiness

Quality indicators are dependent on the type, approach and purpose of a study (Mertens 2020). Validity and reliability are identified as indicators of quality research. However, reliability and validity are often referred to as terms better suited to quantitative research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018). Concern that the language of quantitative research could not adequately account for rigour in qualitative research, Guba and Lincoln (1985) created a new language for qualitative rigour. They recontextualised validity and reliability under the umbrella term of trustworthiness (Morse 2012) Trustworthiness can be assessed by standards such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lincoln and Guba 1985) and replaced the quantitative concepts of internal validity, external validity, reliability, objectivity (Table 4.8). Authenticity was further added for qualitative research (Mertens 2020).

Table 4.8. Quality Indicators in Qualitative and Quantitative Research (adapted from Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018, p.248)

Quality Indicators in Qualitative and Quantitative Research	
Qualitative Research	Quantitative
Credibility: the truth value	Internal validity
Transferability: generalisability	External Validity
Dependability: consistency	Reliability
Confirmability: neutrality	Objectivity

The evidence of these standards requires careful documentation throughout all stages of the research process (Mertens 2020). Many of these standards align with the axiological assumption of the transformative paradigm (Mertens 2020). For transformative researcher’s rigorous quality research and ethics are interdependent. All research activity in an exercise in research ethics (Clegg and Silfe 2009) however, the transformative paradigm places significant emphasis on issues of fairness, ontological authenticity, voice, critical reflexivity, reciprocity, and praxis or social change (Mertens 2020). The ethical concerns in this study were outlined in Section 4.6.1.

Steps taken by me, the researcher, to support the credibility of this study include; prolonged and persistent engagement with participants, member checking and triangulation of data. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich descriptions of the time, place, context and culture to support readers understanding of the complexity of the settings and participants (Mertens 2020). Dependability and confirmability were maintained by having a detailed audit trail, field notes and a reflexive research journal to provide the chain of evidence necessary (Yin 2018). Furthermore, dialogic engagement (Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carl 2021) with supervisors as critical friends throughout the design, data collection and stages of analysis provided insight and guidance to enhance the dependability and confirmability of the research process. A reflexive approach was adopted throughout

the study to guide and examine the researchers' own values, biases and beliefs to identify the impact of these on the research process. Details of the steps to support the quality, trustworthiness, validity and reliability of this study will be discussed below.

4.13 Credibility

4.13.1 Prolonged and Persistent Engagement

Validity and trustworthiness in qualitative research refer to the extent to which findings represent participant's experiences (Ravitch and Mettenfelner 2021). To ascertain the experiences of students with ID in post-primary schools in Ireland Photovoice as a data collection tool was utilised to empower and support student to give voice to their lived experiences in line with the transformative paradigm. This takes prolonged and persistent engagement, however there is no hard and fast rule of how long this should be (Mertens 2020). To ensure credibility while planning the stages of data collection I sought advice on the number of visits to a school that would be necessary to ensure the integrity of a Photovoice project. I contacted Professor Mel Ainscow by email (Nov 2021) who is an experienced Photovoice researcher. I outlined the number and brief details of proposed visits which at the time was five visits in my data collection plan. Professor Ainscow kindly replied and highlighted the necessity to be pragmatic about the number of visits, not least because the research requires support by staff in schools. He also confirmed that a five-day approach was reasonable. This five-day approach was later adapted in response to feedback from participants and was integrated into the data collection phases as outlined in Table 4.10.

4.13.2 Member Checking

Participants in this study took on the role of co-researchers and co-creators of meaning. Although member checking is a recommendation of quality research it is a necessary aspect in Photovoice studies. Member checks according to Mertens (2020) involve the researcher seeking verification from participants about the constructs that are developing as a result of data collection and analysis. In Photovoice studies, member checking to go beyond data validation to deeper, more abstract analysis

(Morse 2012). This data interpretation and analysis were the domain of participants and occurred in the Narration, Ideation and Exhibition stages in this Photovoice project. This informed the second stage of data analysis undertaken by the researcher as outlined in Section 4.11. This repositioning of traditional research roles places power, voice and agency in the hands of participants which enhances the fidelity and rigour of the research.

4.13.3 Triangulation

Triangulation attempts to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one viewpoint (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018). It supports consistency of evidence across the sources of data (Mertens 2020). Methodological triangulation (Figure 4.21) was achieved using a range of data collection techniques. These included the semi-structured interviews and the Photovoice method with student participants, the focus group interview with SETs and SENCOs and the researcher's reflexive research journal and field notes in a data collection memo as data collection instruments.

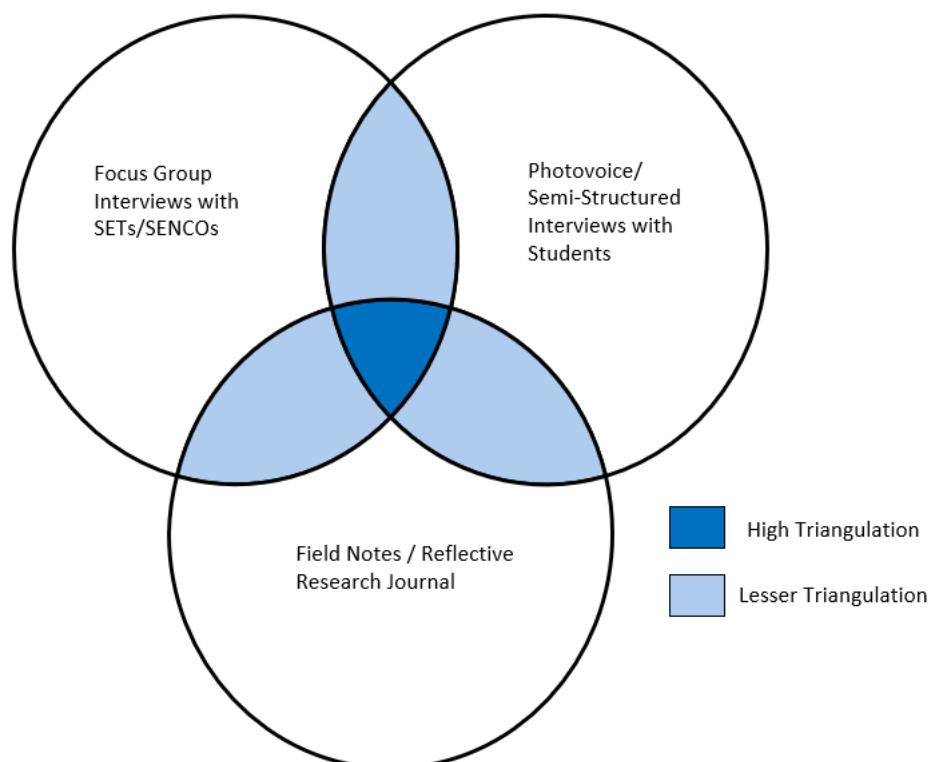


Figure 4.21. Methodological Triangulation

4.14. Transferability

4.14.1 Rich Descriptions

Transferability relates to the generalisability of the research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018; Mertens 2020). It was my responsibility to provide enough detailed descriptions of the site, participants, context, time and place in the form of tick descriptions to support the reader to ascertain the degree of similarity between the study site and receiving context (Mertens 2020). These descriptions were provided throughout this chapter and are further detailed in Chapter Five

4.15. Dependability and Confirmability

4.15.1 Audit Trail

Dependability and confirmability required me to detail each step of the design process to provide a chain of evidence (Yin 2018). This was achieved through an audit trail (Morse 2012). The audit trail allowed me to document all research choices and decisions in the study (Section 4.11). It was used internally by me to track and document changes in thinking and to capture ah ha moments, and to chronicle my growth in thinking (Morse 2012). It can also be shared with peers to determine if conclusions are supported by the data (Mertens 2020). In this sense audit trails require both a reflective and reflexive approach.

4.16. Reflexivity

A reflexive approach was adopted throughout the entire research process from conception through to presentation and write up. Reflexivity requires a systematic examination of ones' identity, positionality, biases, assumptions, values and subjectivities' (Ravitch and Mettenfelner 2021, p. 53). Chapter One, Section 1.2, contains a biographical statement which outlines my positionality regarding inclusion, childhood and children's rights. Furthermore, Chapter Four Section 4.3.1 describes my axiological, ontological and epistemological assumptions which shaped, modified and altered the research design process in response to engagement with empirical and methodological literature. Acknowledging such subjectivity is central to rigorous and valid research and is the responsibility of the

researcher to understand the nature of these subjectivities and their impact on the research design and analysis (Ravitch and Mettenfelner 2021; Patton 2015).

Therefore, a reflexive research journal (Section 4.10.2) was used to chronicle thoughts, questions, struggles, ideas the researcher experienced during the various stages of the research process. Similarly, a field notes from a Data Collection Memo (Section 4.10.3) were used to record observations and interactions with participants, adaptations to stages of the Photovoice method, reflections on the researcher's interviewing technique and ways the researcher was influencing the data. The goal of field notes was to generate and clarify thinking and meaning making in real time (Ravitch and Mettenfelner 2021). This has the advantage of both providing data to refer to while simultaneously capturing the development of a researcher's thinking which add rigour to the research process (Ravitch and Mettenfelner 2021).

4.17 Limitations

While every effort was made to ensure the trustworthiness of this study by underpinning the research design with an ethical framework rooted in a transformative paradigm, limitations still remain. The challenges and limitation of using Photovoice as a data collection tool were discussed in detail in section 4.10.

4.18 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the research question from a methodological standpoint. The principal research question, the aims and embedded questions were listed. The chosen paradigm along with its axiological, ontological and epistemological assumptions were described. The theoretical framework which operationalises these assumptions were outlined. Furthermore, the relationship between Lundy's Framework of Participation (2007) and the research design process was illustrated. The challenges, benefits and ethical implications for conducting research with children was interrogated. A description for the methodology, data collection tools and the data analysis procedures were described. Measures to support the validity and trustworthiness of the study were outlined. A reflexive approach was adopted to enhance the quality of study. This was evident in all stages from the research design to the data collection and analysis using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun

and Clarke 2006; 2022). In conclusion, this chapter attempted to outline the researcher's choices, decisions, behaviours, biases and assumptions and how these impacted on both the analysis of data and the findings. Chapter Five and Six will present the findings in relation to themes which emerged from the active, reflective engagement with the data. It will answer the research question and embedded questions. Finally, it will discuss findings in relation to wider research in inclusive education and children's rights.

Chapter Five

Findings: Voices of Students

5.1 Introduction

Chapter Four reviewed the research process from a methodological standpoint. The research aims and questions were presented. This was followed by an examination of the philosophical and theoretical frameworks which shaped the research design from conception to completion. An examination of children's role in research focused on the ethical and methodological considerations which underpin participatory enquiry. Conventional methods used to involve children in the research process were explored and Photovoice was proposed as a means to elicit the voices of students with intellectual disabilities (ID) in an inclusive participatory manner.

This chapter will present the findings which have emerged from this Photovoice study. Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke 2022) was used to analyse data from semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation interviews and focus group interviews. The reflexivity inherent in RTA honoured the my axiological, ontological and epistemological assumptions which were outlined in Chapter Three. A Reflexive Journal captured my engagement with RTA. Field notes supported this process as they recorded observations and interactions with participants during the Photovoice method. These observations and reflections led to deeper understanding and engagement with the data. Examples are provided in Appendix AA.

The findings offer insights into the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. Three themes developed which answer the research and embedded questions. These three themes will be presented (Figure 5.1) and discussed in terms of their wider relevance to inclusive education in Ireland.

5.2 Presentation of Findings (Voices of Students)



Figure 5.1. Presentation of Findings (Voices of Students)

These themes and relevant subthemes have been mapped in Figure 5.2. This illustrates the interconnectedness of the themes and subthemes as they developed through engagement and re-engagement with the data. As this is a Photovoice Study, qualitative data in the form of quotes from participants, and photographs taken by participants, will be integrated to support the reporting of themes.

Theme One reports on the lived experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools. Although at times this is supported by reflections from field notes, this theme presents findings from the perspectives of the students in this study. In contrast, Theme Two and Theme Three contain the voices and perspectives of both students and teachers. Importantly, this chapter will present the voices and perspectives of the students only. In places where it was considered useful, student voices are supported by reflections from the researcher's field notes and quotations from Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Special Education Needs Co-Ordinators (SENCOs) who participated in the focus group interview. Subsequently, Chapter Six will present findings from themes two and three from the

perspective of participating SETs and SENCOS. Separating the findings of these themes in this manner provides a platform for prioritising the voices and perspectives of students, while acknowledging the nuanced understanding which SETs and SENCOS can bring to further our understanding of these experiences. The focus on this investigation is on the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream schools. Therefore, findings from the voices of students merit its own chapter.

Firstly, an overview of the Photovoice method is warranted to contextualise the findings. This Photovoice study was conducted from 21 January to 25 May 2023. Thirteen students with a Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD) in four schools across Ireland participated. This study is not seeking to compare or contrast on gender, age, year group or school type, rather its focus is on the experiences and perspectives of students with an ID in mainstream schools. The aims are:

- To explore the experiences of students with ID in post-primary mainstream schools in Ireland;
- To operationalise students' rights to express a view and to have their views heard;
- To explore the barriers and facilitators to participation in decision making/ in the life of the school;
- To work with students as co-creators of meaning to develop insights for post-primary schools to enhance the participation of students with ID in decision making; and
- To use findings to potentially inform policy and practice to advance inclusive practices in post-primary schools in Ireland.

Students were supplied with an iPad and I provided training and guidance on suitable photographs students may wish to take. Students took photographs of aspects of their school which were meaningful to them. I met with participating students on four occasions, but this increased according to need, as outlined in Chapter Three.

5.3 Them One: Students' Lived Experience of School: Spaces, Places and People as Mediators of Sentiment.

This theme captures the perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. Sentiments are expressed through students' thoughts, feelings and opinions of spaces, places and people which constitute a support or challenge for students as they navigate their school day. In this theme, students' sentiments represent the complexity of the lived experience. Students expressed overall satisfaction with their experience in school. However, this satisfaction was influenced by support structures which enabled them to cope with challenges they face on a daily basis.

The theme *Students' Lived Experience of School: Spaces, Places and People as Mediators of Sentiment* is divided into two subthemes:

- (i) Students' Perceptions of Support.
- (ii) Challenges Encountered

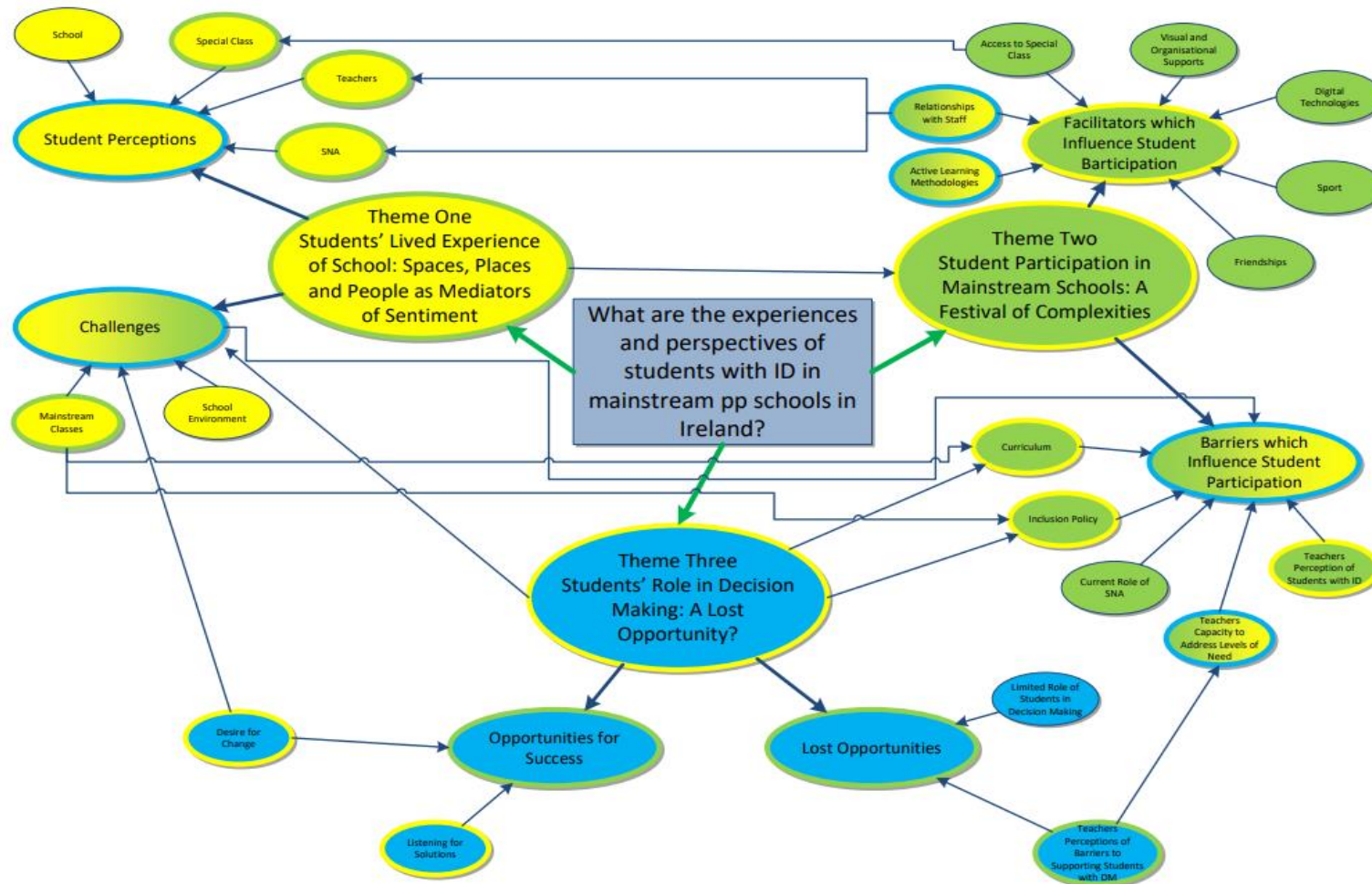


Figure 5.2. Thematic Map of Findings

5.3.1 (i) Students' Perceptions of Support

In this subtheme, students' perceptions of the supports they received are further divided into their perceptions of the school, the special class, Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and teachers. Findings from each of these areas will now be presented.

5.3.1.1 Students' Perceptions of School

Overall, students appeared satisfied with school. Students referred to school being *"fun"* (Daniel Semi-Structured Interview (SSI)), and *"great craic"* (Evan SSI) [Great craic is a term used to describe fun in Ireland]. John noted *"I enjoy myself in school"* (Photo-Elicitation Interview (PEI)), and seemingly to convince the researcher of the quality of his school, James remarked, *"it's a proper good school like"* (SSI). When asked why they came to their school, John, Paula and James identified friends as a driving factor. Similarly, Jane was influenced by her sister who previously attended the school, *"my sister [] and she went here, and she asked me about it and they are so pleasant and nice and kind"* (SSI). In contrast, the size of the school and available space in the building was an important factor for Sam, who is a wheelchair user *"it big and spacious"* (SSI).

Students appeared to place value on resources and structures which schools utilise to respond to students' needs. When asked if there are aspects of school which cause difficulty, Evan noted, *"maybe, like maybe"*, but quickly followed with, *"not really like, I have everything, I have the laptop, I have everything."* This may suggest that although Evan experiences some difficulties in school, particularly in relation to learning, the support the laptop brings is highly valued, as it helps him manage this difficulty.

The value placed by students on resources and structures were starkly illustrated by Sam who took photographs of a wheelchair ramp, wheelchair accessible toilet and lift in the school (Figure 5.3).



Figure 5.3. Wheelchair Accessible Facilities in School

When asked why he took the photographs, he replied, *“I think it is good to have a wheelchair toilet in here [] I need to use this toilet and I like it”* and *“if I don’t have a lift, I wouldn’t be able to go upstairs to class”* (PEI).

The schools’ responsiveness to students’ needs was further recognised by James who explained, *“I got moved into [autism special class (ASC)] because I was struggling”* (SSI). Concerns over the possible absence of support in the future were highlighted by Daniel who predicted *“when you go to college and you study something, it will be harder if there is no one there, SNA or teacher”* (SSI). He went on to say, *“I feel like there should be some support there, they’ll learn about it [subject] then”*. This exemplifies how the current support which he receives in school is valued, as it positively impacts on his learning.

Fears for future life outside of school were also articulated by Mary who was in her last year of post-primary education. Although school is difficult *“it’s kind of bad, sometimes it’s hard”* (SSI) and learning is a challenge, *“some classes are very hard”* and *“I want school to be easier for me”*, Mary also saw the positives of being in school *“I like to learn stuff, sometimes it’s kind of fun stuff”* (SSI). However, the anxiety surrounding her upcoming departure was evident, *“I don’t want to leave, [] I don’t want to go out ‘cause I will miss my friends and I will miss [SNA]”* (SSI). Despite the challenges she experienced in school, Mary identified her school as *“good, happy and excited”* (SSI).

The awareness and benefits of supports and facilities for students were once again illustrated by Paula. However, this time the facilities were viewed as a space for

others. Paula took a picture of The School Food Company which supplied lunch for students in the canteen, which is housed in the school library (Figure 5.4).



Figure 5.4. School Food Company and Library

When asked why she took a photograph of the School Food Company, Paula replied,

“That’s the canteen where most people get their lunch from there. That’s where most people sit down and eat as well. All the people sit in the library to have their food”.

(Paula PEI)

When asked to further elaborate, Paula appeared unwilling to discuss it further, however, she did say, *“I don’t get my lunch there anymore though” “I don’t eat my lunch in the canteen”* (PEI). This may indicate that Paula perceived a sense of disconnect or otherness; the canteen represented a space where she felt she no longer belonged. This was contrasted by a later photograph of the door of the ASC. When asked why she took this picture she replied, *“this is where I can go for my lunch”* and *“I like to eat my lunch in there”* (PEI). Other students also commented on the role of the special class as a support.

5.3.1.2 Students’ Perceptions of the Special Class

All students in this study were accessing the special class in their school. All schools operated an ASC, while one school also had a designated Emotional Behavioural Disorder (EBD) class. Twelve of the thirteen students in this study accessed the ASC and one student accessed the EBD class. Time spent in the special class varied from full placement to partial placement. Three out of the four schools used the ASC as part of the schools’ Continuum of Support (CoS) framework (DES 2007). This approach to provision was also evident where the student had a diagnosis of MGLD not Autism. Chapter Two, Section 2.9.5 details the arrangements for special class provision in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland. A multi-track approach to

provision sees support in mainstream schools offered through the CoS framework utilising in-class support or withdrawal approaches or through placement in a special class designated for a particular disability. However, since 2018 no new special classes designated as MGLD have been opened and none of the schools in this study had a special class designated at MGLD. In the absence of such a class, and in an effort to address the needs of their students with MGLD, three out of four schools in study used the ASC as part of their CoS. Table 5.1 outlines, the category of disability and provision of support for students in their schools in this study.

Table 5.1 Category of Disability and Provision of Support

Name of Student	Name of School	Category of Disability	Access to Mainstream Classes	Access to Autism Special Class	Access to EBD Class
Paula	A	MGLD Down Syndrome	Yes	Yes	N/A
John	A	MGLD	Yes	Yes	N/A
Jane	B	MGLD	Yes	Yes	N/A
Sam	B	MGLD/ Physical Disability	Yes	Yes	N/A
Mary	B	MGLD, Down Syndrome	Yes	Yes	N/A
Rory	C	Moderate General Learning Difficulty & Autism	No	Yes	N/A
Tom	C	MGLD & Autism	PE	Yes	N/A
James	C	MGLD & Dyspraxia	P.E & SPHE	Yes	N/A
Daniel	D	MGLD & Autism	Yes	Yes	N/A
Oliver	D	MGLD & Autism, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia	Yes	Yes	N/A
Evan	D	MGLD, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia	Yes	No	Yes
Avril	D	MGLD & Autism	Yes	Yes	N/A
Colm	D	MGLD & Autism, ADHD	Yes	Yes	N/A

Sentiments expressed about the special class were overwhelmingly positive. Avril, Colm, Paula, Sam, John and Daniel all recorded the special class as their favourite

place in school, while Evan matched his photograph of special class to the category; ‘what do you like best about school?’ Some students chose to photograph the door of the special class to illustrate their point while others took photographs inside the classroom (Figure 5.5).



Figure 5.5. Photographs of the Special Class representing students’ favourite place

Others such as Jane, Oliver, and James identified supports attached to the special class, such as the sensory room, as being their favourite thing about school. Students described the special class with love and affection, *“I love it, [special class], it’s a great place”* (Evan, PEI), it *“is where I like to go”* (Paula PEI), *“I love it so much, I love to learn and work there [] it makes me happy”* (Sam PEI), *“I like coming up here”* (Colm PEI). Others identified it as *“fun”* (Mary PEI), *“great craic”* (Evan PEI), and responded positively *“yeah”* [sounding very happy] when asked if the special class was a good space (Tom PEI).

Students demonstrated an awareness of the benefits of accessing the special class to support their learning. Evan highlighted the extra help that was available in the special class, *“there is loads of help there now”, “it’s better like one to one learning [], it’s kinda better, I learn more faster”* (Evan PEI). James described the help as being *“like having Resource [] down in the special class, I have an extra English class”* and *“I am getting better learning and learning more”* (SSI). Resource Teaching (See Chapter Two, Section 2.8) is often associated in schools with one-to-one or small group support and was introduced under the GAM (2005). Later, James described how the Level Two Learning Programme (L2LP), which he engaged with in the special class, supported his learning. This programme was unavailable to him when he was

accessing mainstream classes full-time. James was clearly aware of how this programme supports him,

“now that I am in [special class], it is easier because I am on a different level, like I was in Level 3 now I am on Level 2, I like it more because it was easier for me. I can do it at my own speed.”

James further described how assessment practices in the L2LP were beneficial to him,

“we have folders and we can take pictures of our work and doing our work and inspectors come in and they see what you have in your folders, that’s how it works in [special class] but others have tests, but I do the folders, and its way easier for me.”

James (SSI)

Others spoke of the flexibility and individuality of support available in the special class. Avril outlined how music helps her focus on her work,

“in [special class] there is a kind of stereo [] and that also helps if I am working on something and that’s playing off in the distance, that helps me to focus on work.”

(Avril PEI)

This theme of flexibility was further expanded by Oliver who explained, that although he had fixed days for accessing the special class he could use it when necessary *“sometimes when I am struggling, I just come up here”* (PEI).

Students also spoke about the staff in the special class being friendly and supportive. James noted,

“if you are stuck they will help you and if you get a question wrong it doesn’t really matter, they will tell you, ‘just try again’ .”

(James SSI).

Despite struggling with verbal communication on the day of his PEI, Colm used a photograph of the door of the special class to match to a written description on his prompt sheet where he described the special class as *‘relaxing friendly and nice’* (Prompt Sheet).

In summary, the happiness students felt with the support they receive from accessing the special class is exemplified by the following two excerpts,

“I don’t mind not being with my class, I’d rather be out there [special class], you can get your work done easily, it’s a great class like, the students are unreal.”

(Evan SSI)

Similarly, in response to being asked how the information in the photograph (which was a picture of the special class) could be used to make his school day better, John responded, *“put me into [special class] for longer maybe”*, when asked if he would like that, he said *“ah, I wouldn’t mind it, I’d still do the subjects that I do”* (PEI).

5.3.1.3 Students’ Perceptions of Special Needs Assistants

Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) appeared to be highly valued and respected by students in this study. SNAs were credited with supporting students with academic learning. Colm identified the SNA as the person who helped him with his work. Equally, Oliver reported *“there is a SNA called [], he helps me a lot”* (SSI). Later, during the PEI, Oliver took a photograph of his Mathematics copy, to represent something he finds difficult in school. When asked if he gets support with Mathematics, he replied, *“oh yes [SNA] helps me with it”*. The theme of SNAs supporting students with academic work continued as Jane declared that the SNA supported her with *“tricky stuff, hard stuff, Maths or anything”* (SSI). In the same vein, Daniel noted that *“SNAs will make me learn better in other subjects and stuff and make me very intelligent”* (SSI). Additionally, Evan asserted the SNA supported him *“if I am struggling with something like Maths or English”* (SSI).

James outlined how the SNA took on a supportive role to encourage him to keep working,

“like they [SNA] will push you to try do it, they will be with you and they will push you to do it. You can get it done by yourself like, but if you were really stuck they would help you.”

(James SSI)

This support was also reported by Avril who noted,

“well in class work and in general, if they can see I am struggling or upset they will come over and ask, are you ok? “

(Avril SSI)

The SNA was also attributed with differentiating and identifying key aspects of

learning for students in mainstream classes. Paula described how woodwork was difficult for her, but the SNA *“will give me what I have to write down”* (SSI) whereas, *“others will write down a long piece, but I don’t have to do that”*. Furthermore, the SNA showed her what to do, *“then with the stuff I have to make, she will show me what to do and where the lines are and stuff”* (SSI).

John further elaborated on the support provided by the SNA in woodwork. In the SSI, John identified that the SNA helped him with writing tasks and identifying what to do. In the follow-up PEI, John indicated a clear delineation of jobs, by stating the SNA *“might help when I am stuck”*, in this case stuck meant having difficulty with writing or identifying what to do, but the physical acts of the cutting, hammering and sawing, he stated, *“that’s my job”*. In these two examples the SNA was instrumental in identifying and showing students what they needed to do in order to succeed.

In a powerful tribute to the role of the SNA, John, in the following excerpt reflected what would happen to him, if he did not have the support of a SNA in school,

*“If I didn’t have an SNA I would probably be more behind in school. I would get in trouble because I wouldn’t know what to do, **she helps me a lot**”*
[emphasis from John].

(John SSI)

Students also demonstrated an emotional connection to SNAs who supported them in school. Jane expressed her love for the SNAs in her setting, *“I love SNAs, I love [name of SNA] and I love [name of SNA]”* (SSI). Mary explained how the SNA who supported her *“is the greatest friend in the world [] she is the greatest”* (SSI). The importance of positive interactions between the SNA and students was demonstrated when Mary spoke about the SNA supporting her with work *“[SNA] helps me doing work but I might get frustrated”* she continued outlining that the *“[SNA] is my best friend, I want [SNA] to help me, not be mad, I don’t want that”*. An SNA being mad at this student was the one thing she wished to avoid.

The positive perceptions students had of the support they received from SNAs contrasted with their sentiments expressed about the supports they received from teachers. These perceptions will now be explored.

5.3.1.4 Students' Perceptions of Teachers

Data reveal students' perceptions of support they received from teachers is dependent on where the teaching took place. A less positive experience of receiving support in the mainstream classroom was evident. Although Daniel noted *"in general [], I think like there is always good teachers that will support you throughout your years in school"* (SSI), this positive outlook was not borne out in the data from others. When asked if he receives support with his learning from teachers, Oliver replied *"no, just SNAs"* (SSI). Later, in the PEI, Oliver outlined Mathematics as an area of difficulty for him. He spoke positively about the help he received from the SNA with this difficulty. When asked if he also gets help from a teacher, he acknowledged he did, but appeared to value the support he received from the SNA more. In response to being asked if he received support with his learning from teachers, Colm noted *"sometimes, they [teachers] would come here and help me with my work and sometimes they wouldn't"* (SSI). After speaking positively about the support she received from the SNA, Avril was asked if she received any other support to help her with learning. She promptly identified her laptop as a source of support in spelling and reading. Interestingly, she never identified teachers as a source of support for learning. John spoke about receiving extra help in certain subjects, *"I get extra help in Maths and sometimes I get extra help in English and that's kind of it"* (SSI). However, this help was provided in the special class. John identified time as a possible barrier for teachers helping him in mainstream classes *"sometimes they help you, but not all the time, if they are busy they probably won't"* (SSI).

The perception of support from teachers in the special class was more positive. John noted the support he received from teachers in the special class was beneficial,

"they [teachers] help you if you are struggling with Maths and you don't really understand it. The teachers will help and explain what you are meant to do."

(John SSI).

James spoke about the teaching he received from the teachers in the special class as *"like, having Resource"* (SSI). Later, in the PEI, he explained one of the reasons why he found Mathematics easier in the special class, *"they [teachers] won't pressure you*

if you get an answer wrong, they just tell you to try again” (PEI). This supportive approach to teaching demonstrated by teachers in the special class was also identified by Mary, who noted *“every teacher helps me with when I do get sad or mad either or tired sometimes. All the time feels good”* (SSI).

Examination of the data reveal that students were happy in their respective schools, and they perceived the support they received as beneficial to them. Supports, particularly the special class and SNA, aided them in overcoming some of the challenges they encountered on a daily basis. The next section outlines these challenges which students with ID encountered in school.

5.3.2 (ii) Challenges Encountered

In this subtheme students’ perceptions of the challenges they encountered in mainstream schools are divided into challenges with mainstream classes and challenges with the school environment.

5.3.2.1 Mainstream Classes

Data in this study reveal that students experienced difficulty with Mathematics more than any other subject. Oliver, Jane, Mary, Evan, Avril, John and James expressed this difficulty. Oliver noted that *“it’s [Mathematics] difficult work”* (PEI). Avril explained that Mathematics was her least favourite subject in school because *“I really struggle with it”* (SSI). While Evan identified *“work”* (SSI) in Mathematics as his least favourite thing. James identified Mathematics as his least favourite *“because it is complicated, it wrecks my head like”* (SSI). To support students with this difficulty, Jane, Mary and James received their Mathematics classes in the special class only. Oliver, John and Evan received extra support with Mathematics in the special class.

Difficulty with time management, organisational skills and using support structures such as lockers between mainstream classes were cited as an area of concern for some students. Avril used a photograph of a clock to illustrate this. (Figure 5.6). *“I struggle with time and I am really bad at time management”* (PEI)



Figure 5.6. Photograph of a Clock: Used to Illustrate Difficulty with Time

Management

When asked how this impacted her school day she explained,

“if I need to get my stuff ready for the next class I either do it 5 mins too late or 5 mins too early and this then sets off a kind of chain reaction of either being really early or being really late throughout the day.”

(Avril PEI)

Likewise, James identified a difficulty with getting organised for classes in the morning,

“we have to go to the locker and our first class starts anyway so you have to go to your locker and get your books for the first two classes and then at break you have to go back and get the next two books, for your other class and you have to do that, that’s the way it is.”

(James SSI)

A lack of differentiation in mainstream classes [researchers’ interpretation] to support students to engage in activities was noted by some students in this study. Both John and Oliver spoke about the difficulty they experienced with sewing in Home Economics. John took a photograph of a pin cushion he made to illustrate his point (Figure 5.7).



Figure 5.7. Pin Cushion Made in Home Economics

He explained how he liked Home Economics, but,

“the sewing, I wasn’t great at it, I was struggling to put the needle into the thing [] I tried my best but I couldn’t get it in.”

(John PEI).

When asked if there was anything that could have made it easier, he stated,

“maybe take the fluffy bit on it, maybe take that off and make that bigger, make the hole bigger to put it in.”

(John PEI).

John was asked to clarify if it was the eye of the needle he wanted bigger, he confirmed it was. When asked how could the information from the photograph be used to make his day better, he replied,

“just by making it easier maybe, maybe like, maybe use something without the needle just with bigger things and try and thread it and get it through.”

(John PEI)

Oliver reported a similar difficulty with sewing in his Home Economics class. He also liked Home Economics and identified it as something that helped him learn in school. However, sewing in Home Economics caused him particular difficulty, *“I hate sewing, it’s the worst part. I sewed a cushion and it took me ages”* (PEI). Oliver was asked to explain the difficulty some more, he said *“trying to thread the needle, the thread through the needle, it was just so [emphasis from Oliver] difficult”*, he further elaborated that, *“the thread, it’s like the needle is so small you can barely see it”* (PEI). In this instance Oliver was supplied with a bigger needle at a later date, which he said *“that helped”* (PEI).

Students identified learning being more difficult in mainstream classes. Mary spoke how *“some of the classes are a bit hard for me, Irish is a bit hard”* (SSI). James reflected on his experience of learning in mainstream classes prior to moving to the special class, *“it’s just like, it was hard to learn. It was getting harder and harder, now that I am in [special class] it is easier”* (SSI). He also explained that there was little time to consolidate learning or practice skills, *“if you got a question wrong in the mainstream class like, you can’t try it again, you have one attempt, you can’t try it again”* (SSI). The necessity to get things correct first time in mainstream was further elaborated in the PEI. James spoke about the difficulty of picking the correct tools for the job in Woodwork: *“picking a tool for like Woodwork, it’s kind of complicated,*

you have to, if you want to get the project right you have to get the measurement right” (PEI). The pressure to get things right in mainstream classes was in stark contrast to his experience in the special class, “they [teachers] won’t pressure you if you get the answer wrong” (PEI) “when you get a question wrong, it doesn’t really matter, they will just tell you try it again” (SSI) (previously used quote Section 4.3.1.4 Students’ Perception of Teachers).

Finally, class tests in mainstream classes were perceived by some students as stressful and difficult. When asked what was difficult for Sam in school, he replied,

“Difficult. Difficult like, [emphasis from Sam] I find it difficult, like doing tests, tests, I get stressed with tests, I have Home Economics, is where I do tests in Home Economics”.

(Sam SSI)

John also spoke about difficulty with mainstream class tests, in particular in relation to Geography. John explained there is a lot to write down in Geography *“I suppose I know it, but when in a test I would forget it” (PEI)*. Speaking about the time of year that was approaching, Evan identified *“we are coming up to the worst time now as we have exams coming up and everything” (PEI)*. These experiences are in contrast to James, who explained that while others have class tests in his school, he didn’t, he followed the L2LP programme which uses continuous assessment to demonstrate students’ learning; this he explained *“is way easier for me” (SSI)*.

5.3.2.2 School Environment

The school environment presented significant difficulties for a number of students in this study. Difficulties with lighting, stairs, noise and signs were identified by autistic students and a difficulty with access to a school building was experienced by Sam who is a wheelchair user. All students used photographs to illustrate these difficulties.

Figure 4.8 is a photograph of a hallway in a school. Both the lighting and the length of the hallway posed a challenge to Avril, who walked through it several times day.



Figure 5.8. Photograph of a Hallway in School

When describing the challenge of navigating this space, Avril explained, *“it’s the lights [], I find they are either very bright or dim”* (PEI). Avril used words like *“harsh”* and *“blinding”* to describe these lights. (SSI). However, it isn’t just the lights that caused her difficulty, the length and narrowness of this space made her feel *“a bit claustrophobic and just squished”* (PEI). Avril also spoke about the *“dreaded stairs”* (PEI) (Figure 5.9). She outlined *“I hate that staircase coming up the back way because it is so narrow”* (SSI).

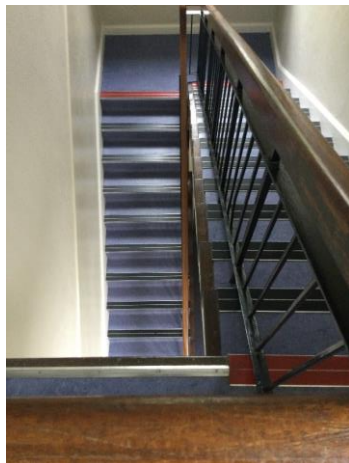


Figure 5.9. “The Dreaded Staircase”

The steps on these stairs presented a challenge as *“they are very close together and they are very squished”* (PEI). Each day Avril used this staircase as it was the quickest

way to get between classrooms. When it is busy it became more “*cramped*” (SSI). When asked if there is an alternative to taking the stairs she outlined there was an elevator in the school, but students who can walk were not allowed to use it.

The staircase was also identified by Oliver. Oliver first mentioned the stairs in the SSI as something he would like to change about the school, “*I hate the stairs*” (SSI). However, he was unwilling at the time to explain why. During the PEI, Oliver presented a number of photographs of the stairs (Figure 5.10).



Figure 5.10. The Stairs

Oliver noted that climbing up and down the stairs with a heavy bag on his back was challenging for him. He went on to explain “*one time, I fell down the stairs, I missed a couple of steps and fell down*” (PEI). Now, he explained “*it’s a fear*” (PEI). When asked if he could use the lift in the school he explained that that he couldn’t , “*it is for wheelchair people or if you had a sore leg or something*” (PEI). Oliver took a number of photographs of the lift in the school (Figure 5.11). Originally, I interpreted the first photograph as a photograph of the stairs. However, Oliver explained “*this is the first aid room kind of*” (PEI). Knowing the stairs was a difficulty for him I asked if the picture represented the first aid room or the stairs? He clarified it was the stairs, but the important aspect in the photographs which he was showing, was the lift beside the stairs “*but that’s the lift [showing several pictures of the lift]*” (PEI). When asked why he took the photographs he explained “*it’s like nice and you just press a button and stay still*” this is in stark contrast to his experience of using the stairs. To further understand the issue and not wanting the student to perceive that he was to blame for not asking to use the lift, I asked if he would like to use the lift, to which he said he used it once to move books, and confirmed he would like to use it more.



Figure 5.11. The Lift is for Wheelchairs

Noise was identified as a difficulty for both Daniel and Avril. Daniel took photographs of the fire alarm and fire extinguisher to illustrate this (Figure 5.12)



Figure 5.12. Fire Alarm and Extinguisher “It’s a Very Sensory Thing”

Daniel wrote on his prompt sheet that he finds it difficult when the fire alarm goes off in school. In the PEI he explained this in more detail,

“because of the noise when it goes off, it’s loud and stuff [] it’s actually a very sensory thing to have the noise of it and it’s very loud and its very delicate.”

(Daniel PEI)

When asked if there was anything that could help when the fire alarm went off, he was unsure but noted, *“it’s really loud on the ears and it affects the ears and, in the head, as well, it stresses people”* (PEI). Noise was also identified by Avril who struggled with *“loud noise and stuff”* (SSI). Meeting friends during lunch in the canteen was a period of significant difficulty: *“it is really loud especially at lunch time”* (SSI). When the noise becomes too much for Avril she used her headphones to reduce the volume.

Signs without images presented a difficulty for Rory. Rory, took a picture of a wet floor sign (Figure 5.13), as it indicated the floor was wet and slippery. Signs which do not have clear visuals caused confusion and difficulty for Rory in school. A conversation with the SNA who supported Rory explained the meaning behind this picture “the SNA explained that he [Rory] took these [photographs] as he does not like signs without images” (NM Field Notes).



Figure 5.13. Wet Floor Sign

Finally, the difficulty Sam experienced with the school environment was due to the actions of other students. Students would throw their bags on the floor, and this prevented Sam from accessing areas of the school, such as the PE hall. Sam took a photograph of how this impeded his access (Figure 5.14).

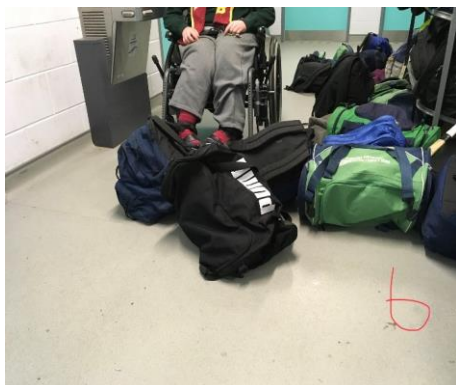


Figure 5.14. Bags in the Way

Sam explained how this was his least favourite thing about school,

“people just throw their bags in the way of me, I don’t like it, I don’t like it. I don’t like it, they just throw their bags and they should put them up out of the way.”

(Sam PEI)

When asked how it makes him feel, he said, “*disappointed*” “*I would love them to put their bags out of their way*”. There were shelves for students to use to store their bags, but most ignored them and threw their bags on the floor. This has resulted in Sam being frustrated and exasperated. During the final stage of the Photovoice method, Sam had the opportunity to share his experiences with his peers, school staff and a member of the student council during the show and tell exhibition. With my help, Sam created a PowerPoint (PPT) with his pictures. He selected the pictures and narrated the text for me to enter on the PPT. During the show and tell he used his PPT which he titled ‘My School Ideas’ to outline what was working well for him in school and what was not working for him. This allowed him to tell the audience how the bags on the floor were causing him difficulty and he asked for this to stop happening. Figure 5.15 illustrates two slides from his PPT presentation.

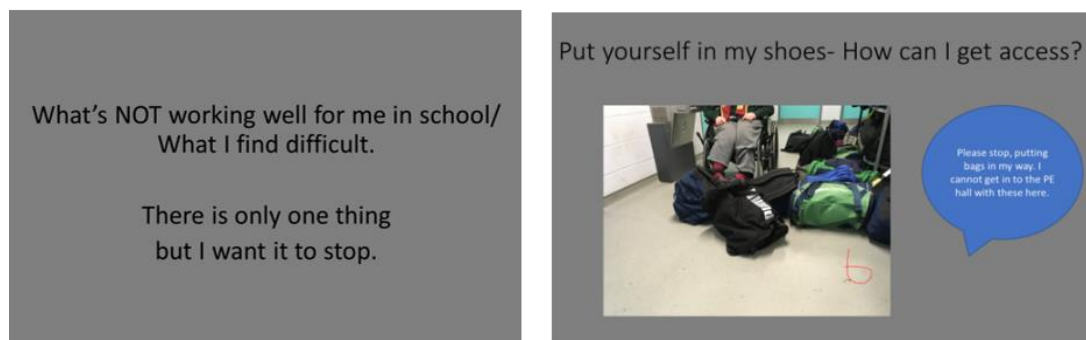


Figure 5.15. Slides from PowerPoint Presentation for Sam’s Show and Tell

This theme captures the experiences and perspectives of a small sample of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. Sentiments expressed by the students outlined an overall satisfaction with their daily experience of school. However, students in this study experienced daily challenges which threatened their happiness. In this theme spaces, places and people represent the complexity of lived experience as students navigated their school day.

5.4.1 Theme Two: Student Participation in Mainstream School A Festival of Complexities.

This theme outlines the facilitators and barriers which influence student participation in mainstream schools. Student Participation here is defined as students being active and meaningfully engaged in teaching and learning in the

classroom; and students' feeling of belonging to the school community (Bergman and Westman 2018). Factors which influence meaningful participation of students with ID in mainstream schools are complex.

In this theme inclusion policy is presented as a barrier to participation as policy informs school and classroom practice. Teachers' capacity to enhance participation may be constrained by inclusion policy as it currently stands. Findings highlight that meaningful participation of students with ID in teaching and learning requires a more flexible approach, and a reimagining of support structures. The designation of special classes based on categories of disability is problematic for schools who require a more responsive approach based on students' needs.

The theme Student Participation: A Festival of Complexities is divided into two subthemes:

- (i) Facilitators Which Influence Student Participation: Students' Perspectives
- (ii) Barriers Which influence Student Participation: Teachers' Perspectives
(Chapter Five)

Findings from the voices and perspectives of students informed the development of the first subtheme and will be presented in this chapter. The second subtheme reports on the barriers which influence student participation. Although barriers were implied by students especially when they spoke of the difficulties they experienced in school, this subtheme is informed by the voices and perspectives of participating SETs and SENCOs. Findings from this subtheme are presented in Chapter Five.

5.4.2 (i) Facilitators Which Influence Student Participation

In this subtheme the facilitators which influence the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools will be presented. Facilitators include: students' relationship with staff, peer friendships, access to special class, active learning methodologies, digital technologies, visual and organisational supports and sport.

5.4.2.1 Relationships with Staff

Data in this study reveal students' relationships with staff were critical to enhancing a sense of belonging and participation in school. The relationship was not solely dictated by role or position of the staff in the school, but rather by positive interactions staff had with students and how these interactions made students feel. Positive interactions included staff showing interest in students, and staff being friendly, fun and supportive.

The importance of these relationships to students was demonstrated by the volume of photographs students took to represent these relationships. Although students could not take photographs of people they used images of doors, buildings and classrooms to represent the staff who were meaningful to them. Avril used a photograph of an open door to the staff room to illustrate the support she feels in school (Figure 5.16).



Figure 5.16. Open Door to the Staff Room

When Avril was asked to describe her photograph and why she chose to take it, she explained *“this is what I like about the school there is always a door open if you need help or somebody to talk to”* (PEI). Having somebody to talk to was also noted by Jane and Sam. Jane took two photographs of a classroom to represent a teacher she feels close to (Figure 5.17).



Figure 5.17. Photograph of a Classroom Used to Represent a Teacher

Although this teacher no longer taught Jane, she provided time, when possible, during the school day so *“I can come over to her and have a chat with her”* (Jane PEI). When asked why she visited this teacher, Jane replied *“she is nice, I like [name of teacher]”* she went on to explain,

“I like to visit her, she is nice and I like [name of teacher] [], I visit her when she is free and she tells me about [name of teacher’s dog].”

(Jane PEI).

Jane was asked how the information from this photograph could be used to make her school day better, she promptly replied, *“go to Ms [teachers name] and have a chat”* (Jane PEI). Similarly, Sam used a photograph of a school building to represent a teacher who he feels close to (Figure 5.18). This teacher’s classroom is in this building, *“upon seeing this photograph Sam became extremely happy, he was smiling and looking at it for a few minutes before talking”* (NM Field Notes).



Figure 5.18. School Building Used to Represent a Teacher

When asked why he took the photograph, Sam explained,

“I have [name of teacher] in here [], it’s one of my favourite things, [] I like learning in it, I like [name of teacher] in it. I have it every Friday, [] I love [name of teacher], he’s a funny man, he is a nice and kind and caring.”

(Sam PEI).

Photographs were not only used to represent positive relationships with teachers, Rory and Tom used them to represent staff who were meaningful to them. Rory took a picture of the door of the principal’s office and Tom took a picture of the door to the caretaker’s office (Figure 5.19).



Figure 5.19. Principal’s and Caretakers Office

When asked why he took this picture, Tom replied *“I like that door, that’s [name of caretaker]”* (Tom PEI). The caretaker’s office was recorded on Tom’s prompt sheet as his favourite place in school, when asked why it was his favourite place, he replied *“I like that room, its good because I was talking to him”* (Tom PEI). Reflections in the researcher’s field notes note that Tom was smiling while looking at this picture. Later, in the adapted version of the PEI, the sentence starters supported Tom to elaborate why this photograph was meaningful to him,

“it’s because I want to talk to him, because I was chatting to him in the room [] I was talking about, Sliotars.”

(Tom PEI)

Continuing to use the sentence starters, Tom explained *“this can make my day better by [] I talk to him”* (Tom PEI). Hurling is an area of interest for Tom, and this was clearly facilitated by the caretaker, this made their relationship meaningful for Tom and appeared to deepen his sense of connection to this staff member.

Although students were unable to take photographs of rooms or buildings to represent SNAs, positive relationships between students and SNAs were evident throughout this study. As outlined in Section 5.3.1.3, students valued the role of the SNA in supporting them with academic learning. Students, especially girls, described an emotional connection to SNAs who supported them in school. The importance of this relationship was further evidenced when students were asked who they thought would want to hear about their experience in school. During the SSI, students were asked to consider who inside or outside of school should know what was working well for them and what needed to change. This was a difficult question and some students; Tom and Rory were not asked, and John and Colm struggled to come up with an answer. Avril suggested *“maybe some of my teachers”* (SSI), Evan proposed *“maybe my Mom and Dad maybe”* (SSI). However, Jane, Mary, Paula, Sam and Oliver identified the SNA as somebody interested in hearing or knowing about their experiences in school. Paula explained why,

“probably my SNA because she goes through it [school] with me a lot from the start of 6th year. She helps me a lot, once the start of 6th year she started to help me then. When she started to work with me first I got to know her better, I got to, that’s basically it.”

[Paula SSI]

This concept of getting to know and building a relationship with the SNA was further explored by Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Special Educational Needs Co Ordinators (SENCOs) in the focus group interview. Fidelma noted,

“I think this is where the relationship building starts, usually from the SNA and I think that the relationship with the SNA is very important.”

(Fidelma Focus Group Interview)

Later, she went on to explain that students with ID *“wouldn’t survive”* (Fidelma Focus Group Interview) in school without the relationship with the SNA. They are the *“eyes*

on them in the classroom” (Fidelma Focus Group Interview). Peter further elaborated by identifying that students often go to the SNA before the teacher as they feel that’s their *“first port of call”* (Focus Group Interview). The support offered by SNAs and the time they gave to students strengthened their relationship and situated them as a critical support for students with ID in school.

In this study relationships with staff were crucial to developing a sense of belonging and enhancing participation in school. Showing interest in and offering support in a fun, friendly manner was valued by all students. Relationships were the kernel to students’ happiness in school, as such relationships with peers (friendships) will be explored next.

5.4.2.2 Friendships

Making friends and being with friends were common themes throughout the study. Playing with and being with friends created spaces of belonging for students. Students spoke positively about friendships both in and outside of the special class setting. Section 5.4.2.3 will detail how the special class was viewed by students in this study as a space for students to socialise.

Students identified that *“talking to friends”* (Daniel SSI) and *“making friends”* (Colm SSI) was what made their school day better. Being with friends was described as *“fun”* (Mary PEI) and *“great craic”* (Evan PEI). Avril identified herself as being *“social”* (Avril PEI), while Evan characterised himself as a *“talking kind of person”* who *“likes to be with people”* (PEI). However, the creation of friendships appeared not to be so easy for some. Daniel spoke about the development of friendships over time, he reflected on how friendships in primary school were centered around going to friends’ houses. Whereas now, in his teenage years, the friendships have developed beyond the protected space of home and have moved to town. The expectation of moving friendships on, appeared to weigh heavy on Daniel, as can be seen in the following excerpt,

“I mean we should meet out more [] some of us could be trying to talk to any other and I mean like trying to do that face to face is hard because you don’t know what they are going to say to you.”

(Daniel SSI)

Structured activities such as card games appeared to support Daniel in the development of friendships. Daniel took a photograph of the card game Uno, he played this every day in the special class during lunch. He described playing the game with his friends as “*fun*” and “*intense*” (PEI). When asked what the information from the photograph can tell teachers and SNAs about him, he said,

“I think there should be more, I think it [playing Uno] is fun, see we actually have a games club every Monday, I think we should have more of those.”

Daniel (PEI)

Friendships were clearly valued by Daniel and other students in this study, they appeared to support a sense of connectedness to peers and to the school community. However, the path to negotiate these friendships needs to be scaffolded so that students like Daniel can develop the skills necessary to maintain friendships throughout their years in school. When this is not supported students can feel a sense of isolation, in spaces where they feel they don’t belong. This was highlighted by Paula when she spoke about no longer eating lunch in the school canteen (See Section 5.3.1.1). The need to re-create spaces of belonging was evident for Paula when she explained the rationale for leaving her work experience placement in the local hairdresser to move to her old primary school,

“I used to do hairdressing but I gave it up because I had enough basically. So, I moved to [old primary school] because I had loads of friends in primary and I know most of the teachers and SNAs in that school [], I go there every Friday, I know where I am going and I know what I am doing.”

(Paula SSI)

The importance of friendships and the tragedy of lost friendships was emphasised by SETs and SENCOs in the focus group interview. Peter expressed the importance of students making connections when they start school,

“Friendship groups are big for them [] they come from smaller schools into bigger school and they do find a little friendship group and sometimes very positive peers will have a huge effect, huge effect on them, [] it’s great for their development and for the development of empathy with other kids as well”

(Peter Focus Group Interview)

However, these connections can be lost as students get older and progress through school and opportunities to develop these friendships become less frequent. Reflecting on lost friendships, Fidelma explained how, on the night of Paula's graduation, she sat with her Mum and Dad away from all the other students in her year. The friendships she once had were no longer evident. This, for Fidelma was "gut wrenching" (Focus Group Interview) and she questioned if the school had let this student down. The disconnect or otherness which Paula had expressed during this study (See Section 5.3.1.1) was evidenced by the symbolic gulf between Paula and her peers at graduation.

Data from this study reveal that friendships enhanced a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community. However, the development of friendships for students with ID may need to be supported, because students with ID may have less opportunity to develop friendships and may struggle with the social skills necessary to develop and maintain friendships. In this study the special class was seen as a space where these friendships can flourish. The next section will present findings demonstrating that access to the special class facilitates student participation in school.

5.4.2.3 Access to The Special Class

In this subtheme, access to the special class is presented as a facilitator to student participation with ID in mainstream school. Students identified the special class as a calm space and a place which provides the space to socialise with friends. Students recognised that access to the special class provided support with homework, and individual workstations provided both a safe space and a place to engage with academic learning. Findings will now be presented under each of these elements.

5.2.2.3.4.1 Calm space

When speaking about the special class, Evan identified the smaller number of students was beneficial,

"it's just great to get out of class like, out of the big class and go into this class [special class] it's not such big numbers like in class like [] you get your work done."

(Evan PEI)

Describing the differences between the special class and mainstream class James noted,

“it’s [special class] calmer, and like I have my own spot where I can be, the other [mainstream] wouldn’t be quiet. In [special class] you can have a quiet corner space.”

(James SSI)

This concept of a quiet, calm space was also identified by John who described the special class as “quieter” as “our classroom [mainstream] is pretty loud” (SSI). Oliver took a picture of the special class, as this was the place where he liked to learn how to cook (Figure 5.20).



Figure 5.20. Special Class

Oliver also participated in Home Economics in the mainstream setting, but preferred to cook in the special class as, “it’s kind of not packed, it’s just less people” (PEI). In Home Economics, “there is a lot of people” (PEI), which he found difficult.

The busyness of the mainstream setting was confirmed by SETS and SENCOS,

“all the kids are going from class to class every hour, they’re moving, [] whereas when they’re in the special class, you’ve limited students in the room [] There is a safe space for them.”

(Margaret Focus Group Interview)

Having all the resources with them in the special class was also identified as being beneficial for students, whereas when they are in the mainstream “they’ve no resources at hand” (Margaret Focus Group Interview). This resulted in students having to use lockers, which were previously identified by James as a challenge (See Section 5.3.2.1).

5.4.2.3.2 Place to Socialise

The special class was identified by students as a place and space to socialise with peers. Playing games with peers featured strongly in this study. Fidelma noted that students with ID need “*somewhere for them to go*” a space where they will be with peers “*more realistic peers than what they’re meeting in mainstream class*” (Focus Group Interview). Socialising with peers in the early years of post-primary school appears to be more achievable,

“I do find first year, it’s no problem. You gather loads of peers in first year, but the older and older they get, I think the gap just widens and widens, unless you have like [] our little special class.”

(Fidelma Focus Group Interview)

The special class was viewed as a “*blanket support*” (Fidelma Focus Group Interview) which created space for students to meet, socialise, develop friendships and foster a sense of belonging to the school community.

Avril, Colm, and Daniel all spoke positively about playing card games (Uno) in the special class during lunch. Avril, who previously identified herself as social, described the special class as a space for her to meet her friends and play. Playing games has the added benefit of helping her to “*chill out*” feel less “*stressed*” (Avril PEI) and helped her focus on her work,

“it relaxes me a bit so I can focus on what I have to do instead of being really stressed and freaking out about what I have to do.”

(Avril PEI)

Similarly, Evan described how he liked “*being with people*” and access to the special class supported this. He described his experience in the special class as “*great craic like, it’s great and you would be talking away, it’s great*” (Evan PEI). Being with peers in the special class appeared to deepen his sense of belonging by having positive interaction with peers. As previously noted in Section 5.3.1.2, Evan explained he didn’t mind not being with his class [mainstream peers] as the students in the special class were “*unreal*”, it was a space where he had “*fun*” “*it’s not all work like*”, “*it’s great craic, all the lads and all that*” (Evan SSI).

Having people willing and wanting to play provided the opportunity for students to socialise in an inclusive space. This willingness was identified by John who took a photograph of the games area in the special class to illustrate this (Figure 5.21). John was asked to describe what he liked about the games area, he noted *“there are normally people there that want to play”* (John PEI). This student liked to play Jenga and the special class afforded the opportunity to do so as other students *“are very nice in there and if they ask to play they can play if they want to”* (John PEI). This demonstrates the inclusiveness of the special class where all are welcome, and all can participate.



Figure 5.21. Games Area in Special Class

5.4.2.3.3 Support with Homework

Homework was identified as a stressor for students in this study. Rory took a photograph of his homework diary to illustrate something he would like to change in school as he found it difficult. However, the special class was identified as a structure which supported students to complete their homework.

Colm identified homework as difficult *“I struggle a lot with homework”* (PEI) and was the thing he least likes about school. For him, homework was *“the most boring thing ever in the world to do”* (PEI). When asked to explain it further he said the *“actual work”* (PEI) is difficult, with English identified as particular challenge. However, in this setting, Colm received support with homework from the SNA and this took place in the special class, this *“makes my homework a bit easier”* (SSI).

Daniel also identified completing homework in the special class as “a good thing” (SSI). While Evan explained completing homework in the special class reduced the pressure when he got home,

“it’s not so much pressure when I get home, getting it all done in that one night, thinking about all that I have this tomorrow, it’s great to get your homework done and over with.”

(Evan PEI)

Worrying about homework also featured with John; he too got the opportunity to do his homework in the special class. John was asked to explain the benefits of this, he noted “you get it [homework] done quicker, you have it done before the weekend [] you won’t have to be worrying about it on Monday” (PEI). He feared if he didn’t get his homework done, he “would be in trouble” (PEI).

5.4 2.3.4 Individual Work Station

Data reveal that individual workstations in the special class provided a space for students to focus on their work and to receive help. It also supported students to stay organised and could be used as a space for students to relax when stressed, away from others. James, Oliver, Paula, Tom and Rory all took pictures of their individual workstations (Figure 5.22).



Figure 5.22. Sample of Photographs of Individual Workstations

James spoke of the benefits of having an individual workstation “I have my own spot where I can be” (SSI). Later in the PEI he explained, “I just like it there, [] it’s my area and if I need some quiet time I can go to my desk” (PEI). It is interesting to note that individual workstations are often associated as a support for autistic students

however, in this study individual workstations were used as a support for all who accessed the ASC including those without a diagnosis of autism.

Needing a quiet space to regulate was also identified by Oliver, he explained the reason he took the photograph of his individual workstation was, *“it helps me take my mind off the people, the world kind of”* (PEI). He also liked how his books were organised into different slots so he could easily access them when needed. The need to have belongings with students was previously identified by Margaret in the focus group interview (See Section 5.4.2.3.4).

For Paula, the individual workstation was a place where she could receive help from the teacher, when explaining why she took the picture she said, *“people can do work on it and the teacher can come over and help them work”* (PEI). This she believed helped her with her academic work, *“I learn and I learn more work”* (PEI).

Finally, the importance of the individual workstation for Tom was seen in his emotional reaction to seeing the photograph of his desk. Reflections from Field Notes recall,

“Tom took the picture of his individual workstation in his hand; he began smiling and appeared much happier than he was just seconds before. It is clear this space has meaning for him. He is very happy looking at it.”

(NM Field Notes)

5.4.2.4 Active Learning Methodologies

Active learning methodologies such as project-based learning and group work supported students to be actively and meaningfully engaged in teaching and learning in the classroom. Students reported a preference for active engagement and demonstrated to me a deeper undertaking of tasks or topics when active learning methodologies were utilised. Furthermore, the use of projects to demonstrate learning created a sense of pride and an awareness of students' role in the learning process.

Students, like Jane, described projects as *“fun”*. She identified that they supported her learning *“I learn best by making projects”* (PEI). This was evidenced when she spoke about a project on planets she was completing in the special class at the time

of this study (Figure 5.23). Jane demonstrated her knowledge and understanding by describing how, “*we have lots of planets in our solar system, Jupiter has the shortest day*” and “*Saturn is 29 million years old and has 89 moons*” (PEI).



Figure 5.23. Project-based learning

When asked how she knew so much about the planets she replied, “*I just learn it with, well, my teachers*” (PEI). Describing what project work involved, she spoke about using computers to do research, working with others and making PowerPoint presentations.

Active learning was used to support Mary to develop life skills in her school. Tasks such as photocopying and cooking supported this process. Although Mary found some of the tasks challenging “*I am good at doing photocopying but sometimes it is difficult for me to do*” (PEI), Mary enjoyed this type of learning experience “*it is really good*” (PEI). Most importantly active learning aided her understanding of the steps necessary to complete a task. Reflections from my field notes noted,

“While looking at the picture of the toasted sandwich, Mary acted out all the steps of making it for me, it is clear she knows each step of this process, active learning works!”

(NM Field Notes)

Active learning methodologies which involve students creating things afforded them the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and strengths in ways that may not be possible through tasks which solely involved reading and writing. Evan took a photograph of the woodwork room in his school which illustrates this point (Figure 5.24).



Figure 5.24. Woodwork Room

Evan described how he loved woodwork:

“I am really good with my hands, I am very creative, like when I am doing stuff like, I take my time with it, like making things, and it’s great craic.”

(Evan PEI)

Additionally, tasks which involve active learning may be more meaningful for students, perhaps because they feel they are learning skills which they can use again, this in turn supports their engagement. The following quote demonstrates this, Evan described how he doesn’t like *“doing work”* (PEI), work in this instance involved tasks where reading and writing were the main activities. Rather, he enjoyed making things,

“I like doing, making stuff like instead, in a more easier kind of way, and I like learning things about woodwork and stuff, like how to do things properly and all the kinds of woods and stuff.”

(Evan PEI)

Overall, students in this study described a preference for active learning, Tom photographed his guitar to symbolise his love of Music class, he also took a photograph of the school’s polytunnel, to illustrate his love of horticulture. Avril took a photograph of a tree in blossom in her school as she loved it when she got the opportunity to plant flowers and shrubs. Teachers who incorporated these methodologies were also viewed favourably by students *“some teachers are fun and stuff as you play games about the topic”* (Daniel PEI). Subjects where these methodologies naturally occur, such as Art, Music, Woodwork, PE, Home Economics were described by students’ as their favourite subjects.

5.4.2.5 Digital Technologies

All students in this study had access to a digital device such as a laptop. Students valued these devices for their role in supporting them with reading, writing and spelling. However, there appeared to be some hesitation to using these devices in mainstream classes for some students. John and Sam spoke of only using the laptop in the special class. When asked why, Sam replied, *“the teachers won’t let me [] because I have to listen to the classes, I’ve to listen”* (PEI). Whereas John explained the special class is quieter and more suitable to use the laptop. Despite this, all students reported benefits to using their device as a support for learning. Colm explained the laptop *“helps me to do my work [] it makes it easier for me, with spellings and stuff”* (PEI). Features such as text to speech and spell check were particularly valued. Speaking about her laptop Avril explained,

“there is a lot on it that helps me, like the text to speech, so it will read it out for me in case I am struggling with all the words.”

(Avril PEI)

Typing was also valued, particularly by students who struggled with writing. Evan explained, *“I don’t really write that much”* (PEI), but identified that the laptop was supporting his writing *“the writing and all that is very improving, the writing is improving, all the help in the laptop is helping me along”* (PEI). He spoke about hoping to use the laptop in his exams because *“my writing is very bad”* (PEI). Evan felt very comfortable about using the laptop to support his reading and writing, when asked if he used immersive reader he replied, *“all the time, it’s there why would I use it”* (PEI).

Digital games such Kahoot were also valued as a way for students to demonstrate their learning. Daniel described the use of online educational games and websites as *“fun”* (PEI) as they supported students to understand more about a topic. These resources allowed him to *“copy and paste”* the information into his *“mind”* (PEI) where he could then use it to answer written questions.

SETs and SENCOs confirmed the benefits of digital devices, particularly in supporting students to demonstrate their learning. Peter identified them as *“a game changer”* for students, as they can *“dictate a project”, or, “do a little video”* (Peter Focus Group

Interview). Developing a “PowerPoint” or creating “a poster” is much preferred “than an essay” (Peter Focus Group Interview). Having multiple means of expression makes “a big difference for them 100%” (Peter Focus Group Interview).

5.4.2.5 Visual and Organisational Supports

Visual and organisational supports such as timetables, mind-maps and visual displays all supported students to meaningful engage with teaching and learning and reduce anxiety for students in this study.

Timetables were identified by James, John and Paula as a means of staying organised in school and they all took photographs of their timetables. The timetable helped them identify what subjects they had during the day and what books or materials they needed. Using the timetable throughout the day helped John identify what books he needed to put in his locker “so I don’t have to carry around a big heavy bag” (John PEI). Tom also took a photograph of his timetable. Tom was on a modified curriculum and no longer engaged in History and Geography as these were significant stressors for him. The timetable represents the classes he successfully engaged with, these classes made him happy. Using the sentences starters in the adapted PEI, Tom, identified “I love life skills” “I love cooking”, “I love music and I love art”.

Visuals supported students to understand and recall the steps necessary to complete tasks. Mary used a photograph of a visual which illustrated the steps she followed to brush her teeth. (Figure 5.25). Describing the photograph, she said it was “lovely and clear” and went on to explain “you have to get brush first from the bag, then you get the tap water on the brush and put the toothpaste on top” (PEI)

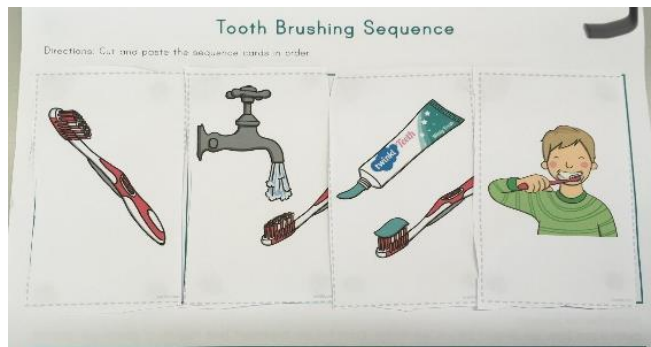


Figure 5.25. Visual to Support Students Brushing Teeth

Reflections from field notes noted that Mary was confident describing this process,

“While looking at this picture, Mary was demonstrating the steps necessary to brush her teeth. She identified that the steps in this visual were very clear and help her to keep her teeth healthy.”

(NM Field Notes)

Paula used photographs of visuals from the Home Economics room to demonstrate how they supported students with learning. Although Paula struggled to find the language to describe why they supported students, she noted they helped others *“understand what the photos will be about”* (PEI). Showing a photograph (Figure 5.26) of a visual display with key words which outlined different occupations associated with Home Economics, Paula said it was helpful as *“it tells you all about different things like, it tells you about fashion and other places”*.



Figure 5.26. Home Economics Key Words

5.4.2.5 Sport

Students in this study viewed their participation in sport as overwhelmingly positive. Mary, James, Daniel, Paula, Tom, Oliver, Evan and John, described P.E or Sport as either their favourite subject or what they like best about school. Mary described sport as *“fun”* and *“healthy”* (PEI) while Paula explained that although she loved all sports, basketball had *“become my new hobby”* (Paula PEI).

Participation in sport appeared to foster a sense of connectedness to peers in and outside of the special class and created a sense of belonging to the school community. James described how P.E and sport were the best things about school,

“I like playing soccer and hurling, like playing games with all the boys” (James PEI). Being with the ‘boys’ was identified by James as important a number of times in this study. Although James valued his place in the special class (See Section 5.3.1.2), due to the academic support he received, meeting his friends from mainstream appeared to be central to his sense of belonging. Key to this belonging was his interest and participation in sport. Sport created a sense of unity, whereby James and his friends worked towards a common goal for the good of the school. Phrases like *“most of us boys”, “we all help”* and *“we are all teammates”* (James PEI) evidence this. The following excerpt where James was speaking about sport with his friends illustrates this sense of belonging,

“It’s good we mostly talk about sport. You can depend on one of the boys to do good in PE and soccer and all that. Because most us boys are from [local town] there are two lads from outside [local town] but we all help, at the end of the day we are all playing with this school and we are all teammates.”

(James PEI)

Evan also spoke about playing sports with the school, for him participation in sport transcended the difficulties he experienced with learning in school,

“I play sports and I am involved in all kinds of sports. I play sports with the school, you don’t need reading and stuff and all this Maths for sports.”

(Evan SSI)

Participation in sport appeared to be very much part of Evan’s self-identity, it allowed him to celebrate his strengths and channel his energy in a safe positive manner.

“It’s the kind of only thing that I really enjoy. I think if I didn’t have sports, thank God I don’t need anything, no reading and all that like.”

(Evan SSI)

Tom had several photographs of himself playing hurling which he asked the SNA to take (Figure 5.27). While looking at the photographs he noted *“I like sports”* , *“I like that sport”* *“I love pucking the ball up in the air”* (PEI).



Figure 5.27. Tom Playing Hurling

Reflections from field notes recall,

“Tom was very happy looking at these pictures, he went over them again and again smiling at each one. Hurling is an area of interest for Tom []. Playing hurling makes him happy, when I met with the SENCO prior to meeting all students she told me that hurling can be utilised to support Tom to regulate his emotions and get him ready for learning.”

(NM Field Notes)

It is clear from these examples that sport is a facilitator to the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools. Sports creates a sense of belonging to the school, they allow students to demonstrate skills that may not be as visible in other subject areas. They can also be used to facilitate a students' area of interest which can be use to prepare students for teaching and learning.

This section outlined the facilitators which influenced the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools. These included relationships with staff and peers, access to the special calss, active learning methodologies, digital technologies, visual and organisational and visual supports and the participation in sport. Chapter Six will present findings on the barriers to the participation of students with ID in mainstream school. These barriers were informed by the perspectives of SETs and SENCOs in this study. The next section will detail findings from this study which highlight students's role in decision making in their school.

5.5 Theme Three: Students' Role in Decision Making: A Lost Opportunity?

This theme captures the dichotomy between students' ability to reflect on themselves and their limited role in decision making. This ability is presented as an opportunity, whereby students have insider knowledge of their strengths, needs and accommodations necessary for them to succeed. However, this ability is stilted by a lack of opportunity for students to experience or be supported in decision making in school. Decision making was explored through students' experience of choice in learning activities, examples of when they made decisions in school and aspects of school they would like to change. The role of the school in supporting students in decision making was further explored. Although teachers identified the importance of student voice, barriers to supporting students in this process were identified.

The theme Students' Role in Decision Making: A Lost Opportunity is divided into two subthemes:

- (i) Opportunities for Success
- (ii) Lost Opportunities

Similarly, to Theme Two, findings from the voices and perspectives of students are presented in this chapter. In the second subtheme; Lost Opportunities, teachers' perceptions of barriers to supporting students in decision making is informed by the voices and perspectives of participating SETs and SENCOs. This element of this subtheme will be presented in Chapter Five.

5.5.1 (i) Opportunities for Success

In this subtheme the ability of students to reflect on themselves, their strengths, needs and accommodations necessary for them to succeed is identified. Aspects of their school which they would like to change, and which may enhance their participation is outlined.

5.5.1.1 Listening for Solutions

Data in this study demonstrate students' ability to reflect on their strengths, needs and accommodations necessary for them to succeed. However, this ability will only

have impact if schools listen. This project provided students the opportunity to express their views and have their voices heard. It is through activities such as listening to students that schools can identify what they are doing well and what they need to change to enhance inclusive practice.

Although slightly hesitant at times, students in this study were willing to describe aspects of school they felt they were good at. Daniel, Evan, Mary, Oliver, James and Paula identified themselves as good at sport. During the PEI Daniel explained why he took a picture of a ball, *“I am actually a good talent at this sport”* (Daniel PEI). Similarly, Mary took a picture of the school gym and a boxing bag, she explained *“I am really good at boxing and I am really good at karate”* (PEI). Identifying strengths was not confined to sports, Evan and John demonstrated an awareness of their strengths in Woodwork *“I am really good with my hands, I am very creative”* (Evan PEI), *“I think woodwork is probably my strongest point. I think I am actually good at it”* (John PEI). Additionally, sentences starters utilised in the PEI supported Tom to identify that he was good at horticulture.

Students in this study were quick to identify aspects of learning and school which they struggled with. Literacy and numeracy were common themes, *“my writing is very bad”* (Evan PEI), *“I might need extra help with reading, like I struggle with it”* (Avril PEI). Students’ struggles with stress and anxiety, particularly with the school environment, featured in this study (See Section 5.3.2.2). However, it is students’ ability to identify accommodations or supports which schools could put in place to address students’ needs which is most important. In the following section three examples of students providing solutions to support areas of need will be outlined.

In the PEI, Avril described her struggles with time management. This often resulted in her being late or early for class which caused her significant stress. When asked what teachers or SNAs could do to support her with this, Avril suggested that she could be given a prompt five minutes before the end of class so she could start to get her materials gathered,

“maybe like say, like say five minutes till the end of class say, hey, you need to get your books ready for the next class, maybe like a five-minute warning or something”

(Avril PEI).

Avril also described how lights in the school and traffic [people] on the stairs and on the corridor make her feel very uncomfortable *“a bit claustrophobic and just squished”* (PEI). She suggested the school may be able to do something with the lights which are *“blinding”* (SSI) and they could *“take into consideration ways to slow the traffic down, maybe how to make it not so crowded”* (PEI).

If the school was to listen to Avril, she could be given the opportunity to gather her materials a few minutes before the end of class, she could then leave the classroom just before everyone else which would result in her being on time for the next class and may result in her missing most of the traffic on the school corridors.

John spoke about the difficulties he experienced with class tests, he felt he knew the material but struggled to recall it in the test *“I suppose I know it, but when in a test, I would forget it”* (PEI). John was asked, what could help him, John identified if he could have the test questions to read prior to starting the test it may be helpful, *“when the test comes maybe read it [questions] a couple of times and then like when the test starts you can take the book away”* (PEI). John was not looking for different questions or a different test, John wanted time to process the questions prior to starting the test. In the Photovoice exhibition John took the opportunity to inform the SENCO and the principal of the school about the difficulty he experienced with class tests and explained the support he felt would help him. Reflections from the Field Notes Data Collection Diary note,

“this was positively received and the SENCO said she thought it was something that all students could do with, as a strategy to support them with class tests”

(NM Field Notes)

John also demonstrated the ability to identify supports which could help him in other subject areas. Section 5.3.2.1 outlined how John struggled with sewing in Home Economics, and suggested if he had a needle with a bigger eye, it would support him to develop this skill. Without having the language to describe it, John, in both instances was looking for differentiation. He believed that he could successfully engage with both activities, but he needed them differentiated for him to participate.

Other students, such as Daniel, also demonstrated the ability to identify supports which could help all students not just himself. Daniel was aware that he is autistic and spoke about how this means there are some things he is good at and other things he still has to learn. One of the aspects Daniel was still learning was how to manage stress and anxiety. During the PEI Daniel showed a number of photographs of sensory supports in the ASC and adjoining sensory room (Figure 5.28).

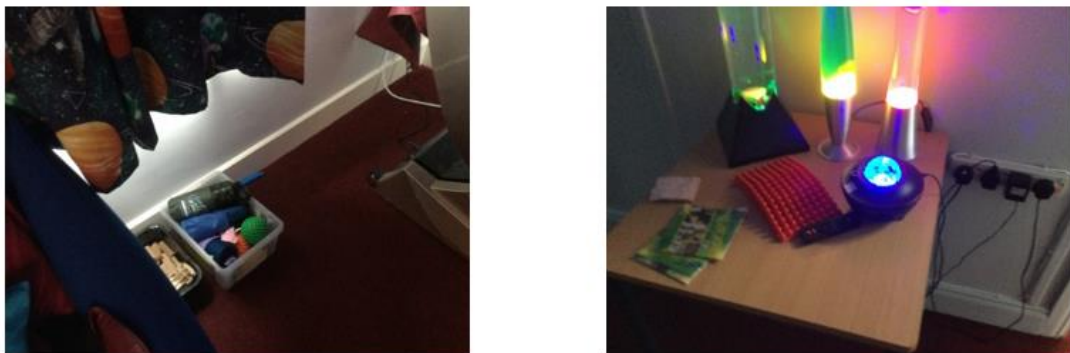


Figure 5.28. Sensory Supports

Daniel explained how sensory supports such as fidgets helped him in times of stress. He believed that, although they “*kind of annoy teachers*” (PEI) sensory supports should be available to everyone who needs them not just students in the ASC,

“I think there should be more [sensory supports] in the school to help me, us, and other students, to help me and other students feel less stressed about exams and stuff, because that is the whole point of it, is to get it [stress] off your mind.”

(Daniel PEI)

Sensory supports could, according to Daniel, help students to “*calm and stress down a bit*” they could also support them to “*feel less pressure*” and they should be

available in all classes *“I think some students should be able to use them in class, just to get the stress out of them (PEI).* Daniel believed this wouldn’t happen all the time but thought the option should be available when needed.

Numerous other examples of students identifying what supports they needed to help them succeed were identified throughout the study. Oliver noted the sensory room helped him to relax when stressed, but also identified that a walk would also be useful. Students didn’t necessarily have the language to articulate what, how or why supports could help them, rather they used words like, *“it’s nice and colourful” (Jane PEI), “its comfy and warm and really good” (Mary PEI) or “I like going in their sitting down” (Paula PEI)* to explain the benefits of a support to them.

What is clear from these findings is students have an insider epistemology, they are able to provide insights not only to types of supports that can help them but also why these supports can help them. What is required from schools is an ethos and culture of listening, listening for solutions, solutions derived from students for students. It is through this authentic listening that schools can identify what needs to change to enhance student participation. The next section outlines what aspects of school students would like to change.

5.5.1.2 Desire for Change

Data from this study reveal that students desire for change centered on either increasing aspects of school they liked and enjoyed, or decreasing or avoiding aspects they found difficult or challenging.

James spoke of a desire for a longer lunch break, *“if it was longer I would have more time to play soccer with the boys and it would be a lot funner” (PEI).* Being with the boys and playing sports was identified in section 5.4.2.5 as being important to James. Although happy with the academic support the special class provided, this desire for change highlights how relationships with peers outside of the special class enhances James’s sense of belonging to the school.

A longer break was also identified by Paula for two reasons. The first break of the day is too short and she does not get enough time to eat her lunch. In section 5.3.1.1 Paula identified that she liked to eat her lunch in the ASC, this is away from other

classes in the school. The first break of the day is too short for her to get there, eat her lunch and get back for her next class. The second reason cited was that she would like *“to go for a walk with friends”* (SSI).

Being with friends was also identified by John for wanting to have a longer P.E class. John likes sport and this gave him the opportunity to play with his peers and succeed. The fear of missing friends and staff was a significant reason why Mary reported that she would like to stay in school and not have to leave at the end of the school year. This was Mary’s last year in school, when asked what she would like to change, she responded, *“I want school to be amazing [] and maybe stay here [] I don’t want to leave [] I don’t want to go, because I will miss my friends and I will miss [SNA]”* (SSI).

Students were equally emphatic in identifying aspects of school they would like to change because they caused them difficulty or presented as a challenge. Many of these challenges were identified in section 5.3.2. Avril and Oliver spoke about challenges which they experienced with the stairs in their school. Both expressed a desire to use the school lift instead *“I wish there was no stairs just lifts”* Oliver (PEI).

Tom, Jane and Paula identified subjects they would like to change. Photographs of books evoked a strong emotional reaction from Tom and Jane. Reflections from field notes spoke of Tom’s reaction,

“He [Tom] did not want to look at the pictures of his History and Geography book and he did not want to put them on his poster, When he saw these pictures he pushed them away and raised his voice saying ‘ I don’t like History and I don’t like Geography and I don’t like History’. These are obviously significant stressors for him.”

(NM Field Notes)

Jane’s reaction to seeing a photograph of her Religion book evoked a similar reaction to Tom. On seeing her photograph, she described how she has *“gone off Religion”* it *“scares me, disgusting videos, it make me sick, I puke on it [] I just get sick, I puke, it’s disgusting”* (PEI). Interestingly, Jane identified, if she had a different teacher for Religion, one whom she previously reported liking, she would be happy to continue studying it. The importance of relationships with staff was highlighted in section 5.4.2.1. In Jane’s situation the relationship with the teacher would have counteracted her dislike of the subject.

Rory and Colm identified that they would like to change homework in their school. Homework for both of these students was a significant stressor. Colm took a photograph of his homework pack and Rory took a photograph of his homework journal to symbolise aspects of their school they would like to change.

Findings in this subtheme highlight that if schools authentically listen to students, their voices can be used to inform positive change. Change for students in this study centred on increasing aspects of school they like or reducing or avoiding aspects they found challenging which increased their participation. The desire for change was rooted in their experiences in school. This presents students as insiders, who are experts in their own lives, who are key stakeholders in understanding barriers and facilitators to their participation in school. This is an opportunity for schools to foster this unique understanding. However, when schools do not embrace this it becomes a lost opportunity.

5.5.2 (ii) Lost Opportunity

Data in this subtheme present students' role in decision making as a lost opportunity. The previous subtheme highlighted if schools authentically listen to students, their insights can be used to increase participation of students with ID in mainstream schools. However, data reveal that students have a limited role in decision making and a limited understanding of their potential role. Barriers to involving students in the decision-making process were identified by SETs and SENCOs in this study and are presented in Chapter Six. These barriers further impact on student participation.

5.5.2.1 Limited Role of Students in Decision Making

Decision making was explored through students' experience of choice in learning activities, examples of when they made decisions in school and aspects of school they would like to change. Aspects of school students would like to change were previously identified in section 5.5.1.2. Data reveal that students' role in decision making is limited, although some meaningful examples were evident, student involvement in decision making had little impact on core activities such as teaching and learning.

Students in this study appeared to have little understanding of decision making or their potential role in the decision-making process in their schools. Paula and John placed little value on their thoughts, feelings, and opinions and appeared to favour the opinions and decisions of others. John viewed his role in education as subordinate to that of teachers, SNAs and parents. When asked how the information from his photographs could be used by teachers and SNAs to make his school day better, John replied, *“I think that’s up to them though”, “I think it is their decision really”* and *“I don’t think that is up to me, I think that is up to teachers”* (PEI). These responses indicate John’s perceived position, whereby he has little impact or influence on his education. Paula maintained a similar belief system. For Paula, it was more important for her mother to know about her education than she did herself. Paula believed that her mother should be informed first about aspects of her education which were important, then she could decide which aspects were suitable to discuss with Paula. When asked who should know about her experience in school, Paula replied,

“my Mam because she might have more, like interest, not interest, but more importance, she might like to know more important things than I should know [] she needs to know some bits that I don’t know about and then talk to me about it.”

(Paula SSI)

Daniel also indicated to the primacy of parents making decisions for their children. When asked if he makes decisions about his education, he identified that although he may wish to be involved, parents make the ultimate decision, *“when you have a parent by your side trying to make that decision, then it’s up to them”* (SSI).

Instances where students had opportunities to engage in decision making in school were limited and can be seen in the following, *“I make a decision to try again and keep at it until I get it right”* (James PEI), *“I have decisions to go outside and play”* (Sam SSI). Tom took a photograph of the menu in the school canteen to represent when he makes decisions about what food to order during lunch. Daniel noted on his prompt sheet that his decision making occurs when he decides to play cards during lunch break. Paula and Tom identified that they use their timetable to make a decision about what class they have next. This not only signals a lack of opportunity

to be involved in decision making but also indicates a limited understanding of what meaningful decision making involves. Colm, John, Jane and Oliver reported they do not make decisions in school. In section 5.3.1.2, Oliver explained that the special class afforded him the flexibility to access his individual work station or sensory room when he stressed or struggling. However, the decision for him to access the special class rested with the SNA. When asked if he makes the decision to go to the special class when stressed, he replied, *“no, the SNA thinks what work we are going to do, and if we have to go to class or if we are going to go to it [special class]”* (PEI).

Decision making was also explored by students experience of choice in learning activities. Similar to above, James indicated a lack of opportunity in this area *“what the teachers say we do, [] I just do whatever the teachers tell me to do”* (SSI). When asked what would he like to have a choice in, he explained, *“if I could choose a subject or topic I would like to”* (SSI). He also explained that he would like a choice in how he could show his knowledge *“I’d like to do a quiz on Kahoot to see what I learned about [the topic]”* (James SSI). Paula’s experience of choice involved her completing different work to others in her class *“teacher gives me work but it is not the same as others in the class”* (SSI). When asked if she had a choice in learning activities, Mary responded *“nah”* (SSI) and when asked if she has a choice on how to demonstrate her knowledge she reported *“I can listen”* (SSI). Evan’s experience of choice in demonstrating his knowledge was equally limited *“like answer more questions or raise your hand more, be more active active maybe”* (SSI).

One area where students appeared to be involved in making decisions was in choosing their choice subjects in school. As expected, this decision appeared to be made with the support of parents. John explained when he first went to the school with his parents *“we just picked them”*. When asked if he was involved in that decision he replied, *“yes, I suppose I picked my subjects”* (John SSI). Speaking about choosing his subjects Daniel noted *“I did it with my Mom I’d say, we kind of made the decision”* (SSI).

The role of parents in supporting students in the decision-making process was exemplified by Avril. Although Avril felt she was bad making decisions, *“I’m quite bad at decision making”* (PEI) she demonstrated an awareness of when she made

decisions and what supported her in that process. Avril spoke about her reasons for coming to her school, she wanted to attend a school which promoted physical activity and environmental awareness. To choose a suitable school Avril and her Mum discussed the options, *“my Mom and me had a discussion about possible schools and this one seemed best”* (SSI). Other decisions she was involved in included choosing her choice subjects and choosing which activities to do in class when presented with an option. Describing what helped her make decisions, she noted it was helpful when she was given the pros and cons of each option and when she was given time to make her decision, *“they could help by giving the pros and cons of each decision and not rushing me make a decision”* (PEI). Time, gave her the opportunity to think through her options and make an informed choice. Talking this through with her mother or a friend helped her to make her decision and stick to it. Avril’s experience of decision making was notably different from other students in this study. Input and advice, time and opportunity all combined to support her in this process.

Chapter Six Section 6.4.1 outlines SETs and SENCOs perceived barriers to supporting students in decision making. These perceived barriers prevent schools from supporting students to express their views and have their voices heard on matters concerning them.

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools are presented. This chapter provided a platform for the voices and perspectives of students in this study to support our understanding of the complexity of their lived experience. Students here are presented as experts in their lives, they have an insider epistemology which provides unique insights to the tapestry of their lived experience. For this reason, findings informed by the voices of students are presented in this chapter. The complexity of their lived experience is demonstrated through students’ sentiments, including thoughts, feelings and opinions of spaces, places and people which constituted a support or a challenge to them including their participation in school. Facilitators which influence student participation supports and challenges our current understanding of inclusive practice

in schools. Furthermore, student participation in decision making is presented as an opportunity which is somewhat lost. Although students possess an ability to reflect on themselves, their abilities and the supports necessary for them to achieve, their participation in decision making in schools in this study was minimal.

Chapter Six will now present the findings from the voices and perspectives of SETs and SENCOs in this study. These voices contribute to our understanding of the complexities of inclusive practice in our schools. The experience of SETs and SENCOs in this study deepened our understanding of the barriers to student participation including their participation in decision making.

Chapter Six

Findings: Voices of Teachers

6.1 Introduction

Chapter Five presented findings from the voices and perspectives of students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) who participated in this study. Three themes developed which answer the research and embedded questions (Chapter Five Section 5.2). When useful and appropriate, students' voices were supported by reflections from the researcher's field notes and quotations from Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Special Education Needs Co-Ordinators (SENCOs). This is particularly evident in themes two and three. However, the prominence in Chapter Five was placed on the voices of participating students. Findings provided insights into the lived experiences of these students in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. Students were presented as experts in their own lives who can contribute as equal stakeholders to our understanding of inclusive practice in our schools. Theme One presented students' perceptions of supports and challenges encountered in schools. Theme Two outlined the facilitators to student participation in school. Theme Three reported on students' role in decision making. The perspectives of SETs and SENCOs which contributed to the development of theme two and three will now be presented.

6.2 Presentation of Findings (Voices of Teachers)

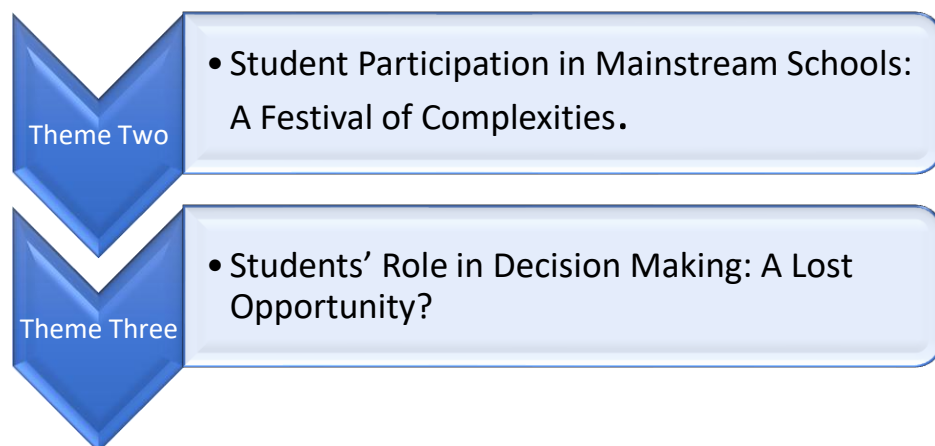


Figure 6.1. Presentation of Findings (Voices of Teacher)

6.3 Theme Two: Student Participation in Mainstream School: A Festival of Complexities.

The theme Student Participation: A Festival of Complexities is divided into two subthemes:

- (iii) Facilitators Which Influence Student Participation: Students' Perspectives (Chapter Five)
- (iv) Barriers Which influence Student Participation: Teachers' Perspectives

Facilitators which influence student participation were informed by the voices and perspectives of students who participated in this study. These were presented in Chapter Five. Barriers which influence student participation will now be presented.

6.3.1 Barriers which Influence the Participation of Students with Intellectual Disabilities: (Teacher Perspectives)

This subtheme presents findings from this study which identified barriers which influence the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. Although implied by students at times, this theme is informed by the voices and perspectives of participating SETs and SENCOs and is supported by reflections for the researcher's field notes.

Inclusion policy, curriculum, teachers' capacity to address the increasing levels of need, the current role of the SNA and teachers' perceptions of students with ID all combine to create barriers in our school system. Findings from each of these elements will now be presented.

6.3.1.2 Inclusion Policy

Inclusion policy was identified as a significant barrier to the participation of students with ID in mainstream schools. The Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (SETAM) (2017), in conjunction with the designation of special classes to support one group of disability, i.e., autism, were identified as significant challenges for teachers and schools. SETs and SENCOs in this study identified the necessity of support to be based on need not category of disability.

All students in this study were accessing the special class either on a full-time or part-time basis. Table 5.1 in Chapter Five, Section 5.3.1.2 outlines the support arrangement for students in this study. Under SETAM (2017; 2024) students with MGLD should access support under the Continuum of Support (CoS) framework (DES 2007), particularly when there is no special class designated for this category of disability in the school. However, the designation of special classes for students with MGLD is in decline (Travers 2023). Special classes for students with a diagnosis of autism are on the increase (Travers 2023). Only students with a diagnosis of autism should be accessing the autism special class. It is this policy of inclusion which is problematic for SETs and SENCOs in this study, as it reduces a schools' capacity to respond effectively to students' needs. There are no other options for students with MGLD in schools outside of the CoS which according to Margaret is not working, "*we are shoving all the kids into mainstream and they're not surviving to be honest*", they "*are kind of invisible*" (Focus Group Interview). Provision of support must "*be needs focused*" "*not disability focused*" (Fidelma Focus Group Interview). Students "*go into mainstream and they act out*" according to Margaret (Focus Group Interview) because they are "*invisible*" and teachers do not have the capacity to support the increasing levels of need. Schools are currently "*struggling*", they are according to Fidelma, a "*pressure bomb*" for everyone at the moment (Focus Group Interview). Provision of support is complex and arriving at a solution is complex. Findings in this subtheme highlight that our current policy on inclusion could be improved. A reimagining of current support structures is necessary. This reimagining necessitates the input from all stakeholders, students, teachers, school management, parents and policy makers if we are to increase the participation of students with ID in our mainstream post-primary schools.

6.3.1.3 Curriculum

The curriculum was identified by SETs and SENCOs as the greatest barrier to the participation of students with ID in mainstream schools. Teachers were described as being "*bound by the curriculum*" (Fidelma Group Interview), particularly when summative assessment in the form of State Examinations is used as a measure of students' success. The pressure "*to deliver on the curriculum*" (Fidelma Group

Interview) reduces teachers' capacity to address diversity in the classroom. Programmes such as the Level Two Learning Programme (L2LP) were designed to support students with lower mild to upper moderate ID to access teaching and learning in Junior Cycle. However, the implementation of the L2LP in Level 3 subject space is challenging. SETs and SENCOs spoke of the challenge of asking teachers to implement the L2LP for one or two students out of a class of 30. Fidelma indicated tensions which exist when this occurs,

"if you are faced in a class of 30 and then I'm coming in, as I do, I'm saying, when you are teaching those, that 30, would you deliver the Level 2 programme for me, like it's you know, it really is impossible."

(Fidelma Focus Group Interview)

Reflections from field notes also noted these tensions,

"The SENCO reported that she tried to get teachers to implement the L2LP in the mainstream class, but this was not working. The SENCO was reluctant to say anymore, but I certainly felt this was an area of tension in the school."

(NM Field Notes)

James described how he was moved to the Autism Special Class (ASC) because he was struggling with the Junior Certificate Level 3 curriculum in mainstream classes (Chapter Five, Section 5.3.1.1). John also spoke of difficulties with Level 3 subject areas (Chapter Five, Section 5.3.2.1). He, along with other students in this study, were on a modified curriculum. Fidelma spoke of the challenges of creating a new curriculum for John *"because whatever the challenges were last year, now in second year they have doubled"* (Focus Group Interview).

Programmes such as Transition Year (TY) appeared to provide opportunities for teachers to create programmes of learning which could support the participation of students with ID. Peter spoke about his school offering TY to students for the first time. Teachers, he reported, are *"actually delighted"* (Focus Group Interview). He explained that TY afforded teachers the opportunity to incorporate practical, active learning, *"that you don't get time to do in the main subject class"* (Focus Group Interview). Fidelma described TY as a *"great learning curve for everyone, for the student, the parents, the school"* (Focus Group interview). Students with ID could participate like everyone else. When asked why TY appears increase the participation

of students Fidelma replied *“because they are not bound by the curriculum [] the curriculum is the greatest barrier to learning of a child with SEN”* (Focus Group Interview).

In this subtheme, the curriculum was identified as a significant challenge to the participation of students with ID in the mainstream classroom. This is compounded by teachers’ capacity to address the increasing levels of need in the classroom. Teachers’ capacity is presented as a barrier, and it is findings from this which will be presented next.

6.3.1.4 Teachers’ Capacity to Address Increasing Level of Need

Teachers’ capacity to address increasing levels of need in schools was identified as a barrier to the participation of students with ID. In the focus group interview SETs and SENCOs reported teachers in their schools feeling *“powerless”* (Margaret Focus Group Interview), overburdened and unsupported to address the *“amount of stuff that has been foisted upon us”* (Michelle Focus Group Interview). Feelings of anger and frustration were directed towards the Department of Education (DE) and the National Council of Special Education (NCSE) for creating a situation where the needs of some students in mainstream classes are greater than the capacity of teachers to meet these needs.

Training is required if teachers are to increase participation. Teachers, according to Margaret, *“aren’t equipped”*, they are *“at a loss of how they can cope”* with the *“changing level of needs”* which has *“hugely increased”* (Focused Group Interview). Michelle described the situation for mainstream teachers as *“unfair”* (Focus Group Interview), and criticised the current model of support, as it does little to change practice on the ground,

“there’s CPD for our mainstream subjects, then we might get a nod from the NCSE, and that’s our training, but then on a practical level, it doesn’t carry through because there’s no support there.”

(Michelle Focus Group Interview)

This helicopter model of support was also identified as ineffective for creating meaningful change in teachers’ practice in Margaret’s school. She described the situation where,

“we’ve got differentiation people in and everything but nothing is carried through in terms of, they come in, they give CPD for two hours, but there’s no real interest in it.”

(Focus Group Interview)

High student: teacher ratios coupled with the burden of delivering the curriculum and preparing students for State examinations (Chapter Five, Section 5.4.2.2) further reduce teachers’ capacity to increase the participation of students with ID in mainstream classrooms. In the absence of meaningful support, teachers and schools seek to find their own solutions to meeting the needs of students. Fidelma described how she was creating a new adapted curriculum for one student with ID as he could no longer access the L3 curriculum, and teachers were struggling to implement the L2LP in her school. Michelle outlined how they were trialling team teaching in Transition Year (TY) to support students with ID to meaningfully participate and Margaret and Peter were strategically positioning SNAs in classes where students needed increased levels of academic support.

The role of the SNA in increasing students’ participation in teaching and learning was addressed in Chapter Five Section 5.3.1.3. The following section calls for a reconceptualisation of the role of the SNA as the current role is identified as a barrier to the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools.

6.3.1.5 Current Role of the SNA

Circular 0030/2014 outlines the role of the SNA in schools. The role of the SNA is of a non-teaching nature, it includes supporting the care needs of students and assisting classroom teachers and SETs to ensure that students with special educational needs can access education (Circular 0030/2014). However, this role was perceived as limited by SETs and SENCOs in this study. Findings suggest a need to reconceptualise the role of the SNA to reflect the reality of what is happening in classrooms across the county and to recognise the complexity of needs in mainstream schools.

Previous sections in this subtheme outline teachers’ frustration with the current system of support for students with ID. This support does not do enough to address students’ needs. SETs and SENCOs reported that in their role they *“cannot be*

everywhere” and teachers “*cannot cope*” with the increasing level of need (Margaret Focus Group Interview). SNAs can and do provide more support, they are “*the eyes and ears*” in the class (Margaret Focus Group Interview). However, the level of support they could provide is curtailed by their current role. Students in this study self-reported the benefits of having the support of an SNA (Chapter Five, Section 5.3.1.3) and this was affirmed by Peter who stated that students with ID “*definitely do cope best when they have loads of help from the SNA*” (Focus Group Interview).

The role of the SNA was identified as being “*much more difficult and much more demanding*” (Fidelma Focus Group Interview) than its original conception. With the increase of students with ID in mainstream classrooms and schools, SNAs have become critical to supporting students’ participation. The current role is no longer “*practical on the ground*” (Margaret Focus Group Interview). Increasing participation of students with ID goes beyond supporting care needs. Waiting for instruction from the teacher is demoralising for SNAs who “*want to feel like they have value*” (Margaret Focus Group Interview). Peter identified the need for more definition to be attached to the role, one which reflects the reality and breadth of student’s needs. Fidelma questioned whether the Teaching Assistant role similar to what is in place in the UK would be “*a better fit for what we need in the classroom*” (Focus Group Interview).

6.3.1.6 Teachers’ Perspectives of Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Teachers’ perspectives of students with ID were noted as a barrier to their participation in school. SETs and SENCOs described how a sense of otherness is created when teachers see students with ID as being in their class but not belonging to their class. Michelle described the scenario where teachers might say, “*I’ve 24 students and the two you know*”, “*they don’t see the two are part of the 26 students*” (Focus Group Interview). Margaret also described how some teachers in her school do not have a “*vested interest*” in students with ID (Focus Group Interview). They do not see students with ID as being their responsibility, she recalled teachers asking her “*why do I have to do it*”, teachers felt these students should get support “*from resource*” or the “*special class*” (Margaret Focus Group Interview). This mindset is problematic, students are perceived as a burden and are viewed by what they cannot

do rather than what they can. Fidelma also spoke of the impact of this deficit model and explained that programmes like TY could counteract this view. These programmes support students' participation, as teachers are not confined by the curriculum or by teaching to the exam, they can therefore broaden the scope of topics to include students interests and can try out and utilise a range of methodologies.

Teachers' perceptions of students with ID were further influenced by the relationships they had with students. Policy documents such as SETAM (2017) do little on their own to change teachers' attitudes towards students with ID. Students may be placed in mainstream classes but can be "*ignored*", as in the case of Tom (NM Field Notes) in favour of those who are perceived as being better able. Students in these instances may "*act out because they are kind of invisible*", teachers then get a "*negative view of these students*" (Margaret Focus Group Interview) which in turn reduces their interest, until it becomes a destructive cycle where teachers say, "*I want him out of my class*" (Fidelma Focus Group Interview). To challenge teachers' perceptions Michelle described how at the beginning of the school year she gave a presentation on two students with ID who were entering TY. This focused on students' strengths, interests, and talents. Teachers were urged to see the student's ability. This, according to Michelle "*has created an awareness amongst the staff that there is an ability there and that there's expectations for our students from the special class*" (Focus Group Interview). The importance of relationships with teachers was outlined in Chapter Five Section 5.3.1.4. Students reported liking subjects which particular teachers taught and reported liking teachers who showed interest in them. This increased their participation.

The participation of students with ID in mainstream schools is complex. In this theme, inclusion policy is presented as a barrier to inclusion. Policy and the curriculum appear to conspire against teachers' capacity to address increasing levels of need and teachers' perceptions of students with ID. The role of the SNA is presented as both a barrier and facilitator. Students valued the role of the SNA in supporting them in teaching and learning. However, this support is outside of their official recognised role. As a result, the current role of the SNA is a barrier.

The next section outlines perceived barriers to supporting students in decision making. These perceived barriers prevent schools from supporting students to express their views and have their voices heard on matters concerning them.

6.4 Theme Three: Students Role in Decision Making: A Lost Opportunity?

The theme Students' Role in Decision Making: A Lost Opportunity is divided into two subthemes:

- (iii) Opportunities for Success (Chapter Five)
- (iv) Lost Opportunities (Chapter Five Student Voices, Chapter Six Teachers Voices).

In this second subtheme; Lost Opportunities, the limited role of students in decision making was explored through students' perspectives of their role in decision making in their schools. Although some meaningful examples were evident, especially with Avril, for the most part students appeared to have little understanding of decision-making or their potential role in the decision-making process in their school. These were presented in Chapter Five. The barriers to involving students in the decision-making process were identified by SET and SENCOs. These will now be presented.

6.4.1 Teachers Perceptions of Barriers to Supporting Students in Decision Making

The role of the school in supporting students in decision making was explored through a focus group interview with SETs and SENCOs from participating schools. Although these teachers identified the importance of student voice, barriers to supporting students in this process were identified.

Teachers' perceptions of students with ID were identified as a barrier to supporting students participating in decision making in schools, which was previously identified as a barrier to students' participation in teaching and learning (Section 5.3.1.6). The "*outward perception and the deficit model*" (Fidelma Focus Group Interview) created a barrier. A lack of focus on "*ability and strengths*" of students with ID resulted in teachers perceiving them as not having the capacity to contribute to change and school improvement. Students were often overlooked, in favour of discussions with

parents, and decisions were made in their name without their input, teachers can *“forget the person in the middle”* and *“probably don’t give them [students] as much time”* (Peter Focus Group Interview).

The curriculum was also presented as a barrier to the participation of students in decision making. The curriculum was also previously identified as a barrier to student participation in teaching and learning (Section 6.3.1.3). Providing choice and flexibility in teaching and learning is challenging when teachers are *“bound by”* (Fidelma Focus Group Interview) and *“tied to the bloody curriculum”* (Peter Focus Group Interview). Focus on state exams reduces multi-modal learning opportunities in favour of traditional approaches, *“sometimes, especially say, third year and leaving cert [] the fun and games have to come out of things”* (Peter Focus Group Interview).

Teachers were identified as *“having their way of doing things”* (Peter Focus Group Interview). This status quo approach is problematic as students’ participation in decision making requires a joint endeavour between students and staff. A culture of participation is necessary and this must be evident for all. Students must be provided opportunities (space) to engage in decision making. SETS and SENCOs believed that if you asked any student if they are given any choice or if they were involved or supported in making decisions in school, the answer would be, no. Michelle noted *“If you ask any student [] are they supported to make decisions in school, they would probably say no”* (Michelle Focus Group Interview) and Peter stated *“I bet if you ask that question to every student in the school, they probably would say we get no choice in anything”* (Focus Group Interview). This self-fulfilling prophecy legitimises the lack of opportunity provided by schools to involve students in decision making. This, coupled with teachers’ perceptions of students with ID results in students being denied their right to express their views and have their views given due weight in schools.

This theme (presented in Chapter Five and Six) captures the dichotomy between students’ ability to reflect on themselves and their limited role in decision making. Students are presented as experts in their own lives, they know their strengths, their needs, and they can provide insights on how schools can support their participation as illustrated by their participation in this study, including their participation in

decision making. However, this ability is stilted by a lack of opportunity. Although teachers identified the importance of student voice, barriers such as teachers' perceptions of students with ID, the curriculum and the status quo were identified.

6.5 Conclusion

Bringing together the perspectives of students, SETs and SENCOs provides a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. As the focus is on the lived experience of participating students it is important to present the findings from the themes in separate chapters. Chapter Five presents the voices of students and Chapter Six presents the voices of SETs and SENCOs.

Findings from students, SETs and SENCOs highlight the factors which influence the participation of students with ID in mainstream schools are complex. Meaningful participation of students with ID requires a flexible, responsive approach and the reimagining of support structures. This requires the input from all stakeholders including students. Involving students in the decision-making process in schools is viewed as complex. The lived experience and student participation including participation in decision making is complex, it is a festival of complexities. The next chapter will present a discussion on the data. The themes and subthemes will be discussed with reference to literature and theorised using Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) and Hornby's Model of Inclusive Special Education. The research and embedded questions will be answered, leading to conclusions and recommendations of this study.

Chapter Seven

Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This study set out to explore the experiences and perspectives of students with intellectual disabilities (ID) in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. This placed the focus on inclusive education within these schools. Obligations following the Irish Government's ratification of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018 positioned the spotlight on the educational provision for students with SEND in our schools. However, currently in Ireland a multi-track approach (Kenny *et al.* 2020) to provision, which provides for dedicated spaces (Hornby and Kaufmann 2023) for students with SEND, through a system of placement in mainstream classes, special classes or special schools, operates under the Continuum of Support Framework (NEPS 2007). However, this system of provision is problematic, as it is currently interpreted as a breach of children's rights, where inclusion means mainstream. Following a comprehensive review of special education provision in Ireland, the National Council of Special Education (NCSE) (2024) set forth its vision for a progressive realisation of an inclusive education system. However, this stops short of implementing full inclusion, where All means All. The NCSE (2024) argues that there will always be children who, because of their individual needs, will be unable to attend their local schools. In adopting such an approach, the NCSE are prioritising the needs of children over the rights of children when inclusion is understood to mean mainstream.

The challenges in defining inclusive education have been discussed throughout the literature and detailed in Chapter Two, Section 2.4. Despite a raft of policy developments, research and guidance, a knowledge-practice gap (Brennan, King and Travers 2019) remains, which has resulted in schools and policy makers grappling with how best to implement inclusive practice (Sundeen and Banerjee 2023). Frameworks such as the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach (Florian and Black Hawkins 2011) sought to identify the knowledge and beliefs underpinning inclusive practice. Despite its benefits, the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach has faced criticism for not

considering the individualisation of approaches that are needed for some children. Thus, the needs-based versus rights-based approach to inclusive education has left many uncertain, including the NCSE, over the best way forward. Proponents of the needs-based approach, most notably Kaufmann and Hornby (2023), cast doubt on the possibility, feasibility and morality of full inclusion, which is a key principle of the rights-based approach. Whereas advocates of a rights-based approach (Ainscow, De Bruin, Slee) argue that separate segregated provision for children with SEND is discriminatory.

I argue that the challenge of implementing inclusive practice has been compounded by the absence of the voices of students with SEND from research on inclusive education. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) and Article 7 (3) of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) sets out the rights for all children to be heard and for their opinions to be given due weight in all matters concerning them. This includes their participation in education. Yet, as outlined in Chapter Four, Section 4.6, the perspectives of children with SEND are rarely included (Porter and Lacey 2005; Lundy and Cook-Sather 2016; Alderson and Morrow 2020; Shevlin and Rose 2021). Children are often the end users of policies, programmes and laws, which are developed in their name without their consultation or participation (Lundy *et al.* 2014; Moloney *et al.* 2021). Lundy's Model of Participation (2007), which was detailed in Chapter Three, Section 3.4, is a means to conceptualise the rights of children under Article 12 of the UNCRC. This model outlines four conditions: space, voice, audience and influence, all of which are necessary for all children as right-bearing citizens to have voice in all matters concerning them and have their opinions heard. Without doubt, capturing the voices of children with SEND can be challenging. Nevertheless, the exclusion of the voices of children because of their SEND, is not only discriminatory, but also reflects on the unsuitability of the methods used, and the skills of the adult involved, rather than of any limitation on part of the child (Rabiee, Sloper and Beresford 2005).

The policy-practice gap (Rose *et al.* 2015) and knowledge-practice gap (Brennan, King and Travers 2019) highlighted in the literature in Chapter Two not only reinforces

the necessity to incorporate the voices of students with SEND to understand their experiences in school, but rather emphasises the requirement to use methods which support children to engage with the research in an ethical, inclusive, participatory manner. As such, Chapter Four outlined the philosophical and theoretical frameworks which underpin this study's design. From the outset I adopted the transformative paradigm as it allowed me to address issues of social justice, while repositioning children as co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge. The transformative paradigm acted as a springboard to the theoretical framework; Lundy's Model of Participation (2007). Together, these guided each step of the research process, including the research design, and the research questions. As a result, Photovoice was chosen as the main method of data collection. Section 4.7 provided a critique of Photovoice and demonstrated how its use provided the space, voice, audience and influence necessary for students to express their views and have their voices heard in an inclusive, participatory manner. Furthermore, its use embraces the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) by building in choice, flexibility and ownership in the research process.

Thirteen students with ID in four mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland, which cater for students from 12-18 years of age, took part in this Photovoice Study. Subsequently, a focus group interview with Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) ($n=4$) from participating schools was deemed necessary to provide a more nuanced understanding of developing themes from the data which emerged while utilising Photovoice. As participatory research requires participants to be engaged in all stages of the research process, including analysis and interpretation (Libenberg 2018), analysis utilised a two-step approach. Analysis of photographs by student participants during the Ideation stage of the Photovoice method informed the second step using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke 2022). The six-phases of RTA (Braun and Clarke 2022), as detailed in Chapter Four, Section 4.11, provided the framework to move through the data from semi-structured interview, photo-elicitation interviews with student participants and the focus group interview with adult participants. The first phase of RTA, familiarisation, was particularly important while using Photovoice. It

supported me to get to know the student participants and to develop and deepen my relationship with them. Through listening, transcribing and note making after each meeting with student participants I was able to use their responses to scaffold their participation and engagement with the process, this reduced my interpretation of responses to questions in the interview process. Furthermore, this supported me to make any necessary adaptations to the method based on feedback from participants. Successive phases supported intimate engagement with the data through the development of systematic data coding, generating initial themes and codes, developing and reviewing themes, refining and defining and naming themes. The findings from this process were detailed in Chapter Five and Six and are discussed in this chapter.

The chapter addresses these findings in conjunction with the embedded research questions identified in Chapter Four:

- How do students with ID describe their educational experiences in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland?
- What are the barriers and facilitators which influence students' participation in mainstream post-primary schools?
- What insights can students with ID give to enhance the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools?
- What are the barriers and facilitators which influence students' participation in decision making in mainstream post-primary schools?
- What insights can students with ID give to enhance the participation of students with ID in decision making in mainstream post-primary schools?

As such each research question will be addressed drawing on Findings from Chapter Five and Six. Findings will be situated in the wider research area of Inclusive Education and Student Voice from Chapters Two and Three. Analysis of data outlined in Section 4.11 produced three themes which include:

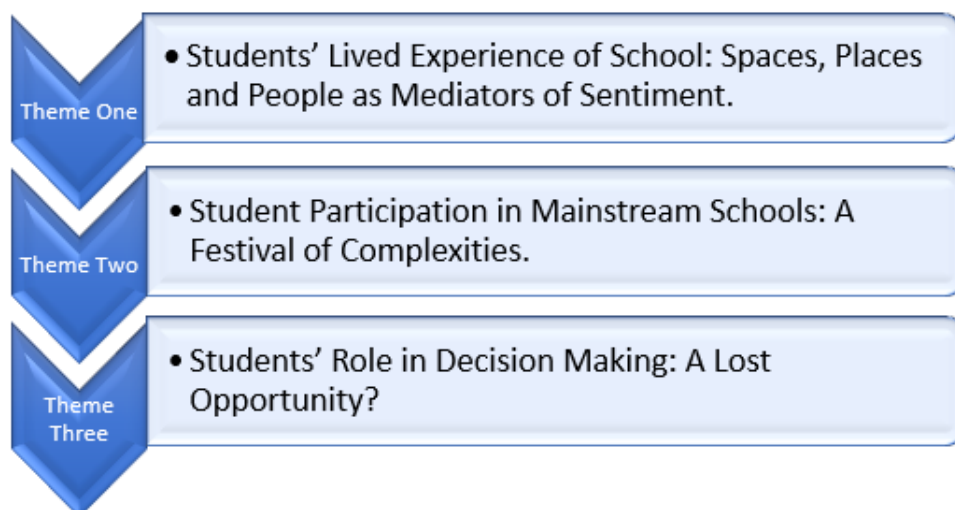


Figure 7.1 Themes from Data Analysis

Theme One, reported on the lived experience and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools. Theme Two outlined the facilitators and barriers which influence student participation in mainstream schools. Theme Three captures the dichotomy between students' ability to reflect on themselves and their limited role in decision making. The data from these themes will be integrated and discussed to answer the embedded questions as outlined above.

7.2 How do students with ID describe their educational experiences in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland?

The new paradigm of childhood (Motherway 2009) repositions the role of children in society where children are seen as experts in their own lives, and as such when provided with the appropriate conditions, can provide an accurate account of their experiences in school (Cefai and Cooper 2010; Burke and Grosvenor 2015). Accordingly, students in this study proved to be key informants, honest, willing, capable, and open to share and analyse their experiences to shape and support our understanding of inclusive practice in schools. Findings from this study indicate that students ($n=13$) expressed an overall satisfaction with their experience in school. This satisfaction is important as previous studies in the Irish context suggest that students with SEND, particularly intellectual disabilities, are prone to disliking the time they spend in school (McCoy and Banks 2012). Student satisfaction was, however, influenced by support structures which students recognised as enabling

them to cope with the challenges they experience on a daily basis. Challenges included navigating the school environment and accessing teaching, learning and assessment methods in the mainstream classroom. Aspects of the school environment which presented a challenge included lighting, noise, the stairs, physical access and signs without visuals which, according to students, decreased their satisfaction. The school environment is identified as particularly challenging for autistic students at post-primary level (Croydon *et al.* 2019) and this was evidenced in this study by students in one school who spoke of the 'dreaded stairs' and 'blinding lights' (Avril) and their 'fear' (Oliver) of such spaces. These challenges continued despite this school having a lift which could have been used by the students. This was not a possibility for these students as the lift was a resource for students with physical disabilities only. Compartmentalising students according to disability is problematic and does not take account of individuals' needs, skills abilities or anxieties. Inclusive education requires the removal of barriers to increase participation in school life for all students (NCSE 2024). The NCSE's vision for a progressive realisation towards an inclusive education system recognises the challenges school environments pose to students with SEND. As such, a key recommendation of the NCSE's vision is to ensure school buildings are designed with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to facilitate access for all.

The necessity of structures and resources to support the individual strengths and needs of students with SEND in schools is well documented in the literature (Booth and Ainscow 2002; McCoy, Banks and Shevlin 2012) and forms a guiding principle of the Continuum of Support (CoS) (NEPS 2007) framework. In this framework, those with the greatest level of need should access the greatest level of support (DES 2017). In this study, supports which increased participation in teaching and learning, such as the special class, the SNA, and physical adaptations to the school environment were identified as key to increasing student's satisfaction in school. Findings in relation to students' perspectives and experiences of the special class highlight tensions between the perspectives of students and obligations to national and international policy. These tensions will be discussed next.

Findings indicate that students' experiences of the special class were overwhelmingly positive. All students in this study were accessing the special class in their school. Time spent in the special class varied from full placement to partial placement. Chapter Five, Section 5.3.1.2 outlines the support arrangements in each school. Three out of the four schools used the Autism Support Class (ASC) as part of the schools' CoS framework (NEPS 2007). This approach to provision was also evident where the student had a diagnosis of Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD) and not Autism. Students reported the special class provided extra help, access to an appropriate curriculum, flexibility in relation to assessment procedures and individualised support which they were not receiving in mainstream classes. Similar findings were reported from NCSE commissioned research (Banks *et al.* 2016) on special class provision for students with special educational needs. In their study, Banks *et al.* (2016) identified the special class as a place where students could experience support which addressed individual strengths and needs; this support was not always possible in mainstream classrooms. However, this approach to provision has drawn chastisement and criticism from leading academics in the field of inclusive education (Black-Hawkins 2015; Allen 2020; Ainscow 2021; De Bruin 2021; Florian 2021) and from the United Nations, for not doing enough to ensure the enactment of students' rights. Criticism focuses on three main areas. Firstly, the belief that special education promotes segregation by denying children their right to be educated alongside their peers in the mainstream classroom; secondly, that separate provision results in inferior quality education; and thirdly, full inclusion is feasible and always successful (Hornby and Kaufmann 2023). However, students in this study demonstrated a preference for attending the special class, with many identifying it as their favourite place in the school. Students did not appear to view the special class as a form of negative separation from their mainstream peers, rather they valued the support provided in the special class. Indeed, John suggested that extending his time in the special class would improve his school experience and Evan explained how he did not mind being separated from his peers in mainstream, because he preferred the special class as it supports his learning. For these students, the need to be supported with their learning appeared to be more important than their need to be with their peers in mainstream. Perhaps the student's preference

for the special class was also due to their desire to be with peers who display similar characteristics. Homophily is the concept where similarity brings connection (Koutsouris 2014). Similar to social identity theory (Turner *et al.* 1987), homophily suggests that people identify themselves as belonging to an in-group (us) or outgroup (them) (Meyers 1996; Koutsouris 2014). Identification with an ingroup, those who we perceive as similar, creates our social identity (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Abrams 1994) which enhances our sense of belonging, and strengthens our self-concept and self-esteem (Meyers 1996; Koutsouris 2014; Stets and Burke 2020). Throughout this study, students demonstrated a connection to their peers in the special class (ingroup), students were described as “*unreal*” (Evan) and the special class was identified by students as a space and place to socialise, which was not always available in mainstream (see Paula’s account of the school canteen, (Section 5.3.1.1). Furthermore, SETs and SENCOs stressed the importance of students with ID having “*somewhere to go*”, a space where they can be with their peers, “*more realistic peers than what they’re meeting in mainstream class*” (Fidelma Focus Group Interview). Perhaps the special class addressed not only academic needs, but rather social and emotional needs, which enhanced students’ sense of belonging and connection to their ingroup which may not have been met in mainstream, the peers there may have been perceived as the outgroup.

The special class in this study formed a space of dedicated provision (Hornby and Kaufmann (2023) which supported the delivery of an appropriate education for students with ID. As a result, a situation exists where this system of provision is valued by students in this study, but is condemned by some adults, due to the belief that it is a breach of these students’ rights. Proponents of a needs-based approach to provision (e.g., Hornby, Kaufmann) suggest that the existence of a rights-based vision for inclusive education outlined in Article 24 of the UNCRPD does not necessarily mean it is morally right or in the best interest of the child (Warnock cited in Terzi 2010). Accordingly, specialised placements may be necessary for some students with more complex needs (NCSE 2024; Hornby and Kaufmann 2023) as it may be in their best interest. This needs-based approach has been adopted by the NCSE (2024), its most recent policy advice recognises there will always be some

students, who, because of their individual circumstances, will be unable to access mainstream schools or classes, consequently a continuum of provision, including special classes, supports the needs of all.

Students in this study reported difficulty with accessing teaching and learning in mainstream classes. A lack of differentiation, difficulty with accessing subject content and teachers' over-reliance on summative assessment measures were identified as challenges by students. Students perceived teachers in mainstream classes as less willing to provide them with support, "*sometimes they [mainstream teachers] help you, but not all the time, if they are busy they probably won't*" (John). This resulted in students having a less positive perception of teachers in mainstream classes. However, findings from a survey conducted by the Association of Secondary School Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) in 2019, identified that teachers feel ill-equipped to support the diverse range of needs in their classrooms. Despite policy developments, research and guidance, teachers continue to struggle to create inclusive learning environments (Brennan, King and Travers 2019). Therefore, a situation currently exists where teachers feel they lack the skills to provide support, and students feel their needs are not being met.

Findings from this study suggest that students with ID experience overall satisfaction with school. However, this satisfaction was influenced by support structures such as the special class which enables students to cope with challenges they face daily. These findings reveal a tension which exists between the voices of students with ID and inclusive policy when inclusion is understood to mean mainstream. Therefore, the necessity to understand the barriers and facilitators to students' participation in mainstream school is imperative. This study seeks to add to our current understanding of inclusive education by providing the space, voice, audience and influence for students with ID to express their views and have their voices heard in relation to appropriate educational provision.

7.3 What are the barriers and facilitators which influence students' participation in mainstream post-primary schools?

and

What insights can students with ID give to enhance the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools?

Inclusive education requires that students are not merely present in the school, but they have opportunities to meaningfully participate. Participation in this study is defined as students being active and meaningfully engaged in teaching and learning in the classroom; and students' feeling of belonging to the school community (Bergman and Westman 2018). Findings from this study indicate the factors which influence student participation are complex, wicked problems (Rittel and Webber 1973). Findings highlight tensions which exist between inclusive special education policy, the voices of students with ID and the voices of adults in schools. These tensions amplify the dilemma of difference identified by Norwich (2008) which occurs when students are identified as having a disability to gain access to resources and supports, coupled with the negative consequences of this due to its impact on how teachers perceive children with SEND, and its impact on teacher efficacy. Thus, the categorical approach and accompanying labels are problematic for inclusive education as they perpetuate otherness and differences, rather than similarities between children. This fosters a belief in teachers that they do not have the required skills and knowledge to support students' needs.

Teacher efficacy is perceived as teachers' belief or conviction in their capacity to affect student performance (Guskey and Passaro 1994). Teacher-perceived efficacy, according to Bandura (1997), influences the classroom environment and learning experiences to enhance student outcomes. Evidence suggests that teacher efficacy is the strongest predictor of positive attitudes towards inclusive practice (Sharma *et al.* 2012; Brennan 2017; Savolainen *et al.* 2022). Teachers with a high sense of efficacy are more willing to try various approaches and methodologies to improve outcomes for students with SEND (Wertheim and Leyser 2002). Conversely, teachers

with a low sense of efficacy believe there is little they can do to improve students' outcomes (Bruce *et al.* 2010). Low teacher efficacy is linked to anxiety and rejection of the principles of inclusion (Sharma *et al.* 2012). However, inclusive education necessitates a reform of educational systems including,

'the content, teaching methods, approaches and structures and strategies in education so that all students are provided with an equitable and participatory learning experience'

(General Comment No. 4, UNCRPD, 2006)

This requires teachers to believe they have the capacity to improve participation and outcomes for all, regardless of diversity. Low teacher efficacy is problematic in inclusive learning environments and presents as a barrier to the participation of students with SEND in mainstream post-primary schools.

Students in this study highlighted facilitators to their participation, whereas SETs and SENCOs identified barriers. Whether these factors were viewed as facilitators or barriers depended on how they were experienced by students and how they were perceived by adults in relation to their position in policy, which influences provision. Research has repeatedly highlighted the differences between students' and teachers' views on various aspects of school (Rabiee *et al.* 2004; Cefai and Cooper 2010), this includes student participation. The necessity to provide students and teachers the opportunity to bridge the gap between perspectives to understand this phenomenon is evident. Facilitators which influence students' participation according to students in this study include: students' relationship with staff, peer friendships, access to the special class, active learning methodologies, digital technologies, visual and organisational supports, and sport. The barriers which influence students' participation identified by adults in this study include: inclusion policy, the curriculum, teachers' capacity to address the increasing levels of need within the mainstream classroom, the current role of the SNA and teacher's perspectives of students with disabilities. Unsurprisingly, students did not speak of policy, nor did they use the language of barriers or facilitators, rather the spoke of their experiences which were interpreted by me as facilitators or barriers. SETs and SENCOs did however use this language when they were making meaning of students'

experience as described by students themselves through the Photovoice exhibition, and from my interpretations of themes which emerged during the Photovoice process, which were presented to teachers in the focus group interview. However, despite being identified and interpreted as a facilitator or a barrier, students and adults were frequently speaking about the same factors. As many of these factors are interconnected i.e., both a facilitator and a barrier, they will be discussed together. This illustrates the tensions and dilemmas which exist in inclusive special education.

The importance of positive relationships with staff and peers was a common theme in this study. Positive relationships with school staff are recognised as important for students' academic development (Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Martin and Collie 2018), wellbeing (Smyth 2015) and overall sense of belonging to a school (Crouch *et al.* 2014; Gonzalo *et al.* 2019). Findings in this study reveal that relationships were not solely dictated by the role or position of the staff in the school, but rather by positive interactions staff had with students and, how these interactions made students feel, how they supported their participation in teaching and learning and students' sense of belonging. Positive relationships with SNAs were a consistent feature in this study. SNAs were highly valued and respected by students and teachers. Despite the non-teaching nature of the SNA role outlined in successive circulars (DES 2002; 2014; Logan 2006; NCSE 2018), students in this study credited SNAs with supporting their academic learning in mainstream and special classes. As evidenced in other empirical research (see Logan 2006; Griffin and Blatchford 2021; Keating and O'Connor 2021) (Chapter Two Section 2.9.4), SNAs were attributed with differentiating and identifying key aspects of learning, in a supportive, caring manner. This support increased students' participation. However, the role of the SNA as outlined in Circular 0030/2014 is presented as a barrier to student participation by SETs and SENCOs. They perceive the role as limited and not reflective of what is happening on the ground. For them, the current role is no longer practical and does not reflect the complexity of needs in mainstream schools. In this study, SNAs appeared to support SETs and SENCOs in their role, as they are, "*the eyes and ears*" in the class (Margaret Focus Group Interview). SNAs appeared to be a go-between

SETs/SENCOs and what happens in the classroom. As SETs and SENCOs *“cannot be everywhere”* and subject teachers *“cannot cope”* (Margaret Focus Group Interview), the SNAs appear to bridge the gap in provision. Increasing the participation of students with SEND in the subject space goes beyond supporting care needs, according to SETs and SENCOs. This necessitates a reconceptualisation of the role of the SNA to reflect the reality and breath of students’ needs. Griffin and Blatchford (2021) identify SNAs as occupying a ‘third space along a continuum between education and care’ (p.210) in schools. It is this care, and their unofficial support with learning which students’ value, and although SETs and SENCOs recognised that this was beyond the SNAs remit, they acknowledged that students with ID *“definitely do cope best when they have loads of help from the SNA”* (Peter Focus Group Interview). Although previous research has indicated this relationship between students and SNAs can result in over-dependency, learned helplessness and over-reliance (Griffin and Blatchford 2021) no evidence of this emerged in this study. However, many students, particularly girls, demonstrated an emotional connection to the SNAs who supported them. Students perceived the SNA as somebody who understands them, and who is interested in them because they have a shared understanding of what it is like to be a student with an ID in a mainstream post-primary school. When asked who they thought would want to hear about their experience in school, Paula explained *“probably my SNA because she goes through it [school] with me a lot”* (Semi Structured Interview) (SSI). These findings indicate the importance of the SNA for enhancing student participation in school, without whom students simply *“wouldn’t survive”* (Fidelma Focus Group Interview). Nonetheless, the close relationship which exists between students and SNAs can have unintended consequences, including less contact time with teachers (Blatchford and Webster 2018). However, as detailed in Section 7.2, students described challenges they experience with accessing teaching and learning in mainstream classes. It may be the case that SNAs engage in academic support when this is unavailable to students in the mainstream classroom.

Overall, students reported more positive relationships with SNAs than teachers. Relationships with teachers were influenced by students’ perceptions of the support

they received from teachers. These perceptions depended on where the teaching took place. Less positive experiences with teachers in mainstream classes were reported than in special classes. Students reported feeling stressed and pressured with teaching and learning in the subject space. Similarly, SETs and SENCOs reported that the curriculum and “*pressure to deliver on the curriculum*” (Fidelma Focus Group Interview) reduces teachers’ capacity to address the diversity of need in the classroom. SETs and SENCOs spoke of mainstream teachers’ negative perceptions of students with ID in their classrooms, whom they perceived as not belonging to them and not their responsibility. Students, according to the SETs and SENCO, are viewed by what they can’t do rather than by what they can do. This deficit model appears to have influenced teachers’ belief that they do not have the capacity to address the needs of students with ID in their classrooms. In this study, some students were ignored (as in the case of Tom) or sent back to the special class (Sam) by teachers who believe they don’t have the capacity to support their needs, or more worryingly because they believe the support should be given in the resource or special class (according to SETs and SENCOs). Teachers with this belief view ability as fixed rather than something they can influence and in doing so they adopt an ‘additional needs approach’ (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011, p.821). The focus of the additional needs approach is on the student who needs something additional or different to everyone else, and how they can participate in class. This according to Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) results in students being marginalised, which for some (Ainscow, Florian, Slee), is the antithesis of inclusion, and as such presents a barrier to meaningful participation. However, systemic challenges at post-primary level, which stem from factors such as, initial teacher education (ITE), ongoing curricular reform, over-crowded curriculum, sustained supports for change to practice, performativity agendas, exam focused agenda, as well as the continuance of a multi-track approach (Kenny *et al.* 2020) to provision, which has seen an extraordinary increase in special classes (Travers 2023), contribute to a deficit mindset. Fitzgerald *et al.* (2021) remind us that the inclusion of students with complex needs in post-primary schools is particularly challenging for the aforementioned reasons.

Despite these systemic barriers, students identified evidence-informed practices and inclusive methodologies which teachers can implement in the classroom without the need for specialised instruction or support, including active learning, digital technologies, visual and organisational supports. These practices and methodologies supported students' learning by offering choice and flexibility and by addressing students' strengths, interests and needs. Furthermore, they allowed students to demonstrate their knowledge in a multi-modal manner. In doing so, they embody the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). These principles outlined in Chapter Two, Section 2.6 support the removal of barriers by widening access for all (Dalton 2017). Similar to the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011), UDL shifts the focus to teachers (Rao and Meo 2016) by encouraging them to create learning environments with opportunities for everyone to engage and participate (Israel, Ribuffo and Smith 2014). Despite this, several barriers to the enactment of frameworks such as UDL in the classroom exist, these include lack of resources, training, time and, most critically, a lack of empirical research to support the potential for UDL to improve student outcomes (Flood and Banks 2021). While the UDL framework has been designed to meet the widest range of needs, it recognises that there will always be some students who need 'particular and specialised add ons' (Quirke *et al.* 2023, p.33). Frameworks such as UDL and Inclusive Pedagogical Approach cannot be seen as a panacea for students who require a more individualised approach. However, by offering choice and flexibility about how students learn and how they can demonstrate their learning (Flood and Banks 2021), UDL can counteract some of the negative experiences with teaching, learning and assessment described by students in this study.

The identification of sport as a facilitator to the participation of students with ID was at first a surprising outcome from this study. Students with SEND tend to report obstacles to their participation in Physical Education (PE) classes due to discrimination from peers and a lack of preparation of the teacher (Coates and Vickerman 2008; Haegele and Sutherland 2015). However, on closer examination participation in sport fostered a sense of belonging and connectedness to peers which transcended other difficulties students may have experienced in school.

Inclusion is underpinned by a sense of belonging, value and acceptance (Stainback and Stainback 1996; Odom *et al.* 2011; Slee 2019) and participation in sport, particularly team sports, created this sense of unity and belonging for students.

Making friends and being friends were common themes throughout this study. However, research has shown that friendships do not spontaneously improve by attending mainstream schools (McCoy and Banks 2012; Croydon *et al.* 2019) rather they need to be supported (Squires *et al.* 2016). Findings from the Growing Up in Ireland Study identified that lower social/peer relations have a central role in shaping student's negative perceptions of their school experience (McCoy and Banks 2012). Furthermore, studies of peer acceptance indicate that students with SEND are more likely to be rejected and experience isolation than students without SEND (Stone and La Greca 1990; Woodgate *et al.* 2020). Paula's account of the School Food Company in the canteen as a space where all other students sit and eat their lunch may signify a divide, an invisible wall (D'Alesio 2012) between her and her peers which negatively impact on her participation. Spaces within schools are socially constructed and can be symbols of power (or lack of it) (Nind *et al.* 2020). They contribute to students' production of their sense of identity and their sense of belonging through feeling as an insider or an outsider (D'Alessio 2012). In the canteen space, Paula appears to perceive herself as an outsider, as this space represents a zone of exclusion. This is in stark contrast to students' descriptions and experience of the special class as an inclusive space to socialise with peers. Activity based clubs and structured activities in the special class appeared to help friendship development, however, it appears that it is the student's perception of the special class as a space of belonging and acceptance which increases their participation and connects with the concept of homophily and social identity theory.

The special class was viewed as a "*blanket support*" for students (Fidelma Focus Group Interview) to increase their participation in school. Students recognised that access to the special class provides them with a calm space, support with their homework, and identified their individual workstation as a safe space and a place to engage with academic learning. Structured work systems such as individual workstations have long been associated with structured teaching approaches for

autistic students in special education classrooms (Mesibov and Shea 2009; Mesibov *et al.* 2015). The structured and predictable environment helps autistic students feel less anxious and more secure (Mesibov *et al.* 2015; Government of Ireland 2022). However, findings from this study indicate the benefits of individual workstations as a facilitator to participation which was identified by both autistic students and students with MGLD. Students reported that their individual workstations promoted self-regulation, organisation and independence. Time spent in this space supported students not only to engage with teaching and learning but also prepared them to be receptive to the teaching and learning on offer. It appears that what is essential for some (structure, routine and predictability) is beneficial for all. In Ireland, however, we are still applying a categorical approach to special class allocations, this contradicts the move to needs based provision.

Findings in this study identify that access to the special class acts as a facilitator to the participation of students with ID in mainstream schools. Perhaps, reflective of perceived benefits to students' participation, or a lack of trust in SETAM (2017; 2024), and in schools to deploy resources when resources are no longer tied to the student, there has been over a 600% increase in special classes in Ireland between the period of 2013 and 2023 (Travers 2023). In 2023, 378 of the 389 new special classes opened in mainstream schools, were designated as autism classes (NCSE 2023) and autism classes now represent 89 per cent of all special classes in Ireland (Travers 2023). All students in this study were accessing the special class on a full or partial placement. While there are MGLD special class designations in Ireland, no new special class under this category has opened since 2018, and there were none in the participating schools. The special class in School B had previously been designated as one for MGLD but this was re-designated as an Autism Support Class in 2022. Under SETAM (2017; 2024) students with MGLD should be accessing support under the CoS framework (NEPS 2007), particularly when there is no special class designated for this category of disability in the school. However, SETs and SENCOs identified that this policy is too rigid as it does not adequately address the needs of some students with MGLD. As evidenced above, students in this study value and recognise the special class as a support for learning and a space of belonging. As

such, the current policy is a significant barrier as it prioritises the needs of one disability over another. The increased designation of special classes to one group of disability, i.e., autism, is discriminatory in the Irish context. The designation of special classes for students with MGLD is in decline, at the same time there has been a significant increase in the number of special classes for autistic students in Ireland (Travers 2023). Undeniably, research has identified that schools can be particularly challenging for autistic students. Large, noisy, chaotic, physical environments and increased demands on academic and social skills make placement options important (Croydon *et al.* 2019) to support the unique characteristics, including strengths, interests, and needs of autistic students (Sweeney and Fitzgerald 2023) in school. The evidence-informed practices which may be more readily available in the special classes support the needs of autistic learners. However, findings from this study highlight that these supports also increase the participation of students with MGLD.

The participation of students with SEND in mainstream schools is complex. These findings highlight the tension between the voices and perspectives of students, teachers, national policy and international policy. Findings from this study indicate that inclusion policy is presented as a barrier to inclusion. Inclusive education is full of tensions and dilemmas. Research and policy have sought to address what many call a wicked problem (Armstrong 2017; Fitzgerald 2020), However, findings from this study indicate that schools, teachers, and policy makers cannot solve this on their own, a whole education approach which incorporates all stakeholders is needed (Kenny, McCoy and O'Higgins Norman 2023). A whole education approach moves away from an individual, whole school approach to inclusive education, to one which recognises the school within the context of wider society. Questions of human rights, equality, social justice and diversity are concerns for society as a whole (Hornby 2015; Ainscow 2020). A whole school approach provides a framework which identifies the necessity of societal attitudes and values, and governmental resource funding and allocation for effective inclusive education (Kenny, McCoy and O'Higgins Norman 2023).

The concept of inclusion is underpinned by the principles of human rights, social justice and equality (Hornby 2015; Ainscow 2020; Kenny, McCoy O'Higgins Norman

2023) which impact students' experiences in schools. The need to elicit the voices of students to understand what constitutes inclusive practice is evident. Inclusion and student voice are interconnected, symbiotic concepts; by providing students with the necessary space, voice, audience and influence for them to express their views on how they can be best supported in school we may see the way forward.

7.4 What are the barriers and facilitators which influence students' participation in decision making in mainstream post-primary schools?

and

What insights can students with ID give to enhance the participation of students with ID in decision making in mainstream post-primary schools?

This study set out to explore the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools, including their participation in decision making. Findings from this study reflect previous research which identifies that students in Ireland have perceived low levels of influence on decision making in schools (Cosgrove and Gilleece 2012; Forde *et al.* 2018; McCormack *et al.* 2019) despite growing acceptance in wider society that children and young people have the right to be involved in all decisions which affect them (Rose and Shevlin 2003; Jones 2005; Lundy 2007; Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felton 2011), including their education. Decision making in this study was explored through students' experiences of choice in learning activities, examples of when they made decisions in school, and aspects of schools they would like to change. Once again, it is important to note that students did not use the language of barriers or facilitators, rather it was my interpretations of students' experience and opportunities to engage in decision making under these areas, which identified if they were barriers or facilitators. Although SETs and SENCOs identified the importance of student voice in schools, no facilitators to support student participation in decision making or to incorporate student voices to

inform teaching and learning were identified or discussed during the focus group interview, despite being directly asked. However, the barriers to the participation of students in decision making and barriers to the incorporation of student voices to inform teaching and learning were readily recognised and formed the basis of the discussion. It is important to note, that SETs and SENCOs may only have been responding to feedback on students' experience of participating in decision making and their experience of choice in learning activities, rather than responding to the question on facilitators. This may have focused their attention on barriers. Despite this, SETs and SENCOs appeared to believe that all students, irrespective of ID, would report that they are not involved in decision making in schools, or that they have choice in learning activities. For them, it appeared that the barriers to providing choice and flexibility in teaching and learning were in many cases too great to overcome, but were significantly increased for students with ID.

The ability of students to speak for themselves and to be actively involved in all matters of school life has been recognised in educational research and literature (Lundy 2007; Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Cefai and Cooper 2010; Bovill *et al.* 2011; Mitra 2018). Findings from Section 7.2 and 7.3 demonstrate that students can analyse their own experiences and provide an accurate account of their learning process and how these can be enhanced and supported through school and classroom practices (Fielding and Bragg 2003; Leitch 2007). Similar findings were evident in relation to students' role in decision making in this study. Students have the ability, but this ability was not harnessed or supported. Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) recognises four conditions: space voice, audience and influence, which must be in place for students to express their views and to have their voices heard. At the time of this study these were not intentionally or consistently provided [researcher's interpretation]. As a result, facilitators identified by students were minimal; input from peers and adults, time, and opportunity to engage in decision making were identified as a facilitator by one student (Avril). Although some meaningful examples of decision making were evident, such as in Avril's case, as a whole, student involvement had little impact on core activities such as teaching and learning. Similar to previous studies (see McCormack *et al.* 2019, Chapter Three

Section 3.6), instances where students had opportunities to engage were passive and resulted in minimal change, examples included; choosing lunch from the school menu (Tom), deciding to go out and play (Sam), or to try again when an answer was incorrect (James). Students in this study, as in previous studies (McCormack *et al.* 2019), appeared to assume a subordinate role in decision making compared to teachers, SNAs and parents. John, Paula and Daniel did not appear to see themselves as active ‘agents of change’ (Fielding 2001, p.122) and Colm, John, Jane and Oliver reported that they do not make decisions in school. Findings, therefore, present a dichotomy between students’ ability to reflect on themselves which is a facilitator, and their minimal role in the decision making or understanding of their potential role, which is a barrier.

Barriers to supporting students with ID to participate in decision making were readily identified by SETs and SENCOs during the focus group interview. Teachers’ perceptions of students with ID, the curriculum, a status quo approach whereby teachers have their way of doing things, were all were identified as barriers. Scepticism about the capacity of students, particularly students with SEND, to have meaningful input into decisions concerning them has resulted in students being denied their rights (Lundy 2007; Mansfield 2018; Brasof and Mansfield 2019). In this study, a focus on deficit rather than on the “*ability and strengths*” (Fidelma Focus Group Interview) of students resulted in teachers perceiving students with ID as not having the capacity to contribute to change and school improvement. Lundy (2007) reminds us that children’s enjoyment of their rights under Article 12 is contingent on the co-operation of adults. The status quo approach of teachers “*having their way of doing things*” (Peter Focus Group Interview) is problematic, and not conducive to responsive teaching. Findings throughout this study identify that students can identify facilitators to their participation in the life of the school, including their participation in decision making. This requires those with the power to listen and respond, for however good or beneficial students’ suggestions maybe, it is how school staff respond to them that makes the difference (McIntyre, Pedder and Rudduck 2007) as they [teachers] have the power. The hierarchical nature of post-primary schools in Ireland has been well documented (Lynch and Lodge 2004; Smith

2009; Gileece and Gosgrove 2012; De Roiste *et al.* 2021). However, research on student voice recognises the need for a shift in mindset and sharing of power (Cook-Sather 2020) which necessitates students and teachers working collaboratively to overcome barriers such as the curriculum (adults' perception) to understand how students learn best. Insights provided by students can be used by teachers to design learning opportunities underpinned by the principles of UDL, to address the strengths and needs of all. In doing so, a culture of participation is created, whereby students are valued and respected as stakeholders in education. This becomes a facilitator.

Students' participation in this Photovoice project and adults' awareness of the need to incorporate student voices in decision making, due to students' participation in this project, has resulted in transformational change in some of the participating schools. Following this study, I contacted schools to see if students' participation resulted in positive change (influence). Two schools responded, and the following examples illustrate the change, but also raised some questions. Sam (See Chapter Four, Section 4.9) is a wheelchair user and prior to participating in this project, experienced significant challenges navigating the school environment due to obstacles (school bags) which were thrown on the floor by fellow students. This was a particular challenge outside of the Physical Education (PE) hall, which resulted in Sam being unable to independently access or participate in PE. Sam had the opportunity during the Photovoice exhibition, 'Show and Tell', to inform staff, management, SNAs, and a member of the student council, how distressing this was and how it impacted him. He asked for this to stop. School management listened to Sam and responded by installing extra shelves outside of the P.E. building for students to store their books and bags (Figure 7.2). Staff and students were informed of the reason the shelves were installed, and staff were asked to remind students to always keep the floor free from obstacles.

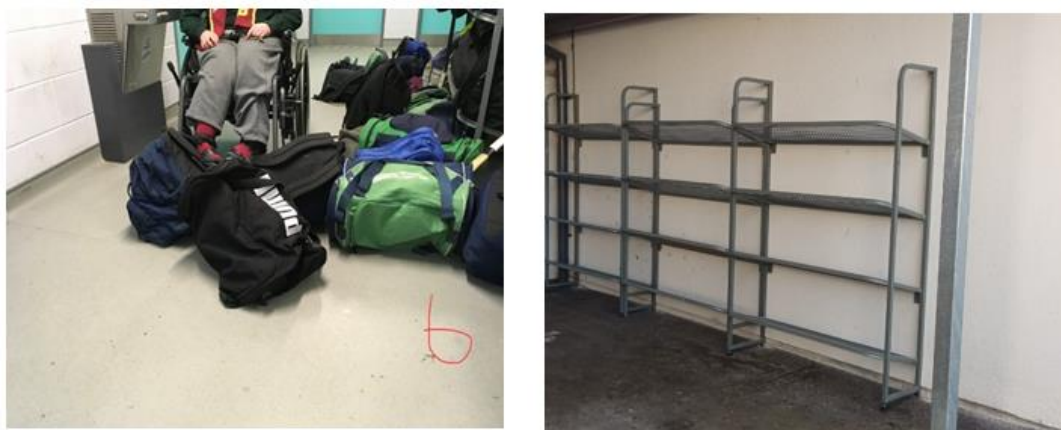


Figure 7.2. Before and After Photovoice Project.

Recent correspondence with the SET from this school has revealed, that although the school listened and responded to Sam, the student body has been slower to act. The following excerpt illustrates the challenges this school has experienced enacting change.

“As a direct result of the Photovoice study we have installed extra storage for gear bags in order not to block the corridor outside the PE Hall as was outlined by our wheelchair user. This was organised by one of our deputy principals and the caretaker on their own initiative. We had anticipated an immediate change in student behaviour of dumping their gear bags on the ground blocking access to the PE Hall. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. However, it is a work in progress. We are going to confiscate bags that are blocking access and I will keep you updated.....it’s hard to break a habit!”

(Email Correspondence, Michelle SET, School B)

This has implications for student voice and inclusion in schools, particularly when the response requires a collaborative approach and solidarity between students’ and between the school and the student body. Inclusion requires a whole education approach (Kenny, McCoy and O’Higgins Norman 2023) involving all stakeholders working collaboratively, as a process (Booth and Ainscow 2002; UNESCO 2018; Ainscow 2020; O’ Brien 2020). Similarly, engaging in student voice requires consultation with students, this situates students as active stakeholders and partners (Fleming 2019) in education. The student body in this school may feel this change (new shelving) was made without consultation with them, which may have

disempowered them and reduced their willingness to change deep-rooted behaviours (throwing the bags on the floor). It is also possible that negative attitudes and ingroup bias (Meyers 1996; Koutsouris 2014) which are associated with the concepts of homophily (Koutsouris 2014) and social identity theory (Turner *et al.* 1987) may have influenced the students' response to the change. Research on students' social behaviour and students' attitudes towards peers with SEND has indicated that students with SEND may be treated less favourably than their typically developing peers (Nikolarazi *et al.* 2005) due to negative attitudes and ingroup bias (Meyers 1996; Koutsouris 2014). This may have reduced students' solidarity to support Sam. As Sam spends the majority of his day in the special class (See Chapter Four, Section 4.9) this may contribute to him being perceived as an outsider. Research on the attitudes of students towards peers with SEND, identify factors such as, proximity to peers with SEND, particularly previous positive experience, parental attitudes towards people with SEND, and disability knowledge as factors which influence peer attitudes (Dias *et al.* 2020). The SET in Sam's school reported that on occasion Sam had been sent back to the special class by mainstream teachers who reported they had nothing for him to do in their class. This may further influence students' attitudes and perceptions of Sam. Unfortunately, this school feels they have no option left but to resort to punitive measures to change behaviours. Perhaps initial consultation with the student body to solve the challenge of students' throwing bags on the floor, may have resulted in a different outcome. More likely though, the adoption of an inclusive culture may have prevented the difficulty in the first place. Schools with an inclusive culture, value and respect diversity as the norm, an inclusive culture involves staff and student collaboration, strong leadership and flexible and integrated school structures (Wilde and Avarmidas 2011) to enhance inclusive practice. The importance of school ethos and culture to implementing inclusive practice in schools is well documented in the literature on inclusive education (Shevlin, Winter and Flynn 2013; OECD 2020). However, schools, teachers, SNAs and students need to be supported on this journey, it is a process (Ainscow 2020). Similarly, Moloney *et al.* (2021) remind us that those working with children need clarity and support to understand what meaningful participation entails and how it can be enhanced. It cannot be assumed that schools and teachers have the

necessary skills and capacities to support the participation of students in decision making in relation to educational matters. This school is on their inclusion journey and are clearly willing to respond to student voices and needs and overcome tokenistic approaches. Their willingness to continue this journey is evident as they have decided to implement this Photovoice study with other students in the school. Students will have an opportunity to present their experiences of school, including facilitators and barriers to their participation to staff, management, SNAs and the student council before the end of each academic year, their voices will inform whole school planning for the following year. As such, students and staff will engage in 'dialogue, discussion and consultation on issues which concern them in relation to their education' (Fleming 2015, p.223).

The second example illustrates the changes School A made as a result of students participating in this Photovoice Project. The SENCO has now incorporated student voice to inform the creation of Student Support Plans (SSP). The SSP is a written document prepared for a student which specifies learning targets that are to be achieved over a set period, including the strategies, supports and resources necessary to achieve those targets (NCSE 2006). Although planning for students' support requires a collaborative approach (DES 2017), historically students had little input in the planning process (Bergin and Logan 2013). Students in School A now have an opportunity to be meaningfully involved in the creation of this plan. Student voice informs teaching and learning by students identifying their strengths, skills and abilities as well as areas of need both within the curriculum and broader development. This now informs the creation of the SSP which SETs and subject teachers use to inform their teaching, learning and assessment. These two examples illustrate the transformational power of student voice when schools provide the space, voice, audience and influence for staff and students to work collaboratively together.

While participation in this study has brought about positive change for students, overall, findings indicate that students' views are not consistently sought or listened to (according to both students and adults). Gillece and Cosgrove (2012) caution that while students are afforded increasing rights to a voice and say through international

conventions such as the UNCRC and the UNCRPD, they have, in reality, little opportunity to exercise these rights in the Irish education system. More barriers than facilitators were evident in this study. Although students have the capacity to contribute to decision making, they were not provided the space voice, audience and influence to do so.

7.5 Conclusion

This study set out to explore the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. Findings highlight the tensions which exist between inclusive education, which is seen by many as a rights-based approach, and special education, which is seen as a needs-based approach. Accordingly, these two divergent views clash and collide in an effort to understand how best to support the diverse range of needs in our schools. Inclusion argues that mainstream education is a right, and as such should be available and accessible to everyone regardless of diversity and special education, suggests that SEND may require specific, individualised strategies to supports students' needs.

Findings from this study indicate that students' value and respect support structures, such as the special class, which schools are currently utilising to address students' needs. For students in this study, dedicated spaces, such as the special class enhance their participation and sense of belonging to the school. Consequently, although inclusion may be enshrined as a human right, questions remain as to whether full inclusion is morally, ethically, academically or socially right, or in the best interest of the child. Findings from this study indicate that the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools is complex. Our current system is too rigid and fails to account for the unique needs of individuals and the challenges schools face in addressing those needs. Participation requires a flexible, responsive approach and a reimagining of support structures. Hornby's Model of Inclusive Special Education (Hornby 2015) marries two divergent philosophies and aims to provide a vision on how best to support students with SEND in our education system. The goal of Hornby's Model (2015) is to ensure children with SEND are effectively educated, which according to Hornby, is in their best interest and makes it morally right. Effective education focuses on instruction, regardless of where this takes place.

Focusing on instruction places the student at the centre of his or her educational experience. In doing so it can provide the space, voice, audience and influence necessary for students and teachers to work collaboratively together to enhance inclusive practice and improve outcomes for all.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of findings from this study on the experiences and perspectives of students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. It will discuss the overall findings in relation to the research aims and research questions. It will discuss the implications of the findings for policy, and practice, particularly in the Irish context. Reflections and recommendations for using Photovoice as a data collection method with students with ID will be outlined. The researcher's vision for situating the Lundy Model (2007) within a wider ethical framework, which prioritises informed assent when researching with children will be explained. Limitations and possibilities for further research, based on the experience of undertaking this study will be suggested. A dissemination plan will be outlined, and reflections and personal learnings garnered throughout the process will be summarised.

8.2 Revisiting the Research Questions and Aims of Study

This section revisits the research aims and research questions (Table 8.1) in an effort to synthesise findings and examine the extent to which this study achieved the aims and addressed these questions, with careful consideration to current literature.

Table 8.1. Research Aims and Questions

Research Aims
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To explore the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in post-primary mainstream schools in Ireland;• To operationalise students' rights to express a view and to have their views heard;• To explore the barriers and facilitators to participation in decision making/ in the life of the school;

- To work with students as co-creators of meaning to develop insights for post-primary schools to enhance the participation of students with ID in decision making;
- To use findings to potentially inform policy and practice to advance inclusive practices in post-primary schools in Ireland.

Embedded Questions

1. How do students with ID describe their educational experiences in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland?
2. (a)What are the barriers and facilitators which influence students' participation in mainstream post-primary schools?
2. (b)What insights can students with ID give to enhance the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary school?
3. (a)What are the barriers and facilitators which influence students' participation in decision making in mainstream post-primary schools?
3. (b)What insights can students with ID give to enhance the participation of students with ID in decision making in mainstream post- primary schools?

1. How do students with ID describe their educational experiences in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland?

This study set out to explore the experiences and perspectives of students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) in mainstream post-primary school in Ireland. Findings indicated that students expressed overall satisfaction with their experiences in school. However, this satisfaction was influenced by support structures which enabled them to cope with the challenges they faced daily. Significantly, many of these supports, such as access to the special class and academic support provided by SNAs, are contrary to provisions in national and international policy. Furthermore, the challenges experienced by students, such as difficulty accessing teaching, learning, and assessment in mainstream classes and the challenges with navigating the school environment, indicate the complexities for teachers and schools in implementing inclusive practice. Accordingly, these findings highlight tensions and dilemmas between the experiences of students with ID, who indicate a preference

for the educational provision through dedicated spaces such as the special class, and national and international inclusion policies which seek the removal of such spaces. These tensions are the result of developments in inclusive education which have witnessed a shift from a focus on special education and disability (needs-based approach), to a broader understanding of inclusion which embraces all learners who may be excluded or marginalised in the education arena (rights-based approach) (Spratt and Florian 2015; Strum 2019; Rose and Shevlin 2020). The rights-based approach to inclusive education is strengthened by the ratification of Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Article 24 of the UNCRPD including General Comment NO.4 (2016) call for the removal of separate special education provision and the adoption of a full inclusion model to ensure that children with disabilities have access to quality, free, inclusive general education system with appropriate individualised supports to facilitate effective inclusion (NCSE 2019). Despite ratification of the UNCRPD, including Article 24, in 2018, Ireland continues to operate a multi-track approach (Kenny *et al.* 2020) to provision, through a system of placement in special classes, designated for a particular disability, or through the Continuum of Support Framework (NEPS 2007). For many (see Ainscow, Slee, De Bruin, Florian) this system is discriminatory and a breach of children's rights.

However, findings in this study and in Goodall's (2020) study (Section 2.9.6) contradict the philosophical underpinnings of full inclusion. Students in this study indicated a clear preference for educational placement and provision in the special class. Sentiments expressed were overwhelmingly positive and acknowledge the benefits of access to the special class for them. Students identified the special class as a calm space, and place to socialise with peers. Students recognised that access to the special class provided support with homework, and individual workstations provided both a safe space and a place to engage with academic learning. These findings are important, not only because they contradict the dominant discourse, but also because they accentuate the significance of incorporating the voices of children in decision making. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and more specifically Article 7 (3) of the UNCRPD state

that children with SEND have the right to express their views and have their voices heard on all matters concerning them. This includes their right to make decisions about their educational placement and provision. Currently, in Ireland the placement of students in special classes is determined by a written professional recommendation and input from teachers, school management, parents and Special Education Needs Organisers (SENO) (DE 2020) and the Health Service Executive (HSE) Assessment of Need Process (AON) (Circular 0025/2024). There appears to be little evidence of the role of students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in this decision-making process. Article 3(1) of the UNCRC demands that the best interest of the child shall be the primary concern in all actions concerning children. The placement of children in mainstream schools may be a human right, but it does not necessarily mean that it is morally (Hornby 2015), academically, or socially right or in the best interest of the child. The right to an appropriate education is the right to feel you belong and the right to effective instruction, and these supersede the right to be educated alongside peers (Kaufmann and Badar 2014; Hornby 2015). Special education provision needs a dedicated space, which for Hornby and Kaufmann (2023) is not the same as segregation. Inclusion is a feeling, a sense of belonging, not a place, mainstream or otherwise (Goodall 2018; 2020). The right to learn is not the right to learn in the same environment (Warnock 2010). Making the place of instruction the central issue in understanding inclusion is a fallacy, being present does not mean participating, and can result in exclusion, isolation, loneliness and increased anxiety for some students (Cooper and Jacobs 2011; Goodall 2018; 2020).

Findings from this study reveal that students expressed satisfaction with their experience in school. This was influenced by support structures which enabled them to cope with challenges they experienced daily. These findings reveal tensions between the experiences of students with ID in mainstream schools, who value access to the special class, and international policy which seeks a removal of such spaces, in favour of full inclusion. Findings indicate the necessity for dedicated spaces for special education provision and for all children to be involved in the decision-

making process to determine if access to these dedicated spaces is in their best interest.

2(a) What are the barriers and facilitators which influence students' participation in mainstream post-primary schools?

2 (b) What insights can students with ID give to enhance the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary school?

The challenge of implementing inclusive practice to facilitate the participation of students with SEND in mainstream schools is well documented (Winter and O'Raw 2010; Shevlin Winter and Flynn 2013; Haug 2017; Ainscow 2020). Several frameworks such as, the *Index for Inclusion*, (Booth and Ainscow 2002), *Inclusive Education Framework* (NCSE 2011), *Inclusive Pedagogical Approach* (Florian and Black Hawkins 2011) and *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)* (CAST 2018) sought to support schools to remove barriers to increase the participation of students with SEND in schools. However, the inclusion of students with complex needs in post-primary schools has been identified as particularly challenging (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021). Furthermore, a lack of empirical research to support the efficacy of frameworks such as UDL (Flood and Banks 2023) and criticism of the *Inclusive Pedagogical Approach* (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011) for not doing enough to recognise the individualisation of approaches necessary for some children (Lindsay *et al.* 2014), may impact on teachers' implementation of these frameworks to improve student outcomes. In this study, systemic barriers, such as inclusion policy, curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment, teachers' capacity to address increasing levels of need, the current role of the SNA, teachers' perceptions of students with ID, and the school environment, all negatively influenced the participation of students with ID in their schools. Facilitators such as relationships with adults and peers, access to appropriate supports, inclusive methodologies and participation in sport, all increased students' sense of participation and belonging.

Findings highlight the importance of school culture, ethos and professional development (Shevlin, Winter and Flynn 2013; OECD 2020) as key to implementing inclusive practice in schools. In this study, it appeared that the teachers' recognition

of the value of supporting students with identified needs was in direct competition with the requirement for them to cover the syllabus in their subject area. Where teachers felt that students didn't have the capacity to participate in teaching and learning or when teachers felt they didn't have the capacity to teach students with SEND, student participation appeared to be negatively impacted, according to SETs and SENCOs. However, where positive relationships existed between students and staff, or when staff had participated in continuous professional development (CPD) in inclusive special education, as in the case of participating SETs and SENCOs, student participation appeared to increase. Positive relationships with school staff are recognised as important for students' academic development (Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Martin and Collie 2018), wellbeing (Smyth 2015), and overall sense of belonging to a school (Crouch *et al.* 2014; Gonzalo *et al.* 2019). Similarly, the necessity for teachers to have additional expertise and access to CPD in inclusive special education, is seen as a critical factor in the establishment of inclusive learning environments (O'Gorman and Drudy 2010; Shevlin *et al.* 2013 Hornby 2014; Kauffman and Badar 2014; Kauffman and Hornby 2020). Students in this study spoke of the challenges they experienced accessing teaching and learning in mainstream classes and demonstrated a preference for time spent in the special class. It is unknown if all teachers in the special class had undertaken CPD to support them in implementing inclusive practice. Although this is a recommendation outlined in Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (SETAM) (2017), it is not a requirement. What is known is that students reported more positive perceptions of teachers in the special class, and they demonstrated an awareness of the benefits of accessing the special class to support their learning. The special class appeared to carve out a space for students which creates the necessary physical, sensory and learning environment to support students' participation. Perhaps the smaller numbers of students in the special class enhanced relationship-building by providing teachers an opportunity to get to know students' strengths, abilities and needs, as suggested by SETs and SENCOs. Or perhaps the structure of the special class afforded teachers the space, flexibility and time to implement inclusive practices and methodologies, which teachers struggled with in the mainstream subject space according to SETs and SENCOs.

Unquestionably, access to the special class acted as a facilitator to the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools. Interestingly other facilitators, such as relationships with staff and peers, and the implementation of inclusive methodologies, were also enhanced by access to the special class. Likewise, barriers to participation, such as inclusion policy, the curriculum, teachers' capacity to address the increasing levels of need, and teacher's negative perspectives of students with SEND, were all reduced by students' access to the special class. This doesn't mean that access to the special class is in the students' best interest or what is right for every student with SEND. What it does mean is that the categorical approach to the designation of special classes based on disability is problematic and is discriminatory. It also means that all students with SEND should be involved in this decision-making process. What is significant about this research is, when provided with the appropriate conditions, students were able to provide an accurate account of their experience of participating in mainstream post-primary schools. Students in this study proved to be key informants, honest, willing and open to share and analyse their experiences to shape and support our understanding of barriers and facilitators to student participation. Findings from this study highlight that factors which influence students' participation are complex. They emphasise tensions which exist between the voices of students with SEND, the voices of adults in schools and inclusive special education policy. They emphasise the necessity to listen to the voices of students with SEND, and to incorporate their voices in all decisions which impact them, including education provision.

3(a) What are the barriers and facilitators which influence students' participation in decision making in mainstream post-primary schools?

3(b) What insights can students with ID give to enhance the participation of students with ID in decision making in mainstream post-primary schools?

Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) recognises four conditions: space, voice, audience and influence, each of which is necessary for all children as right-bearing citizens to have a voice in all matters concerning them and to have their opinions heard. Children's rights to participate in all decisions which affect them are enshrined in Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) and Article 7(3) of the UNCRPD (2006).

Decision making in this study was explored through students' experiences of choice in learning activities, examples of when they made decisions in school, and aspects of school they would like to change. Findings indicate that, although students had the ability to analyse their own experiences and provide an accurate account of their learning processes and how these could be enhanced and supported through school and classroom practice (Fielding and Bragg 2003; Leitch 2007), in reality they had low levels of influence on decision making in their schools. Instances where students had opportunities to engage in decision making were passive and resulted in minimal change, examples included: choosing lunch from the school menu (Tom), deciding to go out to play (Sam), or to try again when an answer was incorrect (James). Furthermore, students appeared to have little understanding of their potential role in decision making and appeared to assume a subordinate role in decision making compared to teachers, SNAs and parents.

As a result, identification of facilitators which influenced students' participation in decision making were minimal. Input from peers and adults, time, and opportunities to engage in decision making were identified as a facilitator by one student. Interestingly, although SETs and SENCOs recognised the importance of student voice in schools, no facilitators were identified by adult participants. The absence of evidence of teacher's use of student voice is well documented (McIntyre, Pedder and Rudduck 2007). Consequently, although students in this study possessed the ability to reflect on themselves, which is a facilitator, this was not harnessed intentionally or consistently by schools. Conversely, the barriers which influenced students' participation in decision making were readily identified. Teachers' perceptions of students with ID, the curriculum, a status quo approach whereby teachers had their way of doing things, were all were identified as barriers.

The aim for students in schools is for them to become 'change makers' (Hargreaves 2018, p.9), to exert influence on their own learning, to have agency, control and authorship in their lives. This can only happen when students are provided with the necessary space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy 2007) to enable students, teachers and SNAs to work collaboratively to create an understanding of how inclusive practice can be enacted or enhanced. In the context of inclusive education

this is not without its challenges. Correspondence with School B reveals that when provided with space, voice, audience and influence through his participation in the Photovoice project, Sam was initially successful in self-advocacy by reaching and influencing his intended audience, namely the school's adult leadership. This, however, did not have the desired impact, i.e., for students to stop throwing their bags on the floor, because it didn't achieve the needed secondary influence on the student body. Inclusive practice requires a whole education approach (Kenny, McCoy and O'Higgins Noman 2023) involving all stakeholders, including students. It is entirely possible that because students were not consulted about these changes, they did not make the necessary changes to their behaviour. However, it is also possible that students saw Sam as an outsider, not belonging to their ingroup, in line with the concept of homophily (Meyers 1996; Koutsouris 2014) and social identity theory (Turner *et al.* 1987). Sam spends most of his day in the special class with some access to mainstream classes, as such, the main student body may not identify with him, or be aware of or value his experience. Research indicates that typically developing peers are not always accepting of the peers with SEND and their attitudes are often negatively biased (Nikolarazi *et al.* 2005). The relationship between attitudes and behaviour is very close (Dias *et al.* 2020). Negative attitudes and ingroup bias (Meyers 1996; Koutsouris 2014), coupled with a lack of consultation, may have resulted in the student body not supporting the change. This has consequences for the concept of student voice and inclusion, especially when the response requires a collaborative approach and solidarity between the school and student body.

The participation of students in the life of the school, including participation in decision making is complex, facilitators and barriers combine to reveal the complexity of the lived experience of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools. Participation in this study provided the space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy 2007) necessary for students as right bearing citizens to express their views and have their voices heard. Findings have deepened our understanding of students' experiences and have provided insight into barriers and facilitators to their participation in school, including their participation in decision making. Furthermore,

students' participation has resulted in transformational change in some schools. It has also raised some questions. As such, conclusions, implications and recommendations for policy, practice and research will be discussed next.

8.3 Conclusions

A return to the research questions and research aims offered a summary of findings. Conclusions drawn from these findings will now be presented.

1. Students in this study expressed an overall satisfaction with their experience in school. This satisfaction was influenced by support structures which enabled students to cope with the challenges they faced daily.
2. Factors which influence the participation of students with ID in mainstream schools are complex. Meaningful participation requires a flexible approach and a reimagining of support structures.
3. The prioritisation of certain disabilities in a categorical designation for special classes is discriminatory. Furthermore, this categorical approach to special class provision contradicts policy and perpetuates deficit approaches.
4. Tensions exist between the voices of students with ID, the voices of adults in schools and national and international policy.
5. Although students are capable of reflecting on their strengths, needs and accommodations necessary for them to succeed, students in this study were not intentionally or consistently afforded the opportunity to engage in decision making in their schools.
6. Photovoice provided the space, voice, audience and influence necessary for students to participate in this research in an ethical, inclusive, participatory manner.

8.4 Implications and Recommendations for Policy

As stated above, findings from this study highlight the factors which influence the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools are complex. Meaningful participation requires a flexible, responsive approach and a reimagining of support structures. This requires input from all stakeholders. Findings reveal tensions between the voices of students with ID, the voices of SETs and SENCOs, and

national and international policy. Little evidence indicates that national or international educational policy for inclusion is underpinned by the UNCRC. This may account for the tensions which exist, in this study, between the voices of students with ID, the voices of SETs/SENCOs and policy. These tensions highlight the designation of special classes based on category of disability, and the current limited role of the SNA, is problematic in the Irish context. The following section will discuss the implications and recommendations for policy, but also will highlight how the policy itself is discriminatory, when viewed through a children's right lens. Although this study did not set out to examine policy, findings indicate that current inclusion policy is problematic to the participation of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools.

Currently in Ireland, national policy advocates a multi-track approach (NCSE 2016; Kenny *et al.* 2020; Sheehan 2023) to the provision for students with SEND. This policy is likely to continue based on the most recent policy advice from the NCSE (2024). In mainstream schools, students are placed in a mainstream class and provision is provided through the CoS framework (NEPS 2007) through in-class or withdrawal approaches or they can be placed in a special class designated for a particular disability (Kenny *et al.* 2020). The placement of students in special classes is determined by a written professional recommendation and input for teachers, school management, parents and Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO) (DE 2020) and the Health Service Executive (HSE) Assessment of Need (AON) process (Circular 0025/2024). This policy, particularly regarding special class provision, is discriminatory for many reasons, mainly because it is not underpinned by Article 12 of the UNCRC. Separate special education provision, in dedicated spaces (Hornby and Kaufmann 2023) is interpreted as a breach of children's rights under Article 24 of the UNCRPD (2006). Although Article 24 was developed in consultation with people with disabilities, and the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is made up of a majority of people with disabilities, it is unclear if children and young people were involved in the development of Article 24. This is significant, as children and adults experience the world in different ways. There is a possibility that what is interpreted as inclusion and inclusive practice by adults, may not be interpreted in

the same way by children and young people. Therefore, to understand what inclusion can mean and what it can look like in an educational setting, the need to consult with children and young people is paramount.

Secondly, the failure to involve students in the decision-making process regarding their educational provision/placement is also in breach of Article 12 of the UNCRC, and Article 7 (3) of the UNCRPD. Although policy advocates the participation of students in the decision-making process, there appears to be little evidence of this consultation in the Irish context. While the *Guidelines for Setting Up and Organising Special Classes* issued by the NCSE (2016) maintain that the decision is made with students, no guidance is given to schools or parents on how to achieve this, and no reference is made to students' 'right' to participate, under Article 12. It is recommended that clear practical guidance be given to schools and parents on how they can support students to participate in this process. Educational policy in the Irish context must be underpinned by the UNCRC and schools and parents must be supported to understand how participation in decision making can be implemented in practice. Furthermore, collaboration with parents as primary educators of the child must be a feature of the decision-making process in schools. The role of parents/caregivers must be elevated to ensure an equal voice and understanding of provision.

Thirdly, the designation and increased provision of special classes, based on category of disability, namely autism, is discriminatory from a children's rights perspective. Not only does it fail to account for the unique and individual needs of all students with SEND, whereby placement or access to a special class may be in the child's best interest, it prioritises one category of disability over others without empirical evidence to support this decision. Moreover, like other areas of inclusion policy, it is not informed by the voices of students with a variety of SEND. In light of this, a key recommendation is to revisit the current designation of special classes based on category of disability. Findings from this study prove that the categorical approach to provision is unhelpful. It may be more appropriate for each school to have a support class/centre. Critically though, students should be assigned to a mainstream

class from the outset and access to this support should fluid and based on need not on category of disability.

Policy underpinning the role of the SNA is also problematic, as findings highlight a policy- practice gap in their role in supporting students with SEND. Currently, the role of the SNA outlined in Circular 0030/2014 is to support care needs and to promote student independence. Despite the non-teaching nature of the SNA role outlined in successive circulars (DES 2002; 2014; Logan 2006; NCSE 2018), students in this study credited SNAs with supporting their academic learning in mainstream and special classes. SNAs were attributed to differentiating and identifying key aspects of learning, in a supportive, caring manner. The frustration of SETs and SENCOs with the current system of support for students with ID in schools was evident in this study. The support provided through the CoS framework (NEPS 2007) does not do enough to address students' needs. Schools are struggling and according to SETs and SENCOs, are a pressure bomb. Findings indicate teachers do not have the capacity to support the increasing levels of need in mainstream schools. SNAs appear to bridge a gap in provision between SETs/SENCOs and teaching and learning in mainstream classes. SNAs provide more support than originally conceived, and officially recognised. With an increase of students with SEND in mainstream schools, and with the NCSEs most recent policy advice advocating a progressive realisation towards an inclusive education system (2024), SNAs are critical to supporting student participation and independence. Findings from this study indicated that the factors which influence meaningful participation of students with ID in mainstream schools are complex. Increasing student participation goes beyond supporting care needs, and requires a whole education approach (Kenny, McCoy and O'Higgins Noman 2023) with collaboration between all stakeholders. However, the current role of the SNA, working under the direction of the classroom teacher, reduces the possibilities of this collaborative relationship. Findings suggest a need to reconceptualise the role based on current practice, which recognises the breadth and depth of support SNAs provide. Griffin's (2024), framework of SNA support explicitly defines the SNAs role in scaffolding and promoting independence of students by fostering the role of student voice in the decision-making process regarding their care and development

of independence. With extensive SNA consultation currently underway, it is recommended that the DE adopts such a model, to redefine the role of the SNA reflecting the reality and complexity of inclusive education provision in mainstream schools.

Findings from this study indicate that inclusion policy in Ireland is problematic, when viewed through the lens of children's rights, particularly Article 12 of the UNCRC and Article 7 (3) UNCRPD. Education policy must be underpinned by the UNCRC, and schools and parents must be supported to understand how participation in decision making can be implemented in practice. Findings indicate that education policy is too rigid, as it fails to account for the unique needs of all individuals with SEND, and the challenges schools face in addressing those needs. If students with SEND were involved in education policy development at a national level, some of the challenges influencing student participation may be overcome.

8.5 Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Findings from this study indicate a dichotomy between the ability of students to reflect on themselves and their limited role in decision making. This ability is presented as an opportunity for all schools, however, this ability can be stilted by a lack of opportunity to experience or be supported in decision making in school. It is recommended that schools should adopt a model of participation, such as the Lundy Model (2007), to support students with decision making in all matters that concern them, including aspects which impact their learning and wellbeing and school policies. Findings of this study have particular implications for inclusive education practice in schools.

Furthermore, the students' experiences and perceptions of participating in decision making offers much for schools and teachers to consider in their daily practice. Firstly, students with ID proved to be key informants, honest, willing, competent and open to share and analyse their experiences to shape and support our understanding of inclusive practice in schools. It is recommended that schools and teachers elicit the voices of students with SEND to identify the facilitators and barriers to inclusive practice in their schools. For example, School B have decided to implement a

Photovoice study with other groups of students in their school to ascertain the barriers and facilitators to inclusive practice. Secondly, the ability of students to reflect on themselves, their strengths, needs and accommodations necessary for them to succeed should be used by SETs and SENCOs in the development of Students Support Plans (SSP), and Personal Pupil Plans (PPP). This is now happening in School A. It is recommended that SSPs should be used by teachers to plan rich and varied learning experiences, which offer choice and flexibility in line with the principle of UDL for students to engage and demonstrate their learning. Furthermore, it can be used by teachers to facilitate the development of key executive functioning skills and as a pre-requisite of critical thinking skills. Thirdly, students must be involved in the decision-making process in relation to their placement in special classes. Currently, there appears to be little evidence of students being involved in this process. Although decisions regarding the designation of special classes are taken at a national policy level, the decision regarding placement occurs at a local level. From a children's rights perspective, students' views must be incorporated during the AON process to identify what supports are in the child's best interest. Furthermore, students must be involved in an annual review of their placement in special classes to ascertain if provision provided in the special class is supporting their strengths, needs and abilities, and to identify if continued access to the special class, is in their best interests.

The perceptions of SETs and SENCOs of the barriers to supporting students in decision making in their schools also offers much for schools to consider. The status quo approach of *"teachers having their way of doing things"* (Peter Focus Group Interview) things is a breach of children's rights under Article 12 UNCRC (1989) and Article 7 (3) UNCRPD (2006). For this to change, it is recommended that a programme of awareness for all those working with children to understand the implications of UNCRC (Lundy 2007; Byrne and Lundy 2018; Moloney *et al.* 2021) and UNCRPD, for children's rights. This, however, has implications for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in the area of inclusive special education, and children's rights, particularly as subject teachers have primary responsibility for the education of all students in the classroom,

including students with SEND (DES 2017). It cannot be assumed that teachers have the necessary skills, knowledge and capacities to support students' participation in decision making in relation to educational matters. Frameworks, such as Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) and the Planning and Evaluation Checklists and Everyday Spaces Checklist (Hub Na nÓg 2021), can support and guide schools to ensure that students have a voice in decision making. However, eliciting the perspectives of students with SEND has its challenges, and schools may need to be further supported in this process. As evidenced in Chapter Six, Section 6.4 all schools recognised the importance of student voice, and transformational change was reported when the voices of students with ID were heard through their participation in this project. Given that research demonstrates the link between student voice, engagement and participation and student outcomes including an increase in self-esteem, social status (Holdsworth 2000), democratic skills, citizenship, student adult relationships, (Fielding 2004; 2013), academic success (McMahon and Portelli 2004) students' health and wellbeing (De Roiste *et al.* 2012), agency, belonging and competence (Mitra 2004), it is imperative that teachers and schools place student voice at the heart of educational provision.

8.6 Reflections and Recommendations for Research

Much can be taken from my experience of undertaking this research with students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools. My decision to incorporate Photovoice as the main method of data collection was rooted in my previous experience as a SET working with students with ID in schools in Ireland. Capturing the voices of students with ID in an authentic manner was crucial, and I felt traditional methods alone would not enhance or support this process. Therefore, I started a journey to explore other methods which I felt would provide the space, voice audience and influence for students to express their views and have their voices heard (Lundy 2007). It is this journey which resulted in me choosing Photovoice. The trials and tribulations of this journey were captured in Chapter Four, and illustrated in Figure 4.5, but these did not end with my decision to incorporate Photovoice. The following provides a reflection on this process, including the challenges encountered during this process.

It also outlines my vision for situating the Lundy Model (2007) within a wider ethical framework which prioritises informed assent when researching with children.

Chapter Four, Section 4.10, provides a detailed account of how Photovoice was adapted to support students to meaningfully engage in the research process. While the experience of using Photovoice to elicit the voices of students with ID was overwhelmingly positive, there were also challenges which need to be acknowledged. These challenges require careful consideration prior to choosing Photovoice as a method for data collection. Firstly, accessing research sites proved a significant obstacle to undertaking this research. Gatekeepers such as principals govern student's participation in research (Danker, Strnadová and Cumming 2019). Only schools where a staff member was personally known to me or my supervisors, through their work as teacher educators, agreed to take part. Trust appeared to be an integral part of this decision. Concerns over the use of cameras as a data collection method were raised by one principal. Despite me adhering to Child Protection and Data Protection Legislation which minimise any risks associated with the use of cameras in a school, these fears remained, and this principal chose not to participate. Providing concise, accessible information about the research to schools, offering to meet and discuss the project with management and staff, and outlining the benefits of participation to the school and to students' realisation of Article 12 (UNCRC) may support researchers accessing research sites.

An additional difficulty was noted by students who identified the password used to unlock the iPads used to take photographs in this project was too long and complex for them to remember. When asked if there were any difficulties or anything they would like to change about the project, in the second meeting one student identified the password as a difficulty, *'It's a bit long and hard to remember'*. He further suggested *'maybe numbers might be easier'* (John). This resulted in passwords being changed on all iPads before giving them to other students. Passwords need to be strong to protect data but should not be so complex that students can't remember them. The necessity to listen and respond to the voices of participants to ensure they can access and engage with all stages of the research is paramount.

A significant challenge relates to the time necessary to undertake Photovoice projects. Researchers need to consider what happens if students are absent on the day of arranged meetings. This was a challenge in this study; a way to circumvent this involved the school contacting me, if a child was absent at the start of the school day. Furthermore, time is needed to build rapport and understanding of strengths and needs of participating students. This is particularly evident when working with students with more significant communication needs. Adaptations, as outlined in Chapter Four Section 4.10, were necessary to support these students. Although each adaptation utilised evidence-informed practices the need to know the child on a personal level was evident. In one instance the SNA provided insight as to why a student took a particular photograph of a famous past pupil. The student had a particular interest in history and dates, and the picture captured this for him. Without such insight, the meaning behind the photograph would have been lost.

While the above issues certainly add to the complexity of using Photovoice, the benefits for students and researchers are plentiful. This study makes a distinct contribution to the body of literature on Photovoice as a participatory research method. The reflexive and responsive approach taken throughout this study, which supported students with ID to participate as co-researchers, acts as guide to others who may wish to employ Photovoice as a data collection method with students with ID in schools. Furthermore, the systematic approach to data analysis addresses criticism towards previous Photovoice research for not adequately addressing how data may be analysed and interpreted in Photovoice projects. This project aimed to capture the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. Framed within a transformative paradigm, child participants in this study were co-researchers who charted their educational experiences using this visual participatory method. When asked if they enjoyed taking the photographs, one student replied *“yeah [] it’s like being part of a research kind of thing [], it’s kind of fun like”* (James), another responded *“it’s going good so far, it’s like its great you can go outside and take pictures and it’s fun”* (Evan). Furthermore, students demonstrated an awareness of their role as researchers, particularly when referring to the challenge they experienced in maintaining the

anonymity of others when taking photographs in the school as one student noted “challenges were not having faces in it” (Oliver) another reported “I took one [photograph] in the hallway and there was people, they were in the hallway, and I didn’t want to get anybody in it, so that was a bit of a challenge” (Avril). Consequently, the Photovoice method in this study not only provided the space, voice, audience and influence necessary for students to express their views and have their voices heard but students embraced their role as co-researchers.

Situating the Lundy Model (2007) within a wider ethical framework is important, as it prioritises informed assent as a pre-condition to space, voice, audience and influence (Figure 8.1).

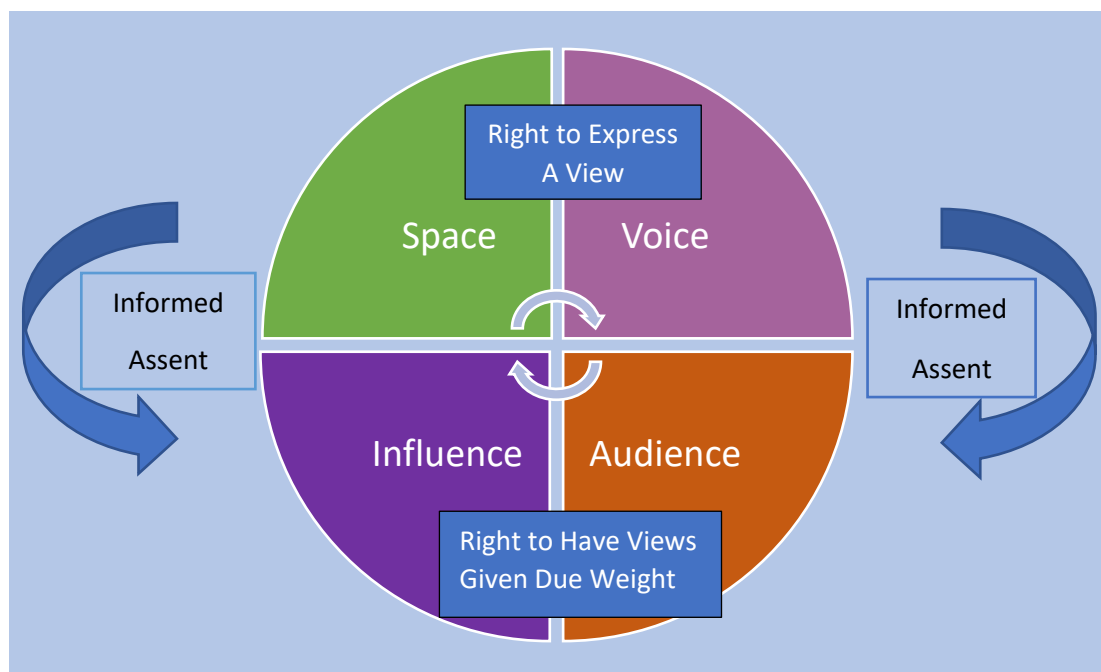


Figure 8.1. Lundy’s Model of Participation Situated Within a Wider Ethical Framework.

Participatory research not only involves the aforementioned conditions, but also involves participants actively making decisions related to the research process (Lienbenberg 2018; Montreuil *et al.* 2021). For this to happen, children must know and understand the nature of the research, exactly what is expected of them, any possible risks, what will happen to the data collected, and their right to withdraw from the research at any time without consequence (MacNaughton, Rolfe and Siraj-

Blatch-ford 2001 cited in Harcourt and Conroy 2005, p.569) before they can assent to participate. Furthermore, researchers must be responsible for ensuring that children's assent is freely given. Chapter Four, Section 4.10 details procedures which were put in place in this study by the researcher to ensure that students knew what they were assenting to and to ensure their assent was freely given. Using a UDL approach, students were informed of the purpose of the project and their assent to participate was re-sought at each stage of the Photovoice process. Revisiting assent at various stages of the research process built in opportunities for clarification and understanding for participating students which supported them to decide if it is in their best interest to participate in an informed manner. Due to these precautions, the researcher identified when some students assented to participate against their will, or without them understanding what participation involved. This allowed the researcher to respond immediately, which gave students the opportunity to withdraw without recourse. Situating the Lundy Model (2007) within a wider ethical framework, which prioritises informed assent as a pre-condition to space, voice, audience and influence, repositions the role of children in the research process. As a result, child and adult researchers enter a collaborative relationship, and the collaborative nature of the participatory process provides a bilateral power structure which respects the rights of all.

8.7 Revisiting Limitations

Chapter Four, Section 4.10, and Chapter Eight, 8.6, outlined the challenges and limitations of using Photovoice as a data collection tool. While every effort was taken to design an ethical, inclusive, well-designed study, limitations must be acknowledged prior to interpretation of results.

Undoubtably, the most significant limitation of this research was its scale. A small sample size and use of convenience and purposive sampling may limit the generalisability of findings. Nevertheless, the detailed descriptions of the data and the context as well as the systematic structure to analysis provided transparency which enhances trustworthiness so that the reader can make a comparison to other contexts base on the information provided. This, and because the study is theoretically underpinned by Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) allows the

audience of the research to transfer the study design and findings to other contexts rather than replicating the study design and findings as may be the case with quantitative research (Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carl 2021).

Researcher bias may also be seen as a limitation of this research. Although the two-step approach to data analysis in the Photovoice method reduced my interpretation of data from photographs, my values, beliefs and experiences as a SET have shaped my interpretation of students' interpretations. While transparency in how data were analysed was provided, interpretation was informed by my philosophical assumptions, which are rooted in issues of empowerment, participation, voice, children's rights, democracy and inclusion.

The extent of the role of students as co-researchers could also be viewed as a limitation in this study. Students were elevated to the status of co-researcher in the research design, which was underpinned by Lundy' Model of Participation (2007) (Figure 4.1). Providing space, voice, audience and influence were key to amplifying their voices. While every effort was made to maximise students' involvement in all stages of this participatory research, I do acknowledge that students were not and will not be involved in publications and conferences. Their role as co-researchers was limited to my time spent in the school undertaking data collection, utilising semi-structured interviews and Photovoice. Their involvement as co-researchers in the research process be acknowledged and thanked is all future dissemination plans. The literature on inclusive special education and student voice recognises the necessity for a collaborative approach between all stakeholders to bring about change. In this study, belonging and 'influence' was mediated by the response of peers. Although methodological triangulation was achieved through the use of a range of data collection methods with students with ID and SETs and SENCOs, the experience and perspectives of typically developing peers and parents/guardians may have provided a more nuanced understanding of the barriers and facilitators to the participation of students with ID in the life of the school including participation in decision making. This may have provided an understanding of the perspectives of teachers, parents, peers and embraced the whole education approach (Kenny, McCoy and O'Higgins Norman 2023) necessary for inclusive education. Ascertaining

the perspectives of parents/guardians on the impact this project had on their children and how they support them in decision making may also have enhanced my understanding of barriers of facilitators which influence students' participation in decision making in schools.

8.8 Further Research

This research set out to explore the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. It would be beneficial to extend this research to explore the experiences of students in primary and special schools, and to examine the impact of variables such as gender, school type, and age/stage in participating schools. It would also be useful to extend this research to a larger scale study to explore the use of special classes in Ireland. While this research shed light on these experiences and provided insight into the barriers and facilitators which influence students' participation in the life of the school, including their participation in decision making, it also raised some questions. Participating schools appeared to embrace the concept of student voice, but enacting change was more complex. Findings from this study indicate that students were provided with the space, voice and audience to express their views, but achieving influence was more complicated. Chapter Seven, Section 7.4 discussed the transformational change in some schools due to students' participation in this Photovoice study. It also discussed implications for student voice in schools, particularly when the response 'influence' required a collaborative approach and solidarity between students and the school. Influence in School B was mediated by the response of peers. This requires further investigation. Currently, I am working with the school to consult with the student body to ascertain why they are not using the new shelving which was installed to support access to the Gym for Sam. Results of this will determine the way forward.

Further examination of the 'influence' of students' participation reveals that although some transformational change was reported, many more insights were provided. Insights into the barriers and facilitators which influence the participation of students with ID in teaching, learning and assessment and decision making were provided. A follow up study to investigate the extent of this influence is warranted.

This would add to the body of research on ‘influence’ in the Lundy Model (2007) and would further support the rights of children under article 12 UNCRC (1989) and Article 7 (3) UNCRPD (2006). A study of teachers’ professional learning needs to implement voice work into schools’ policies/ SSPs and into classroom teaching and learning activities would pave the way for more targeted support for schools and teachers.

An interesting aspect of this study was the extent to which students were involved in the decision-making process regarding subject choice in schools. Students were supported in this by their parents, as such a study to explore the importance of family leadership in centring students’ voices in decision making would be worthwhile, and further support the understanding of a whole education approach (Kenny, McCoy and O’Higgins Norman 2023) which is necessary for inclusive education. So too would a study to investigate the role of the SNA in amplifying student voices. The importance of the SNA to increasing the participation of students with ID was a significant finding from this study. This supportive relationship may further promote independence by supporting students in the decision-making process in school.

8.9 Dissemination Plan

From the beginning, this research was theoretically and methodologically underpinned by Lundy’s Model of Participation (2007). Subsequently, employing Photovoice empowered me to work with students as co-researchers as it provided the space, voice, audience and influence for students to express their views and have their voices heard in their schools. Section 8.5 acknowledges the limitations to which students were co-researchers in this study. Chapter Seven, Section 7.4, outlined the impact/influence of students’ participation in individual schools. Now, it is incumbent on me to continue this process by amplifying the voices of my co-researchers, by expanding the audience beyond the participating schools and using the findings to influence policy and practice. From the beginning of this research, I have endeavoured to achieve this, Table 8. 2 provides an overview of past and future dissemination plans.

Table 8.2. Disseminating the Research

Dissemination Platform	Contribution
International Research Methods Summer School, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.	Mannion, N., Fitzgerald J. and Tynan, F. (2022) Making Children Visible: Photovoice as a Participatory Research Method (Oral Presentation)
The Future of Education, International Conference, Florence, Italy.	Mannion, N., Fitzgerald J. and Tynan, F. (2022) Developing Inclusive Pedagogy with Students with Intellectual Disabilities as Co-Researchers. (Oral Presentation and Conference Paper).
Student Voice Community of Practice, Limerick Education Centre, Limerick,	Mannion, N. (2023) Student Voice in Inclusive Education Systems. (Oral Presentation)
International Creative Research Methods Conference, Manchester, England	Mannion, N., Fitzgerald J. and Tynan, F. (2023) Making Children Visible Using Photovoice as a Participatory Research Methodology. (Oral Presentation)
Centre for Children’s Rights Symposium on Children’s Rights, Participation and Education.	Mannion, N., Fitzgerald J. and Tynan, F. (2023) Supporting Students with Intellectual Disabilities to Voice the Perspectives and Experiences of Participation in Mainstream Post-Primary Schools in the Republic of Ireland. (Oral Presentation)
Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA).	Mannion, N., Fitzgerald J. and Tynan, F. (2023) Voices of the Seldom Heard: Experiences and Perspectives of Students with Intellectual Disabilities in Mainstream Post-Primary Schools in Ireland. (Poster Presentation).
Inclusive Education Special Interest Group (SIG) Newsletter.	Mannion, N. (2023) Student Voice in Ireland: Voices of the Unheard. How Can we Listen? (Article)
Children’s Voices in Research Symposium: Children’s Research Network, Ireland.	Mannion, N., Fitzgerald J. and Tynan, F. (2023) Supporting Students with Intellectual Disabilities to Express their Views and Have the Voices Heard: Using Photovoice. (Oral Presentation).

International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.	Mannion, N., Fitzgerald J. and Tynan, F. (2024) 'Leading the Way': Listening to the Voices of Students with Intellectual Disabilities to Enhance Inclusive Practice in Schools. (Round Table Discussion)
International Research Journal (Article Submitted)	Mannion, N., Fitzgerald J. and Tynan, F. (2024) Photovoice in Practice: A Guide for Researchers. (Journal Article).
Children' Research Network Conference	Before June 2024: Intended submission on Children's Participation in Research.
The 17 th Annual International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation, Seville, Spain	November 2024: Intended submission to orally present findings from PhD research.
Special Education National Symposium Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE).	Before February 2025: Intended submission to orally present findings from PhD research but with a focusing on supporting schools on ways to enhance the participation of students with ID in decision making in schools.

Furthermore, in my role as a teacher educator in Mary Immaculate College (MIC) Limerick, I am fortunate to teach primarily on the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) and Postgraduate Diploma in Inclusive Special Education (PGDISE) programmes. This gives me access to an audience that includes pre-service (student teachers), and in-service teachers. It is intended that this research will inform course content relating to student voice and inclusion in schools in Ireland, particularly in relation to supporting teachers to elicit the voice of students with SEND to enhance inclusive practice in their schools, thereby expanding its influence. Also, as a member of the Department of Educational Psychology Inclusive and Special Education (EPISE) I also supervise postgraduate research, this will provide an opportunity to support postgraduate students who wish to undertake research on student voice and inclusion to perhaps explore some of the questions which emerged from this study. Finally, this research has opened collaborative opportunities with colleagues from MIC. Funding has been secured from the Limerick Regeneration Economic and Social Intervention Fund, to conduct a needs analysis to establish the level of need for

onsite multidisciplinary support in schools with the Oscailt network. Oscailt is a network of 16 Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) primary and post-primary schools in Limerick which is facilitated by the Transforming Education Through Dialogue (TED) Project in MIC. I am part of the Oscailt Needs Analysis Research Advisory Group. To make this research as ethical, inclusive and participatory as possible I have provided guidance and support to secure ethical clearance to undertake this project and I am providing ongoing support regarding data collection, particularly when researching with children. I was also an invited speaker to Education Training Board Ireland (ETBI) to provide professional learning to a national network of Inclusion Coordinators who will be supporting the network of 250 post-primary schools in participatory methods with students with SEND.

8.10 Personal Reflections

In Chapter One, Section 1.2 outlined the rationale for undertaking this research and my positionality in relation to inclusive special education provision. Previous research and experience as a SET informed my thinking and understanding of the possible role of students with SEND in education. My experience also taught me that traditional approaches to research such as interviews, surveys, and focus groups could be problematic when eliciting the voices of students with more significant communication needs. This started a journey of discovery, as I explored ways to support students to engage with the research; for their voices to inform practice. Although I was very comfortable in understanding the philosophical, theoretical and methodological literature which informed the planning and implementation of this research, other aspects proved more challenging. After the data collection phase I struggled on numerous occasions to make sense of the data. Chapter 4, Section 4.11, outlines the data analysis process, including the challenges I experienced during this phase. Doubts about my ability to honour the voices of participating students were never far. I was determined to tell their story in a true and authentic manner, but generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes and creating clearly demarcated themes (naming and defining themes) when the data was so complex and nuanced was challenging. This required discipline, and trust in the process and trust in myself. It was the latter aspect which I struggled with the most. These

struggles continued when presenting the findings. The need to prioritise the voices of the students resulted in the decision to separate the findings into two chapters. However, the greatest struggle came when writing the discussion chapter. I found myself stuck and trapped inside the findings unable to unravel the 'so what' element, or significance of the findings. The intricacies of the data made a discussion by theme impossible. Therefore, the data from the themes were merged and integrated which allowed a discussion to answer the embedded questions. This provided me with the freedom to integrate both the theoretical framework and wider literature to discuss the nuances within the findings. It also paved the way to draw appropriate conclusions and recommendations from the research.

This research was undoubtedly a journey of discovery. As a researcher I developed skills and understanding of ethical, inclusive, participatory research. I adapted Photovoice as a method to support students with ID to participate in the research process and detailed a two-step approach to data analysis. I extended the Lundy Model (2007) by situating it within a wider ethical framework which recognises informed assent as a pre-condition to space, voice, audience and influence when researching with children. I utilised the voices of participating students and my knowledge and experience of inclusive special education to draw conclusions and recommendations for policy, practice and future research. However, there has been personal growth too. Throughout this process I have endeavoured to provide an open, honest and reflexive account of the emotional journey involved. At times, I doubted my strength and ability to continue. However, I never wavered from my original motivation to undertake this research. This, and the support of supervisors carried me through. I think perhaps, I believe in myself more than when I started, and I feel confident in my knowledge and skills. I am proud of this work; I have given it my everything. I believe it has provided the space, voice, audience and influence necessary for participating students to express their views and have their voices heard to enhance inclusive practice in schools, I also believe we have much more to learn. I hope this research project can act as a guide to other researchers who wish to work with students in an ethical, inclusive and participatory manner.

8.9 Conclusion

This study set out to explore the experiences and perspectives of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. Underpinned by the transformative paradigm and Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) students were re-positioned in the research process as co-researchers. Utilising Photovoice placed students as makers of meaning, as they were provided with the necessary space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy 2007) to chart their educational experience and provide insights to enhance inclusive practice in their schools. Focus group interviews with SETs and SENCOs provided a nuanced understanding of contextual factors to further understand students' experience. Findings, derived through sustained and systematic engagement with data, using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke 2022), highlight the complexity of the lived experience of students with ID in mainstream schools, as they navigate places, spaces and people who both challenge and support them in their school journey. Barriers and facilitators which influence the participation of students with ID emphasise the complexity of inclusive practice in schools. Findings stress tensions and dilemmas between the voices of students with ID, the voices of SETs and SENCOs and national and international policy. These tensions call for a reimagining of support structures, and a flexible approach which addresses individual needs, not categories of disabilities. Although students hold many of the answers to supporting inclusive practice in schools, they are not intentionally or consistently involved in the decision-making process. This is not only a breach of children's rights, but it is also a lost opportunity for schools. Schools and teachers need to be supported to increase the participation of students in educational matters. This requires a whole educational approach (Kenny, McCoy and O'Higgins Noman 2023). Children's rights, student voice and inclusion are symbiotic, interconnected concepts. The actions to support one affect the other. By enacting the rights of students with SEND to express their views and have their voices heard, students can and will provide the necessary insights for schools and teachers to enhance inclusive practice

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Appendices

Appendix A- Child Safeguarding Statement



As Principal Investigator (PI) in a research study to capture the experiences and perspectives of students with intellectual disabilities in post-primary schools in the Irish context I am engaging with such individuals by means of a participatory research method called Photovoice.

This research will engage with children (those under 18 years of age). My academic institution, Mary Immaculate College (MIC)- where I am enrolled as a postgraduate student to which this research is intended to contribute, has a formal Safeguarding Policy, including provision for Child Safeguarding. The fundamental tenet of this policy is that the safety and welfare of children is paramount and is the primary consideration of all members of the MIC Community, including those engaged in research.

I have undertaken a comprehensive risk assessment (attached) in order to form this Safeguarding Statement and this risk assessment fully informs my research design, my research plan and my data collection methodologies. The risk assessment is fully consistent with statutory provision for safeguarding (including the Children First Act) and with MIC policies and procedures which the Governing Authority of the College has deemed to be fit for purpose.

My research design is also informed my best practice in the engagement of data subjects who are children as set out in the relevant academic literature and codes of practice for research integrity. I have received Garda Vetting through my academic institution which extends to my activities as PI in research undertaken for the purpose of completing my course of study.

A duly constituted College research ethics screening group has reviews and approved my research proposal and my intended methodology, inclusive of my safeguarding risk assessment and this Safeguarding Statement.

Risk Assessment

<p><i>I have carried out an assessment of any potential *harm to a child while engaged in this research. The table below lists the areas of risk identified and the procedures for managing these risks. In undertaking this risk assessment, every effort has been made to identify as far as possible the risks of harm that are relevant to the research project and to ensure that adequate procedures are in place to manage all risks identified. While it is not possible to foresee and remove all risk of harm, the procedures in this risk assessment have been put in place to manage and reduce risk to the greatest possible extent.</i></p> <p><i>*harm means in relation to a child –</i> <i>(a) Assault, ill-treatment or neglect of the child in a manner that seriously affects or is likely to seriously affect the child's health, development or welfare, or</i> <i>(b) Sexual abuse of the child,</i> <i>Whether caused by a single act, omission or circumstance or a series or combination of acts, omissions or circumstances or otherwise.' (Section 2 of the Children First Act 2015)</i></p>	
Risk Identified	Measure in place to manage this risk
<p>Physical injury to a child during engagement with P1 as research data participants</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ PI has written permission, from the principal of the school as representative of the Board of Management, to use a space in the school that is familiar to participants. This space is perceived by children as a 'safe space'. ✓ PI will use furniture layout and materials that are suitable for use by participants of their age. ✓ PI provide training to participants with an overview of photography basics including how to use the device.
<p>Disclosure of a child of their experience of a recognised and substantive form of abuse during the photovoice process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ PI IS Garda Vetted ✓ PI has had formal training in Child Safeguarding, including provision of the Children First Act. ✓ PI has prepared for engagement by familiarizing herself with provisions of (i) Child Safeguarding Policy of PI's academic institution (ii) Child Safeguarding Policy of host institution (individual schools). ✓ PI is not a Mandated Person but has recorded and retained the emergency contact number of (a) the Designated Liaison Person but has recorded and retained the emergency contact of (a) the Designated Liaison Persons of PI's academic institution/ and will retain the Designated Liaison Person from each participating school and understands the strictly detailed procedures for engaging appropriately with a child in the event of a sudden/ impromptu disclosure by the child, including the importance of engaging immediately and appropriately with the Designated Liaison Person of the school.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Either the Designated Liaison or Deputy Designated Liaison will be present on premises during the photovoice process with participants in the school. ✓ PI understands her role is limited to reporting the details of a disclosure to the Designated Liaison but is available for requests for supplementary information in the event of a duly constituted investigation being launched by the proper authorities (i.e., TUSLA and/ or An Garda Síochána). ✓ PI understands that's she cannot act as a counsellor to a child in the event of disclosure and cannot suggest or make referrals on behalf of the child to any third party. ✓ PI understands that while a guarantee of confidentiality cannot be provided o a child making a disclosure, the next line of communication must be with the Designated Liaison Person and not with any other person (including a parent, Guardian, teacher, SNA etc.) and that contact with such other persons will be made, as appropriate, by designated authorities (including TUSLA and/or An Garda Síochána) should the Designated Liaison Person deem it necessary to report the details of the disclosure in line with proper procedures. ✓ PI understand that disclosure of a form of abuse, including affective, sexual or physical abuse or neglect, may refer to a child or vulnerable person other than the child making a disclosure and that in such an event the same safeguarding procedure apply as above. ✓ PI has formulated a plan for managing a disclosure that is not made privately by a child but not openly, in group setting, that preserves the right to privacy and dignity of the child, that is based on the paramount importance of the safety and not the continuation of data collection as a priority of the PI.
<p>PI will collect data from students with intellectual disabilities using the Photovoice method. Risk that a form of disclosure will occur in a response</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ PI will follow the same procedures for reporting a written disclosure, whether by a participant about their own experience, or the experience of a third party described by the respondent (e.g. friend, family member etc.); ✓ PI recognises that an adult respondent (to the impact survey) may make a retrospective

<p>this process (e.g. a photograph of injuries)</p>	<p>disclosure about an experience that took place when they were under 18 years of age and that the same procedures for reporting to a Designated Liaison apply.</p>
<p>Methods used by the PI are not suitable or appropriate to the age profile and needs of the child participants.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ PI is fully familiar with the academic literature on research design and methodology that represents best practice in engagement with the age and profile of those being engaged with the purpose of data collection. ✓ PI's academic supervisors had provided adequate and satisfactory forms of advice and guidance for engagement with children with the age and profile of those being engaged with for the purpose of data collection. ✓ Research Ethics screening has taken place at PI's academic institution and has reviewed the content and form of presentation of all materials to be used/shared with child participants.

Appendix B- Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)



Data Protection Impact Assessment Template (DPIAT)

This template should be used to record your DPIA process and outcome. It should be completed alongside the following documents:

1. The MIC DPIA Guidance Document (DPIAGD)
2. The MIC DPIA Screening Checklist and (DPIASC)
3. The Criteria for an acceptable DPIA set out in European guidelines on DPIAs.

You should complete the following template at the start of your project involving the use of personal data. The outcomes should be integrated back into your project plan.

Step 1: Identify the need for a DPIA

Explain broadly what project aims to achieve and what type of processing it involves. You may find it helpful to refer or link to other documents, such as a project proposal. Summarise why you identified the need for a DPIA.

This study involves sets out to explore the perspectives and experiences of students (under 18 years of age) with an intellectual disability in post-primary schools in Ireland. This is a participatory research project that will employ the use of Photovoice as the main method of data collection. The photovoice process supports participants to chart their educational experiences in an inclusive accessible manner. Students will be asked to photograph places, spaces, objects and learning experiences that are meaningful to them. Digital devices will be used to take photographs and these will be supplied by the researcher.

Researching with children and using an alternative method to data collection, that being photography necessitates the creation of a Data Protection Impact Assessment. This will identify the level of risk and the likelihood and severity of any impact on individuals.

Step 2: Describe the processing

Describe the nature of the processing: how will you collect, use, store and delete data? What is the source of the data? Will you be sharing data with anyone? You might find it useful to refer to a flow diagram or other way of describing data flows. What types of processing identified as likely high risk are involved?

Data will be collected using Photovoice as the main method of data collection. This will be supported by the use of a research journal and a fieldwork/ data collection memo which will be kept throughout the duration of the study.

Data will be stored on a personal laptop, secured with a password. The researcher will have custody of this personal laptop and access to data on this laptop will not be granted to any person other than the researcher's supervisor. Interview responses will be anonymised through the use of a pseudonym before being saved onto a personal, encrypted laptop. Audio recordings from interviews will immediately be transcribed onto the researcher's password-protected device, with a pseudonym assigned to each participant. The original recording will be deleted from the recording device. Photographs taken by participants will be saved onto the researcher's password-protected device. The original photographs will be deleted from the digital device.

In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Record Retention Schedule, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop.

Describe the scope of the processing: what is the nature of the data, and does it include special category or criminal offence data? How much data will you be collecting and using? How often? How long will you keep it? How many individuals are affected? What geographical area does it cover?

Data in this study can be grouped into two types; data generated by students and data generated by the researcher.

Student data will be gathered using the photovoice process. Photovoice has a number of steps some of which I have combined to make it more practical to carry out in schools. The following table outlines the steps involved and the nature of the data collected.

Data generated by Students		
Data Collection Tools	When it will be used	Nature of the Data Collected

Photovoice Step 1-4 Identification Invitation Education Documentation	First meeting with students	Demographic details Name, age, year/class, programme of study, previous school (s) attended,
Semi- Structured Interview	Second Meeting after the students have taken photographs.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Did you enjoy the taking the photographs? 2. Did you have any difficulties or challenges taking the photographs? 3. Have you anything you would like to say about the process so far?
Photovoice Step 5 NARRATION (Photo-elicitation Interview)	Third Meeting	<p>Photo-elicitation interview. Photographs will be used as prompts for the student to describe their experiences. Students sign a Photograph Release Form</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe Your Picture 2. What is happening in your picture? 3. Why did you take a picture of this? 4. What does this tell us about your life? 5. How can the picture provide opportunities for us to improve your life? 6. Is there anything else you would like to say about the photographs that was not captured in the above questions?
Photovoice Step 6 Ideation (Participatory Visual Analysis)	Fourth Meeting	Students select photographs which best reflect their experiences. Codify and create themes with students which will use to tell their stories via a visual presentation.
Photovoice Step 7 Exhibition Show and Tell	Fifth meeting	Students present the photographs and their findings to members of the school community via a medium of their choice (video, poster, presentation).

Data Generated by the Researcher		
Data Collection Tools	When it will be used	Nature of the Data Collected
Fieldwork data/ collection Memo	Throughout the Study	This will include; <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reflections about fieldwork experiences, including interactions with participants, observation about the site. 2. General or specific reflections and thoughts about data collection methods and processes. 3. How/whether the data being generated answer the research questions? 4. What changes/adaptations need to be made to the data collection instrument, and/or techniques to better answer the research questions? 5. Describe your identity and/or positionality, its impact on the data, and how this changed over time.
Research Diary		This provides the researcher with opportunities to reflect, develop, enhance, question, examine and explore research questions and ideas.

Data will be collected in post-primary schools in the West and Mid- West region of Ireland. Due to the specific criteria for respondents it is not possible to pre-calculate the sample size for individual participants in a school. However, in other studies of this nature a sample size of 7-10 (Budig *et al.*, 2018; Wang and Burris 1999) participants were deemed appropriate. However, rates of attrition in such projects need to be considered as they can be high (Latz 2017). Therefore, a sample size of 12 will be selected to participate in the project.

Describe the context of the processing: what is the nature of your relationship with the individuals? How much control will they have? Would they expect you to use their data in this way? Do they include children or other vulnerable groups? Are there prior concerns over this type of processing or security flaws? Is it novel in any way? What is the current state of technology in this area? Are there any current issues of public concern that you should factor in? Are you signed up to any approved code of conduct or certification scheme (once any have been approved)?

Data will be collected from students with intellectual disabilities in post-primary schools in the West and Mid- West of Ireland. As photovoice projects require time spent in the field convenience sampling will be used for ease of access to the sample site. Purposeful sampling will be used to identify schools who offer the Level Two Learning Programme (L2LP) to support the needs of students with upper mild to lower moderate learning difficulties in their school. It is these students that will be invited to participate in the research project. Participants in these schools will be unknown to me. Informed consent to conduct the study in the school will be sought from the principal on behalf of the Board of Management. Informed consent from parents/ guardians and informed assent will be sought from student participants prior to engaging in any data collection. Parents/ guardians and student participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. If a student or parent wishes to withdraw that data will be destroyed immediately. Participants will remain owners of any photographs taken during the duration of the study. A printed copy of the photographs will be supplied to participants. Participants and their parents will sign a photograph release form which will allow the researcher to use the photographs for any purpose related to the study. All data gathering and storage will comply with GDPR codes of practice.

Describe the purposes of the processing: what do you want to achieve? What is the intended effect on individuals? What are the benefits of the processing – for you, and more broadly?

This research contributes to the body of understanding on the role of student voice in inclusive education. Situated in the context of international and national reform, with a focus on inclusive education and children's rights, this research situates students with intellectual disabilities as key informants who can support and shape our understanding of inclusive practice in post-primary schools in Ireland. This study set out to explore the educational experiences of students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. The focus on this study, throughout, is on the voice of students. Data collection which involves student participants (under 18 years of age) is therefore essential.

The intended outcomes for students (under 18 years of age) who participate in this study are identified in the aims of the research. Students in this study will be co-researchers this will operationalise their rights to express their views and have their views heard. It is hoped that by working with students, that insights to enhance the participation of students in decision making in post-primary schools will be developed. Furthermore, it is hope that these findings will potentially inform policy and practice to advance inclusive practices in post-primary schools in Ireland.

Step 3: Consultation process

Consider how to consult with relevant stakeholders: describe when and how you will seek individuals' views – or justify why it's not appropriate to do so. Who else do you need to involve within your organisation? Do you need to ask your processors to assist? Do you plan to consult information security experts, or any other experts?

Consultation with student participants (under 18 years of age) will be ongoing throughout the duration of data collection using the Photovoice process outlined above (Describe the scope of the processing). Consultation will also be ongoing with my supervisors, Dr Johanna Fitzgerald and Dr Fionnuala Tynan.

Step 4: Assess necessity and proportionality

Describe compliance and proportionality measures, in

particular: what is your lawful basis for processing? Does the processing actually achieve your purpose? Is there another way to achieve the same outcome? How will you prevent function creep? How will you ensure data quality and data minimisation? What information will you give individuals? How will you help to support their rights? What measures do you take to ensure processors comply? How do you safeguard any international transfers?

Photovoice is a participatory visual research method developed by Wang and Burris (1994) to promote empowerment, and give voice to vulnerable communities. It is a means for users to represent and enhance their community as makers of meaning through photography. Photovoice is a suitable data collection method as the multimodal representation of the process evidenced by combining visuals (photographs) with discussion (voice element) support the inclusiveness of such an approach. Photovoice as a data collection tool can successfully be utilised to provide the space, voice, audience and influence identified in Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) which is the guiding theoretical framework for this study. In this sense it is ideal for use in schools for seeking the perspectives of students in order to facilitate change. The images represent the subjective reality of the lived experience which students can interpret verbally and which reduces the cognitive and linguistic demands that are found in other types of qualitative research. Therefore, its use is suitable for children and young people with communication and learning difficulties (Booth and Booth 2003).

Data collection and storage will be in compliance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy and the principles of GDPR.

Step 5: Identify and assess risks

Describe source of risk and nature of potential impact on individuals. Include associated compliance and corporate risks as necessary.	Likelihood of harm	Severity of impact	Overall risk
Students will be identifiable in pictures	Remote, possible or probable	Minimal, significant or severe	Low, medium or high
Students will be identifiable by comments	Remote	Significant	Low
Schools will be identifiable in pictures	Remote	Significant	Low
Schools will be identifiable by comments	Remote	Significant	Medium
Picture will appear on social media.	Possible	Significant	Low
Data breach/theft	Remote	Significant	Medium
Loss of Confidentiality	Remote	Significant	Low

Step 6: Identify measures to reduce risk

Identify additional measures you could take to reduce or eliminate risks identified as medium or high risk in step 5				
Risk	Options to reduce or eliminate risk	Effect on risk	Residual risk	Measure approved
Students will be identifiable in pictures.	<p>Students will be given guidance on what they can take photographs of and what they cannot take photographs of. No photographs of identifiable people will be used in the exhibition or the study</p> <p>A pseudonym will be generated for each participant and it will be this rather than the participant's name which will be held with their data to maintain their anonymity</p> <p>Students will be given guidance on what they can take photographs of and what they cannot take photographs of. No photographs of identifiable places will be used in the</p>	Eliminated reduced accepted	Low medium high	Yes/no
Students will be identifiable by comments		Eliminated	Low	
Schools will be identifiable in pictures		Eliminated	Low	
Schools will be identifiable by comments		Eliminated	Low	

	exhibition or the study			
Pictures will appear on social media.	A pseudonym will be generated for each school and it will be this rather than the schools name which will be held with their data to maintain their anonymity	Eliminated	Low	
Data shared third party.	Participants (under 18 years of age) will assent and parents /guardians will consent not to share any photographs from the study on any social media platforms.	Minimal	Low	
Data breach		Eliminated	Low	
Loss of Confidentiality	Information gathered will not be released to any third party, other than the researcher's supervisor.	Eliminated	Low	
	Data will be stored on a personal laptop, secured with a password.	Eliminated	Low	

	<p>Consent to participate will be sought at all stages throughout the research project. All identifiers from participants and schools will be removed. All digital recording and pictures will be stored on a personal encrypted laptop that is password protected.</p>			
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Appendix C- MIREC Ethical Approval

MIREC-5, Created November 2021



MIREC-5

Research Ethics Committee

MIREC Final Decision Form

APPLICATION NUMBER:

A22-028

1. PROJECT TITLE

Making Children Visible: Using Study Voice to Shape Effective Pedagogy

2. APPLICANT

Name:	Nicola Mannion
Department / Centre / Other:	EPISE
Position:	Postgraduate Researcher/Lecturer

3. DECISION OF MIREC CHAIR (✓)


<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance through MIREC is not required and therefore the applicant need take no further action in this regard.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is required and is hereby granted by the Chair without need for referral to the MIREC committee.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance for a funding application or a similar purpose is granted by the Chair <i>pro tem</i> without need for referral to the MIREC committee. However, the applicant must subsequently seek ethical clearance from MIREC prior to embarking on any related project work involving human participants or their data.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is not granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.

MIREC-5, Created November 2021

4. REASON(S) FOR DECISION

I have reviewed this application and I am satisfied it meets MIREC requirements. It is, therefore, approved.

5. SIGNATURE OF MIREC CHAIR

Name (Print):	Dr Marie Griffin
Signature:	
Date:	24 th June 2022

Appendix D- Invitation to Participate (Schools)



An invitation to participate in a Photovoice study to explore the perspectives and experiences of students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland.

Dear Principal,

My name is Nicola Mannion, and I am a lecturer in Inclusive and Special Education in Mary Immaculate College. I am also a Doctoral student completing a PhD in the Department of Educational Psychology Inclusive and Special Education, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, under the supervision of Dr Johanna Fitzgerald and Dr Fionnuala Tynan. This study will form part of my thesis.

What is the project about?

I am conducting a PhD study to learn more about how students with intellectual disabilities describe their experiences in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. I would like to explore the extent to which students believe their voices are heard and if this acts as a facilitator or barrier to their participation in the life of the school, including decision making.

What are the benefits of this research?

It is hoped that the data gathered from participants will (a) enhance our understanding of the experiences of students with intellectual difficulties in post-primary schools in Ireland, (b) it will give voice to students who have been largely absent in educational research, (c) findings from this project will support schools to enhance their own inclusive practices to support the participation of students with intellectual difficulties who attend their school. This research gives students with intellectual disabilities a voice on matters concerning them as is their right under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Furthermore, this research aligns with DoE policy relating to School Self Evaluation, as such it provides participating schools with an opportunity to capture these voices to inform school improvement planning.

What is Involved?

Within your school, students with a diagnosed intellectual disability in mainstream classrooms will use photography to document their experiences. Photographs will be taken on a digital device by students of aspects of their school life that are meaningful to them. Photographs used in this study will focus on places, spaces, objects and learning experiences. No identifiable images of people or identifiable places will be used. The steps involved are outlined in Appendix A

Right to withdraw

If participant involvement in this study is agreed; students' and the school's anonymity is assured, and students are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without consequence.

Child Protection

All child protection procedures as outlined in Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017) and the Children First Act 2015 will be adhered to including the relevant school's safeguarding statement. In accordance with the above and with MICs *Promoting the Welfare of Children: Safeguarding Children Policy, Procedures and Safeguarding Statement* a Child Safeguarding Statement was devised prior to receiving Ethical Approval.

How will confidentiality be kept?

All information will remain confidential and will not be release to any third party other than my research supervisors. A pseudonym will be generated for each participant, and it is this rather than the participants name which will be held with their data to maintain their anonymity. Data will be stored on a personal laptop, secured with a password. The researcher will have custody of this personal laptop and access to data on this laptop will not be granted to any person other than the researcher's supervisor.

What will happen to the data after research has been completed?

In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop. Furthermore, a Data Impact Assessment (DPIA) was completed prior to receiving Ethical Approval.

What's Next?

Please email me Nicola Mannion, to register your interest to participate in this study. I will be able to explain more about the study and I can meet with you and your staff to answer any questions you may have before making any decisions to participate. Included in this email are a Letter of consent for the principal, Information Letter for parents, an Information Letter for students, a Letter of consent for parents and a Letter of informed assent for students.



Researcher: Nicola Mannion

Email: Nicola.mannion@mic.ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC).

Approval Number: A22-028

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact:

<p>Dr Johanna Fitzgerald JHN210 Mary Immaculate College South Circular Road Limerick Telephone:061-204517 Email: Johanna.fitzgerald@mic.ul.ie</p>	<p>Dr Fionnuala Tynan R118 Mary Immaculate College South Circular Road Limerick Telephone:061-204517 Email: Fionnuala.tynan@mic.ul.ie</p>	<p>Mary Collins MIREC Administrator Research and Graduate School Mary Immaculate College South Circular Road Limerick Telephone: 086- 204980 Email: mirec@mic.ul.ie</p>
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First meeting	Discuss project aims and purpose. Revisit informed assent. Gather demographic details. Provide opportunity to input into research questions. Discuss rules and guidance for taking photographs.
Second Meeting	Two weeks later collect cameras and meet with students for a brief interview to discuss their experience taking the photographs.
Third Meeting	Return photographs (printed) to students and conduct a short photo-elicitation interview. In this interview the photographs will be used as prompts for the student to describe their photographs and assign relevance. Students will sign a Photograph release form.
Fourth Meeting	Students select photographs which best reflect their experiences. Individual photographs will then be grouped together in themes according to meaning assigned by the participants. These themes and photographs within will be used to tell the participants stories via a visual presentation using a medium of their choice, poster, presentation, video, storyboard.
Fifth Meeting	Exhibition / Show and tell to members of the school community outlining their experiences and providing insights of what could be done to enhance these experiences. Impact survey on audience members to gauge initial responses and to identify possible changes that they may make to enhance inclusive practice.

Appendix E- Letter of Informed Consent (Principal)



Understanding the perspectives and experiences of students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland

Dear Principal,

As outlined in the Letter of Invitation to participate, the current study will investigate the perspectives and experiences of students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream post-primary school in Ireland.

Details of the this Photovoice study are outlined in the Letter of Invitation. This should be read fully and carefully before consenting to take part in the study.

The participant's anonymity is assured, and they are free to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. All information gathered will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party other than my research supervisors.

In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy, all data and research records of this study will be anonymized and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop.

In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Child Safeguarding Policy a child safe guarding statement must be devised.

Please read the following statements before signing the consent form:

I have read and understood the Information Sheet.

I understand what the project is about and what the results will be used for

I am fully aware of all the procedures involving the participant, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.

I am aware that the interviews with students will be recorded using a digital voice recorder.

I am aware that photographs of places, spaces, objects and learning experiences will be taken by students. No identifiable places, spaces or people will be used.

I know that participant involvement is voluntary and that students can withdraw from the study at any stage without giving reason and without consequence.

I am aware that all participant data will be kept confidential.

Name (Printed):

Name (Signature): -

Date:

Principal

Researcher:

Appendix F- Letter of Information Parents



Understanding the perspectives and experiences of students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland

What is the project about?

I am conducting a PhD study to learn more about how students with intellectual disabilities describe their experiences in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. I would like to explore the extent to which your child believes that his/ her voice is heard and if this acts as a facilitator or barrier to his/her participation in the life of the school, including decision making. I am hoping that by giving your child an opportunity to share their experiences, it will provide some guidance for the school, and other schools to learn from these experiences and improve their participation and educational outcomes. To watch a short video outlining the details of this project please click on this [short video](#), or use the following link (<https://youtu.be/Mmz-YRk2zx8>).

Who is undertaking it?

My name is Nicola Mannion, and I am a Doctoral student and a lecturer in Inclusive and Special Education in Mary Immaculate College. My many years of experience as a special education teacher has motivated me to work with students with an intellectual disability. I hope that your son/daughter can become a co-researcher in a joint effort to enhance inclusive practice in their school. I am completing a PhD in the Department of Educational Psychology Inclusive and Special Education, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, under the supervision of Dr Johanna Fitzgerald and Dr Fionnuala Tynan. This study will form part of my thesis.

What is involved for participants?

This is a Photovoice study which involves your son/daughter taking photographs to document their experiences in school. Photographs will be taken on a digital device which I will provide on aspects of their school life that are meaningful to them. Photographs used in this study will focus on places, spaces, objects and learning experiences. No images of people or identifiable places will be used. The posting of photographs to social media is not permissible. I will meet with your child on five occasions to support them in this process.

I will meet with your child prior to them taking any photographs to explain the project, to give them the cameras and to give them guidance on the types of photographs that are suitable to take. They will then have two weeks to take photographs.

After a two-week period, I will collect the cameras from your son/daughter in school and I will discuss the experience of taking the pictures with them during a brief interview. Two copies of the photograph will be made one for your child to keep and one that will be used in the project.

I will meet your child for a third time to give back the photographs and to conduct a short interview. In this interview the photographs will be used as prompts for your son or daughter to describe their experiences and reflect on what the school can do to enhance or make their experiences better.

A fourth meeting will involve your son/daughter choosing the pictures which pictures best tell their story. They will use these pictures to create a poster/ brochure/ visual map to illustrate their experiences and to provide insights on how the school can enhance or make their experiences better.

The final meeting will involve a small show and tell where your child will show and tell their story to members of the school community. You will be invited to this exhibition where your son or daughter will chart their experiences via a medium of their choice. You will also be invited to participate in a brief survey to gauge your initial reactions and provide insight on what the school could do to enhance inclusive practices in the school.

Right to withdraw

You and your child have the right to refuse to participate in this study and your child's anonymity is assured. Your child is free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without consequence.

Confidentiality

All information gathered will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party other than my research supervisors. A pseudonym will be generated for your child, and it is this rather than your child's name which will be held with their data to maintain their anonymity.

Data will be stored on a personal, encrypted laptop. The researcher will have custody of this personal laptop and access to data on this laptop will not be granted to any other person other than the researcher's supervisor. In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Record Retention Schedule, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal encrypted laptop.

How will this information be used/disseminated?

The information from your child’s participation will be combined with that of other participants in this study and used to inform the results section of my PhD thesis. Summary data will appear in this thesis and individual participant data will not be shown. The results of this study may be disseminated at conferences or appear in publications but all identifies of the school and students will be removed.

Contact details

If at any time you have queries/issues with regard to this study my contact details are as follows:

Nicola Mannion

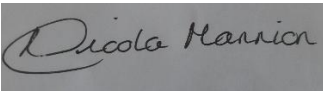
Nicola.mannion@mic.ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC).

Approval Number: A22-028

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact:

<p>Dr Johanna Fitzgerald JHN210 Mary Immaculate College South Circular Road Limerick Telephone:061-204517 Email: Johanna.fitzgerald@mic.ul.ie</p>	<p>Dr Fionnuala Tynan R118 Mary Immaculate College South Circular Road Limerick Telephone:061-204517 Email: Fionnuala.tynan@mic.ul.ie</p>	<p>Mary Collins MIREC Administrator Research and Graduate School Mary Immaculate College South Circular Road Limerick Telephone: 086-204980 Email: mirec@mic.ul.ie</p>
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Signed: 



Appendix G- Letter of Information for Students



Dear Student,

My name is Nicola Mannion



I am a student and a lecturer from Mary Immaculate College, Limerick



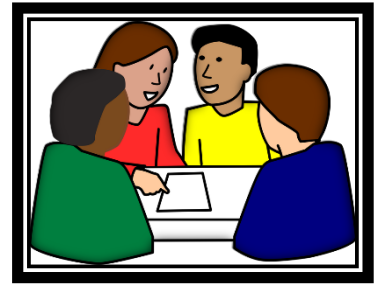
I want to learn more about what you think about and how you experience school. Please watch this [short video](#) or use this link <https://youtu.be/p3Sv9IBNd94> to find out what the project is about and your possible role in it.



I am hoping that you can take pictures of your experiences of school and we can use these pictures to better understand how the school can make these experiences better.



I will meet with you on five different occasions to give guidance on taking photographs, to discuss the experience of taking photographs, to discuss the photographs and what they mean, to create a visual map/ poster of your photographs and their meanings and finally to create a show and tell for members of your school community.



This work will help me in my studies and I will use this information to write a report.



You **do not have to take part** and you can **withdraw at any time**. All your personal information will be confidential and your real name and the name of your school **will not** be used.



Appendix H- Letter of Informed Consent Parents



Understanding the perspectives and experiences of students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland

Dear Parent,

As outlined in the Information Sheet the current study will investigate the perspectives and experiences of students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream post-primary school in Ireland.

Details of the this Photovoice study are outlined in the Information Sheet. This should be read fully and carefully before consenting for your child to take part in the study.

The participant's anonymity is assured, and they are free to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. All information gathered will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party other than my research supervisors.

In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Data Protection Policy, all data and research records of this study will be anonymized and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop.

In accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Child Safeguarding Policy a child safe guarding statement must be devised.

Please read the following statements before signing the consent form:

I have read and understood the Information Sheet.

I understand what the project is about and what the results will be used for

I am fully aware of all the procedures involving my child, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.

I am aware that the interview with my child will be recorded using a digital voice recorder.

I am aware that photographs of places, spaces, objects and learning experiences will be taken by my child. No identifiable places, spaces or people will be used. No photographs are to be posted on social media.

I know that my child's participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw from the study at any stage without giving reason and without consequence.

I am aware that all my child's data will be kept confidential.

I am aware that I will be invited to participate in a survey at the end of this project and that all data from this survey will be anonymised.

Name (Printed):

Name (Signature): -

Date:

Principal

Researcher:

Appendix I - Informed Assent Students



My name is _____.

I know that I will take photographs of how I experience school using a camera.

I know that I will meet Nicola five times throughout the project.

I know the pictures I take and what I say will be used by Nicola to write her report.



I know that I do not have to take part and that I can withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

I know this isn't a test or an exam and I am just helping Nicola with her study.

I know that all my personal information will be changed so that nobody can know who I am.

I know that I cannot post any pictures on social media.

Please tick the smiley face if you would like to participate or the sad face if you do not want to join in

Appendix J- Break Card



I need a break.

Appendix K- Semi-Structured Interview Students (Demographic Details)



Name	
Age	
Year/ Class	
Programme of Study	
Previous school (s) attended	
Why did you come to this school?	
Do you attend a special class or mainstream class or both?	
What subjects do you do?	
Do you receive extra support to help you with learning in school?	
Do you have the support of an SNA?	
Do you have any questions about this study?	
Are there questions about your educational experience that you would like to ask/ or that you would like me to ask?	
Is there anything about your school experience that you would like to change?	
How would you like to inform others about your experience of school?	
What would you like me to do with the findings of this study?	

Appendix L- Rules and Guidance for Taking Photographs



Always **ask permission** before taking photographs



No photographs of people's faces



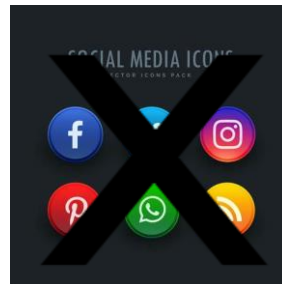
Photographs of **learning activities**



Photographs of spaces and places



Do not share your photographs online



Appendix M- Prompts for Taking Photographs

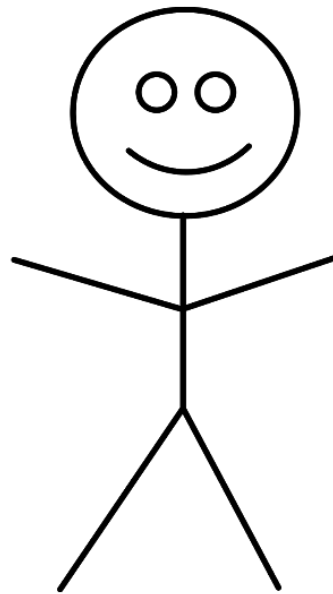


These prompts might help you when deciding what photographs to take. Tick when you have taken a photograph of the following;

What you like best about school? (take some pictures to describe)	
What is your favourite thing to learn? (take a picture to describe)	
Describe how you learn best? (take some pictures to describe)	
A typical day in school includes (take some picture to describe)	
Take pictures of your favourite places/ spaces in school	
I find it difficult when _____ (fill in the blanks by taking pictures)	
If I could change something it would be _____ (fill in the blanks by taking pictures)	
School is _____ (fill in the blanks by taking some pictures)	

All about Me in School

You can write, draw or tell Nicola the answers to the questions.



My name is _____.


I am _____ years of age.


I am in _____ class/year.

In school I like _____.


In school I don't like _____.


Do you receive extra support to help you with learning in school?

What is  about it.


What is  about it.


Do you have the support of an SNA?


What is  about it.


What is  about it.


Are there others areas of school that you would like support with?




What do you find  difficult about your school day?

What would help to make your school day better? 

Do you make decisions  in school?
If so can you give me an example of a decision you made?

Do you have  questions about school that you would like to ask?

Who would you like to tell about your experience in school? 

Appendix O- Children and Young people’s Feedback Form (for individuals)

Children and Young People’s Feedback Form (for individuals)

Boy Girl Other I dont know ____ Age

Tick the number of stars you would give to everything below. Five stars is the best.

SPACE	★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
I was listened to from the start					
I felt comfortable giving my opinions					
I felt safe giving my opinions					

VOICE	★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
I got the chance to give my opinions					
I got enough information to help me give my opinions					
I got support to have my voice heard					
I understood what was being discussed					
I could give my opinions whatever way I wanted					
I had enough time to talk					

AUDIENCE	★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
I know who wants to hear my opinions					
I know why they want my opinions					
They were honest about what they would try to do with my opinions					

INFLUENCE	★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
I know where my opinions are going next					
I know how I will be told about what happens to my opinions					
I think what I said today will be taken seriously					

Is there anything else that would have helped you in giving your opinions?

.....

.....

.....

.....

THANK YOU! 😊

Appendix P- Semi-Structured Interview (Meeting Two Narration)



1. Did you enjoy the taking the photographs?
2. Did you have any difficulties or challenges taking the photographs?
3. Have you anything you would like to say about the process so far?

Appendix Q- Sentence Starters

Using your pictures to help, draw, write or tell Nicola the answers to the questions.

What do you like best about school?

<p>_____ is the best thing about school.</p>	<p>I like it because _____</p>
<p>Picture here.</p>	
<p>This picture shows teachers and SNAs that _____</p>	<p>This can make by day better because _____</p>

What helps you learn in school?

_____ helps me learn in school.

It helps me because _____

Picture here.

This picture shows teachers and SNAs that _____

This can make by day better by _____

What is your favourite place in school?

<p>_____ is my favourite place in school.</p>	<p>I like it because _____</p>
<p>Picture here.</p>	
<p>This place can tell teachers and SNAs that _____</p>	<p>This place makes can make my day better by _____</p>

I make decisions when?

This is a picture that shows when I make decisions in school.

I find making decisions _____

Picture here.

Teachers and SNAs can help me make decisions by

Making decisions can make my day better by

I find it difficult when?

I find _____ difficult.

It is difficult because _____

Picture here.

This tells teachers and SNAs that _____

If teachers and SNAs know this it would make my day better by _____

If I could change something about school it would be?

<p>If I could change something about school it would be</p> <hr/>	<p>I would make this change because</p> <hr/>
<p>Picture here.</p>	
<p>This tells teachers and SNAs that</p> <hr/>	<p>This can make by day better by</p> <hr/>

Appendix R- Photograph Release Form



Study Title

The Experiences and Perspectives of the Educational Lives of Post-Primary Students in Ireland through Photovoice.

Participation Procedures and Duration

The method used in this study to understand what you think about and how you experience school is Photovoice. For this study you were asked to respond to prompts regarding your school life using photographs (camera provided). You were also asked to discuss the photographs in an interview with Nicola. Next you will be asked to choose the photographs which best describe your experiences and present them in a form of show and tell to members of your school community.

Photo Release

By participating in this study, you have taken a number of photographs. Photographs will not be presented, exhibited, or otherwise published without your permission.

Photographs

You will receive copies of the photographs you have taken; the photographs will be provided to you by Nicola. Any photographs you receive may not appear on any social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Instagram) or otherwise be published online in any format by you.

Statement of Release

I, _____ give permission for Nicola Mannion, the right to use the photographs taken by me for any purpose related to this study. I understand that these photographs may appear in various publications such as scholarly journal articles or conference presentations.

I understand that no real names or identifiers will accompany the photographs published in association with this study.

Indicate permission to publish photographs with an 'x' in the spaces provided below.

_____ All Photos (1-24)

1.	4.	7.	10.	13.	16.	19.	22.
2.	5.	8.	11.	14.	17.	20.	23.
3.	6.	9.	12.	15.	18.	21.	24.

Signature: _____

Print Name: _____

Date: _____

Photovoice Exhibition Survey

Thank you for taking time to participate in this anonymous survey. It is important that you read and understand the purpose of the survey, how it relates to the overall research study and how your data will be used and stored.

What is this survey about?

This survey looks at the impact of the Photovoice Exhibition which you attended today. I want to gain an understanding of the impact on you as a participant.

Who is undertaking this project?

My name is Nicola Mannion, and I am a Doctoral student attending Mary Immaculate College. I am completing a PhD in the Department of Educational Psychology Inclusive and Special Education, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Johanna Fitzgerald and Dr. Fionnuala Tynan. This survey will form part of my thesis.

What is involved for participants?

Participants will complete an online survey which should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. There are a number of text-based questions you will be asked to complete based on your participation in the Photovoice Exhibition. This exhibition forms part of a larger study which examines the perspectives and experiences of students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. Your participation examines the impact of the Photovoice exhibition generated by students.

Right to withdraw

Involvement in this survey is voluntary. However, if you do agree to participate, your anonymity is assured and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason and without consequence.

Confidentiality

All information is anonymous as your name is not requested, participation will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party other than my research supervisors. An ID number will be generated for each participant and it is this which will be held with their data to maintain anonymity.

Data will be stored on a personal, encrypted laptop. The researcher will have custody of this personal laptop and access to this laptop will not be granted to any other person other than the researcher's supervisors.

In association with the Mary Immaculate College Record Retention Schedule, all data and research records of this study will be anonymised and retained indefinitely on a personal, encrypted laptop.

Section 1

1.By proceeding you consent to participate in this study.

Yes, I consent

No, I do not consent

Section 2

Photovoice Exhibition Survey

2.Please identify your role in the school

Student

Mainstream Teacher

Special Education Teacher

SNA

Parent

Deputy Principal

Principal

Other

3.Having engaged with the Photovoice exhibition, what are your initial thoughts?

Enter your answer

4.Was there anything in the exhibition that surprised you?

Enter your answer

5.What possible actions might you like to take as a result of this exhibition? Required to answer.

Enter your answer

6.Any additional comments? Required to answer.

Enter your answer

Appendix T- Field Notes Structured Format



- Reflections about fieldwork experiences, including interactions with participants, observations about the site.

- General or specific reflections and thoughts about data collection methods and processes.

- How/whether the data being generated answer the research questions?

- What changes/adaptations need to be made to the data collection instrument, and/or techniques to better answer the research questions?

- Describe your identity and/or positionality, its impact on the data, and how this changed over time.

Appendix U- MIREC Ethical Approval Focus Group Interview

MIREC-5, Created November 2021



MIREC-5 Research Ethics Committee

MIREC Final Decision Form

APPLICATION NUMBER:

A22-028 Amendment 1

1. PROJECT TITLE

Making Children Visible: Using Study Voice to Shape Effective Pedagogy

2. APPLICANT

Name:	Nicola Mannion
Department / Centre / Other:	EPISE
Position:	Postgraduate Researcher

3. DECISION OF MIREC CHAIR (✓)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance through MIREC is not required and therefore the applicant need take no further action in this regard.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is required and is hereby granted by the Chair without need for referral to the MIREC committee.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance for a funding application or a similar purpose is granted by the Chair <i>pro tem</i> without need for referral to the MIREC committee. However, the applicant must subsequently seek ethical clearance from MIREC prior to embarking on any related project work involving human participants or their data.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is not granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.

4. REASON(S) FOR DECISION


Proposed amendments: This is a proposed amendment to the data collection method only. In this project so far, I have collected data from students in 4 different schools. I now wish to conduct a focus group interview with the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator SENCO/ Special Education Teacher (SET) from each of the schools (n= 4). A focus group interview will allow me to gather data on opinions, perceptions and viewpoints (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018) from the SENCO/SET to yield insights on themes that are emerging in the preliminary stages of data analysis from the Photovoice Data Collection Method. A focus group interview is suitable as it allows me to collect high-quality data (Patton 2015) from the collective group, previously unknown to each other, to address a shared phenomenon. The focus group interview will provide a more nuanced understanding and clarity to developing themes in the data collection process so far. The objective is for these teachers to consider their own views in the context of the views of others both SENCOs/SETs and students. Only themes from the collective student dataset, as per student assent and approved dissemination of data/findings from earlier ethics will be shared. The focus group interview will be conducted synchronously on MS Teams at a time that is suitable for each of the participants. The focus group will consist of 5 questions and will last approximately 1 hour. Letter of Information for the Principal Appendix A and Letter of Consent for the Principal Appendix B as well as Letter of Information for Participant Appendix C and Letter of Consent for Participants Appendix D will be sent to each participant via email in advance of the focus group interview. This information will outline the aims of the research, the steps involved, duration of the study, confidentiality and data protection arrangements as well as the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Focus group questions typically seek reactions to a shared experience (Patton2015), in this sense questions such as (see below) will be presented to the collective group for discussion. These questions are formed from preliminary analysis of data from the Photovoice Data Collection Method with students.

Sample Focus Group Questions

1. The importance of the special class in supporting the needs of students in schools is a key finding in the Photovoice Study. Why do you think this is?
2. What are the facilitators to the inclusion/participation of students with Intellectual Disabilities in mainstream classes in schools?
3. What are the barriers to the inclusion/participation of students with Intellectual Disabilities in mainstream classes in schools?
4. The Special Needs Assistant is identified as essential in supporting students to access learning and the curriculum. Why do you think this is?
5. How are students with Intellectual Disabilities supported to make decisions in relation to their education in your school?

I have reviewed this application and I am satisfied it meets MIREC requirements. It is, therefore, approved.

5. SIGNATURE OF MIREC CHAIR

Name (Print):	Dr Marie Griffin
Signature:	
Date:	5 th July 2023

Appendix V- Focus Group Interview (Guiding Questions)



1. The importance of the special class in supporting the needs of students in schools is a key finding in the Photovoice Study. Why do you think this is?
2. What are the facilitators to the inclusion/participation of students with Intellectual Disabilities in mainstream classes in schools?
3. What are the barriers to the inclusion/participation of students with Intellectual Disabilities in mainstream classes in schools?
4. The Special Needs Assistant is identified as essential in supporting students to access learning and the curriculum. Why do you think this is?
5. What are the barriers or facilitators to supporting students with decision making in your school?
6. How are students with Intellectual Disabilities supported to make decisions in relation to their education in your school?

Appendix W - Phase Two Codebook (Initial Coding)

Phase 2- Systematic Coding of Data (197 non- hierarchical codes)	Files	Units of Meaning Coded
Accessibility	1	1
Active learning is easier	4	5
Always someone to talk to	1	1
Art room	1	1
Autism	2	2
Being annoyed	1	1
Books help me learn	1	2
Cafeteria	1	1
Choice of learning activities	4	6
Choice of Subjects	6	7
Class size is a barrier	1	4
Class tests	3	7
Classes Student use a Laptop	6	6
Classroom where a particular teacher teaches	1	1
Collaboration	3	6
Coloured copies help with brightness	1	1
Continuous Assessment	1	1
Cooking	8	16
Curriculum is a barrier	1	10
Day trip	1	2
Decisions made for students	1	3
Differentiation	3	7
Difficulties or Challenges of Taking Photographs	7	9
Digital Technology	3	6
Disability versus Needs Focused Provision	1	4
Discussion to make decisions	2	3
Dislike homework	0	0
Don't know	3	3
Don't like doing work	2	2
Double class	1	2
Drop a subject	3	3
Dual provision of inclusion	1	5
Enjoyment	7	16
Enjoyment of school	2	2
Enjoyment of sports	4	6
Enjoyment of Sports (2)	1	1
Enjoyment of taking photographs	5	7
Environmental Difficulties	3	9
Ever increasing level of need in schools	1	10

Extra help	1	1
Family members	1	2
Feelings around having a choice	1	1
Fidget Toys helps me feel calm and focus	2	8
Friends	2	3
Friends are the reason for choosing to come to the school	3	3
Friends from the past	2	2
Fun	6	16
Games	2	5
Games help me learn	3	9
Games with the teacher	4	4
Gap between students with ID and their peers widens	1	1
Gardening and horticulture	3	6
Good Literacy Skills necessary to demonstrate knowledge	1	2
Good school	1	1
Hard without support	1	1
Have a chat	4	7
Headphones for Music	1	1
Help from SNA	18	41
Help with Decision Making	1	3
Home Economics	3	8
Home Economics Room favourite place	1	1
Homework in the Special class	5	11
Homework is boring	1	1
Homework is difficult	2	5
How supports can improve students school experience	5	17
How teachers might provide support	1	4
I like colours	1	1
I like seeing seeds, flowers and trees growing	1	1
Illusion of Inclusion	1	4
Inclusion is beneficial for all	1	1
Inclusion policy is problematic	1	6
Individual work station	5	12
It's fun	3	3
It's interesting	2	7
Lack of support for teachers	1	1
Laptop helps me learn	10	23
Lava Lamp helps me feel calm	0	0
Learned Helplessness	1	2
Learning about	2	2
Learning in mainstream class is hard	4	13
least favourite subject	4	5
Library in Autism Support Class	1	1
Lift in school	1	1
Like sports	9	17

Likes a Lava Lamp	1	1
Likes being outside	1	2
Likes gardening	1	1
Likes massage chair	0	0
Likes Music	1	4
Likes project work	2	5
Likes Reading	3	4
Likes Special Class	4	4
Likes Stain Glass	1	1
Likes typing	1	1
Literacy	1	3
Lockers	2	2
Lockers support organisation	1	1
Love sports	9	14
Loves cooking	1	3
Mainstream class is busy	4	7
Mainstream class is loud	1	1
Mainstream school expected to supports all levels of need	1	1
Making Decisions	6	11
Making friends	2	2
Making friends (2)	1	1
Making things	6	9
Management of SNAs to enhance inclusion	1	8
Maths	3	4
Meeting friends	5	7
Mom and Dad	4	4
More PE	2	3
Moving from class to class can cause difficulties for students	1	1
Music helps with learn	2	11
My favourite subjects	12	18
Need support	1	1
No choice	7	11
Nobody would like to know about my school experience	1	1
Noise	1	2
Not my decision, it's up to them	4	5
Not understanding	1	1
Organisational structures	2	3
Outside	1	1
P.E hall	1	1
Painting	2	3
Picking correct tools for woodwork	1	2
Play with friends	6	11
Playing games	1	2
Practical Classes	1	3
Presentations	2	2

Pressure on SETs and SENCOs	1	5
Projects	9	56
Providing choice doesn't always work	1	3
Relationship with SNA	2	5
Relationship with teachers	5	12
Relationships with other staff members	2	8
Religion	2	3
Respect	1	1
Responsibility	0	0
School day is long	1	1
School dog	4	11
School facilities	2	6
School Garden	1	2
School is fun	2	2
School is hard	0	0
Self-Management	3	5
Sensory Break	2	5
Sensory Room	5	8
Sensory Room helps me feel relaxed	3	4
Sensory Room helps me relax	4	16
Sensory space	4	5
Sewing	2	3
Signs without visuals	1	1
Smaller class	2	3
SNA are fun, kind and friendly	4	10
SNA as a trusted individual	1	4
SNA as observer to act when and if necessary	1	6
SNA complex role, not a teacher but	1	20
SNA provides Personal Care	1	1
SNA provides Social Support	1	1
SNA supports learning	16	38
Soccer is popular	1	2
Special Class	4	4
Special Class (2)	20	59
Special class as a place to socialise	5	8
Special Class can facilitate needs of students	1	3
Sport keeps you fit	2	2
Sports and friends	6	7
Sports help me	2	2
Student strengths	6	18
Student Struggles	8	15
Students feeling regarding their struggles or difficulties	1	3
Students not surviving	1	3
Students thoughts about their involvement in the Photovoice Project	5	6
Talking to friends	4	8

Talking to friends (2)	1	3
Targeting Students Strengths, Abilities and Interests Enhance Inclusion	1	8
Teacher need support to enact inclusive practices	1	13
Teachers are friendly	4	6
Teachers are fun	2	2
Teachers have their ways of doing things	1	4
Teachers know strengths and weaknesses	1	2
Teachers perceptions	1	8
Teachers support with work	10	17
The voice of the student must be listened to.	1	4
Things in school that students would like to change	9	26
Things that annoy	1	2
Time pressure	1	4
Timetable	6	12
Typing	2	6
Unsure or Don't know	2	2
Visuals	2	15
Visuals to show school experiences	1	1
Woodwork	4	8
Woodwork favourite place	1	1
Woodwork is hard	1	1
Work Experience	1	3
Working in school all day	1	1

Appendix X- Phase Three Codebook (Generating Initial Themes)

Phase 3-Generating Initial Themes from Codes and Collated Data (24 initial themes in which 197 codes were placed)	Files	References
Active Learning	21	167
Active Learning\Active learning is easier	4	5
Active Learning\Collaboration	3	6
Active Learning\Cooking	8	16
Active Learning\Digital Technology	3	6
Active Learning\Enjoyment	7	16
Active Learning\Fun	6	16
Active Learning\Gardening and Horticulture	3	6
Active Learning\Home Economics	3	8
Active Learning\It's interesting	2	7
Active Learning\Painting	2	3
Active Learning\Practical Classes	1	3
Active Learning\Presentations	2	2
Active Learning\Projects	9	56
Active Learning\Typing	2	6
Active Learning\Woodwork	4	8
Active Learning\Work Experience	1	3
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion	1	102
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Class size is a barrier	1	4
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Curriculum is a barrier	1	10
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Disability versus Needs Focused Provision	1	4
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Dual provision of inclusion	1	5

Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Ever increasing level of need in schools	1	10
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Gap between students with ID and their peers widens	1	1
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Good Literacy Skills necessary to demonstrate knowledge	1	2
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Illusion of Inclusion	1	4
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Inclusion is beneficial for all	1	1
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Inclusion policy is problematic	1	6
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Lack of support for teachers	1	1
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Learned Helplessness	1	2
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Mainstream school expected to supports all levels of need	1	1
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Management of SNAs to enhance inclusion	1	8
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Moving from class to class can cause difficulties for students	1	1
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Pressure on SETs and SENCOs	1	5
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Special Class can facilitate needs of students	1	3
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Targeting Students Strengths, Abilities and Interests Enhance Inclusion	1	8
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Teacher need support to enact inclusive practices	1	13
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Teachers perceptions	1	8
Barrier and Facilitators to inclusion\Time pressure	1	4
Difficulties students experience in school	14	43
Difficulties students experience in school\Accessibility	1	1
Difficulties students experience in school\Being annoyed	1	1
Difficulties students experience in school\Environmental Difficulties	3	9
Difficulties students experience in school\Homework is difficult	2	5
Difficulties students experience in school\Literacy	1	3
Difficulties students experience in school\Lockers	2	2
Difficulties students experience in school\Maths	3	4

Difficulties students experience in school\Noise	1	2
Difficulties students experience in school\Not understanding	1	1
Difficulties students experience in school\Picking correct tools for woodwork	1	2
Difficulties students experience in school\Self-Management	3	5
Difficulties students experience in school\Sewing	2	3
Difficulties students experience in school\Signs without visuals	1	1
Difficulties students experience in school\Students feeling regarding their struggles or difficulties	1	3
Difficulties students experience in school\Woodwork is hard	1	1
Favourite places or spaces in school	9	20
Favourite places or spaces in school\Art room	1	1
Favourite places or spaces in school\Cafeteria	1	1
Favourite places or spaces in school\Classroom where a particular teacher teaches	1	1
Favourite places or spaces in school\Home Economics Room favourite place	1	1
Favourite places or spaces in school\Library in Autism Support Class	1	1
Favourite places or spaces in school\Outside	1	1
Favourite places or spaces in school\P.E hall	1	1
Favourite places or spaces in school\School Garden	1	2
Favourite places or spaces in school\Sensory space	4	5
Favourite places or spaces in school\Special Class	4	4
Favourite places or spaces in school\Woodwork favourite place	1	1
Favourite Subjects	12	18
Favourite Subjects\My Favourite Subjects	12	18
Homework	5	12
Homework\Homework in the Special class	5	11
Homework\Homework is boring	1	1
How students would like to tell others about their experience	1	1
How students would like to tell others about their experience\Visuals to show school experiences	1	1
Least Favourite Subjects	4	5

Least Favourite Subjects\least favourite subject	4	5
Mainstream classes	7	31
Mainstream classes\Class tests	3	7
Mainstream classes\Learning in mainstream class is hard	4	13
Mainstream classes\Mainstream class is busy	4	7
Mainstream classes\Mainstream class is loud	1	1
Mainstream classes\Students not surviving	1	3
Need to reconceptualise the role of SNA	17	70
Need to reconceptualise the role of SNA\SNA as a trusted individual	1	4
Need to reconceptualise the role of SNA\SNA as observer to act when and if necessary	1	6
Need to reconceptualise the role of SNA\SNA complex role, not a teacher but	1	20
Need to reconceptualise the role of SNA\SNA provides Personal Care	1	1
Need to reconceptualise the role of SNA\SNA provides Social Support	1	1
Need to reconceptualise the role of SNA\SNA supports learning	16	38
Participation in Research	10	22
Participation in Research\Difficulties or Challenges of Taking Photographs	7	9
Participation in Research\Enjoyment of taking photographs	5	7
Participation in Research\Students thoughts about their involvement in the Photovoice Project	5	6
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making	22	93
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\Choice of learning activities	4	6
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\Choice of Subjects	6	7
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\Decisions made for students	1	3
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\Discussion to make decisions	2	3
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\Don't know	3	3

Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\Drop a subject	3	3
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\Feelings around having a choice	1	1
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\Help with Decision Making	1	3
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\Making Decisions	6	11
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\No choice	7	11
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\Not my decision, it's up to them	4	5
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\Providing choice doesn't always work	1	3
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\Teachers have their ways of doing things	1	4
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\The voice of the student must be listened to.	1	4
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy and Decisioning Making\Things in school that students would like to change	9	26
Possible Actions Resulting from Research	2	2
Possible Actions Resulting from Research\Unsure or Don't know	2	2
Relationships with staff	16	55
Relationships with staff\Games with the teacher	4	4
Relationships with staff\Have a chat	4	7
Relationships with staff\Relationship with SNA	2	5
Relationships with staff\Relationship with teachers	5	12
Relationships with staff\Relationships with other staff members	2	8
Relationships with staff\Respect	1	1
Relationships with staff\SNA are fun, kind and friendly	4	10
Relationships with staff\Teachers are friendly	4	6
Relationships with staff\Teachers are fun	2	2
School	10	15
School\Enjoyment of school	2	2
School\Friends are the reason for choosing to come to the school	3	3
School\Good school	1	1
School\School day is long	1	1
School\School facilities	2	6
School\School is fun	2	2

School\School is hard	0	0
Self-awareness	15	35
Self-awareness\Autism	2	2
Self-awareness\Student strengths	6	18
Self-awareness\Student Struggles	8	15
Socialisation	13	46
Socialisation\Friends from the past	2	2
Socialisation\Games	2	5
Socialisation\It's fun	3	3
Socialisation\Making friends	2	2
Socialisation\Meeting friends	5	7
Socialisation\Play with friends	6	11
Socialisation\Special class as a place to socialise	5	8
Socialisation\Talking to friends	4	8
Sports	10	36
Sports\Enjoyment of sports	4	6
Sports\Love sports	9	14
Sports\More PE	2	3
Sports\Soccer is popular	1	2
Sports\Sport keeps you fit	2	2
Sports\Sports and friends	6	7
Sports\Sports help me	2	2
Student dislikes	5	10
Student dislikes\Dislike homework	0	0
Student dislikes\Don't like doing work	2	2
Student dislikes\Double class	1	2
Student dislikes\Religion	2	3
Student dislikes\Things that annoy	1	2
Student dislikes\Working in school all day	1	1
Student likes	20	86
Student likes\Always someone to talk to	1	1
Student likes\Day trip	1	2

Student likes\Enjoyment of Sports	1	1
Student likes\I like colours	1	1
Student likes\I like seeing seeds, flowers and trees growing	1	1
Student likes\Learning about	2	2
Student likes\Lift in school	1	1
Student likes\Like sports	9	17
Student likes\Likes a Lava Lamp	1	1
Student likes\Likes being outside	1	2
Student likes\Likes gardening	1	1
Student likes\Likes massage chair	0	0
Student likes\Likes Music	1	4
Student likes\Likes project work	2	5
Student likes\Likes Reading	3	4
Student' likes\Likes Special Class	4	4
Student likes\Likes Stain Glass	1	1
Student likes\Likes typing	1	1
Student likes\Loves cooking	1	3
Student likes\Making friends	1	1
Student likes\Making things	6	9
Student likes\Playing games	1	2
Student likes\School dog	4	11
Student likes\Sensory Room	5	8
Student likes\Talking to friends	1	3
Support with Learning	27	278
Support with Learning\Books help me learn	1	2
Support with Learning\Classes Student use a Laptop	6	6
Support with Learning\Coloured copies help with brightness	1	1
Support with Learning\Continuous Assessment	1	1
Support with Learning\Differentiation	3	7
Support with Learning\Extra help	1	1
Support with Learning\Fidget Toys helps me feel calm and focus	2	8
Support with Learning\Games help me learn	3	9

Support with Learning\Help from SNA	18	41
Support with Learning\How supports can improve students school experience	5	17
Support with Learning\How teachers might provide support	1	4
Support with Learning\Individual work station	5	12
Support with Learning\Laptop helps me learn	10	23
Support with Learning\Lockers support organisation	1	1
Support with Learning\Music helps with learn	2	11
Support with Learning\Organisational structures	2	3
Support with Learning\Sensory Break	2	5
Support with Learning\Sensory Room helps me relax	4	16
Support with Learning\Smaller class	2	3
Support with Learning\Special Class	20	59
Support with Learning\Teachers know strengths and weaknesses	1	2
Support with Learning\Teachers support with work	10	17
Support with Learning\Timetable	6	12
Support with Learning\Visuals	2	15
Supports for Difficulties which Students Experience	5	6
Supports for Difficulties which Students Experience\Headphones for Music	1	1
Supports for Difficulties which Students Experience\Lava Lamp helps me feel calm	0	0
Supports for Difficulties which Students Experience\Responsibility	0	0
Supports for Difficulties which Students Experience\Sensory Room helps me feel relaxed	3	4
Who should know about students experience in school	7	10
Who should know about students experience in school\Family members	1	2
Who should know about students experience in school\Friends	2	3
Who should know about students experience in school\Mom and Dad	4	4
Who should know about students experience in school\Nobody would like to know about my school experience	1	1
Worries about the future	1	2
Worries about the future\Hard without support	1	1
Worries about the future\Need support	1	1

Appendix Y- Phase Four Codebook (Developing and Reviewing Themes)

Phase Four-Developing and Reviewing Themes (24 initial candidate themes were reduced to eight developing themes and 34 refined codes)	Files	References
Access to Special Class	25	159
Access to Special Class\Calm Space	5	11
Access to Special Class\Individualised Work Station	6	23
Access to Special Class\Special Class is a Place to Socialise	13	36
Access to Special Class\Support with Homework	5	11
Challenges Encountered by Students in School	21	104
Challenges Encountered by Students in School\Activities and or Subjects	16	47
Challenges Encountered by Students in School\Mainstream Classes	8	30
Challenges Encountered by Students in School\Miscellaneous Challenges	6	9
Challenges Encountered by Students in School\School Environment	7	18
Decision Making in School	23	116
Decision Making in School\Barriers	1	11
Decision Making in School\Change	12	33
Decision Making in School\Help	1	2
Decision Making in School\Parental Influence	3	3
Decision Making in School\Student Voice	1	5
Decision Making in School\The Student Experience	20	62
Inclusion is a Barrier to Inclusion	1	113
Inclusion is a Barrier to Inclusion\Curriculum	1	13
Inclusion is a Barrier to Inclusion\Inclusion Policy	1	27

Inclusion is a Barrier to Inclusion\Perception and Expectation	1	6
Inclusion is a Barrier to Inclusion\Role of the SNA Needs to be Reconceptualised	1	30
Inclusion is a Barrier to Inclusion\Teachers capacity to address increasing levels of need	1	37
Relationships in School	23	111
Relationships in School\Friendships	15	51
Relationships in School\Relationships with School Staff	18	60
Relationships in School\Relationships with School Staff\Have a chat	3	6
Relationships in School\Relationships with School Staff\Teachers are friendly	2	3
Student Agency	18	144
Student Agency\How school can support me	10	37
Student Agency\Self-Awareness	11	36
Student Agency\Supports for Stress and Anxiety	12	71
Student Engagement	28	342
Student Engagement\Active Learning	25	211
Student Engagement\Digital Technologies	12	36
Student Engagement\Sport	12	55
Student Engagement\Visual and Organisational Supports	11	40
Students' Perceptions of Support	26	153
Students' Perceptions of Support\School	10	16
Students' Perceptions of Support\School\Hard without support	1	1
Students' Perceptions of Support\School\Need support	1	1
Students' Perceptions of Support\Special Class	18	60
Students' Perceptions of Support\Support from SNAs	20	56
Students' Perceptions of Support\Support from Teachers	13	21

Appendix Z- Phase Five Codebook (Defining Refining and Naming Themes)

Phase Five- Defining Refining and Naming Themes (3 themes refined, defined and named at phase 5)	Files	References
T1 Students' Lived Experience of School Spaces, Places and People as Mediators of Sentiment.	28	265
T1 Students' Lived Experience of School Spaces, Places and People as Mediators of Sentiment.\T1.1 Students' Perceptions of Support	26	183
T1 Students' Lived Experience of School Spaces, Places and People as Mediators of Sentiment.\T1.1 Students' Perceptions of Support\School	15	41
T1 Students' Lived Experience of School Spaces, Places and People as Mediators of Sentiment.\T1.1 Students' Perceptions of Support\Special Class	19	65
T1 Students' Lived Experience of School Spaces, Places and People as Mediators of Sentiment.\T1.1 Students' Perceptions of Support\Special Needs Assistant (SNA)	19	56
T1 Students' Lived Experience of School Spaces, Places and People as Mediators of Sentiment.\T1.1 Students' Perceptions of Support\Teachers	13	21
T1 Students' Lived Experience of School Spaces, Places and People as Mediators of Sentiment.\T1.2 Challenges Encountered	20	82
T1 Students' Lived Experience of School Spaces, Places and People as Mediators of Sentiment.\T1.2 Challenges Encountered\Mainstream Classes	18	64
T1 Students' Lived Experience of School Spaces, Places and People as Mediators of Sentiment.\T1.2 Challenges Encountered\School Environment	7	18
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.	30	676
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T 2.1 Facilitators which influence student participation	30	555
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T 2.1 Facilitators which influence student participation\Access to Special Class	19	86
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T 2.1 Facilitators which influence student participation\Access to Special Class\Calm Space	5	12

T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T 2.1 Facilitators which influence student participation\Access to Special Class\Individual Work Station	6	23
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T 2.1 Facilitators which influence student participation\Access to Special Class\Place to Socialise	13	37
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T 2.1 Facilitators which influence student participation\Access to Special Class\Support with Homework	5	14
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T 2.1 Facilitators which influence student participation\Active Learning Methodologies	25	217
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T 2.1 Facilitators which influence student participation\Digital Technologies	12	40
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T 2.1 Facilitators which influence student participation\Friendships	15	51
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T 2.1 Facilitators which influence student participation\Relationships with staff	19	64
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T 2.1 Facilitators which influence student participation\Sport	12	57
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T 2.1 Facilitators which influence student participation\Visual and Organisational Supports	11	40
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T2.2 Barriers which influence student participation.	1	121
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T2.2 Barriers which influence student participation.\Current Role of SNA	1	37
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T2.2 Barriers which influence student participation.\Curriculum	1	13
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T2.2 Barriers which influence student participation.\Inclusion Policy	1	27
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T2.2 Barriers which influence student participation.\Teachers capacity to addressing increasing levels of need	1	37
T2 Student Participation in Mainstream Schools A Festival of Complexities.\T2.2 Barriers which influence student participation.\Teachers perspectives of students with ID	1	7

T3 Students' Role in Decision Making A Lost Opportunity	28	258
T3 Students' Role in Decision Making A Lost Opportunity\T 3.1 Opportunities for Success	22	171
T3 Students' Role in Decision Making A Lost Opportunity\T 3.1 Opportunities for Success\Desire for Change	12	36
T3 Students' Role in Decision Making A Lost Opportunity\T 3.1 Opportunities for Success\Listening for Solutions	19	135
T3 Students' Role in Decision Making A Lost Opportunity\T3.2 Lost Opportunities	20	87
T3 Students' Role in Decision Making A Lost Opportunity\T3.2 Lost Opportunities\Limited Role of Students in Decision Making	20	69
T3 Students' Role in Decision Making A Lost Opportunity\T3.2 Lost Opportunities\Teachers Perceptions of Barriers to Supporting Students in Decision Making	1	18

Appendix AA- Sample of Memo

Overall Thoughts on Data from Photovoice Method

A number of things began to strike me as I engaged with the data collection process and when I began the familiarisation process. I began this process immediately after each meeting with students. I transcribed each interview as soon as I possibly could and I made notes, comments, questions for myself. I read and reread each of these before I would meet the student for a second time. I used the information in these to provide feedback to the students to support them and act as prompts when necessary.

Initially the following stood out across all the datasets, with all participants.

1. The role of the special class was significant. All but one student was accessing the Autism Special class on either a full time or part time basis. In three schools' students who do not have Autism were accessing the Autism class on either a full time or part time basis. This is in breach of Department of Education policy and international legislation. One student with MGLD was full time in the Autism class after struggling to cope in the mainstream classes. One student was accessing an EBD class on a part time basis. All students reported being very happy with their placement. They reported a sense of safety or belong, a place to socialise and connect with others. One student with an MGLD said he would like more time there. They also reported the Autism class was less busy, teachers had more time for them, the work was more individualised. Students reported that teachers in the mainstream classes were too busy to help and the work was too hard. I was struck at how many students were accessing the Autism Special class. I questioned the suitability of this, I wondered what it did to the student's self-perception, but the students overwhelmingly reported being happy with this. Currently in Ireland the NCSE is exploring a move towards full inclusion, however students have not been consulted on this. I need to consider why these students are happier in the special class, is it because the class teachers/subject teachers or not addressing their needs or is it the flexible approach to support that is working for them.

2. The role of the SNA was a significant aspect in this study. SNAs are reported as supporting students with their learning, with accessing the curriculum and with teaching. The valued placed on SNAs was significant. Every student reported that it was a positive support with nothing negative being associated with it. There appeared to be no difference between the role of a teacher and the role of the SNA. However, the role of the SNA is that of a non-teaching, it is a care role. In this study the SNA was the person who was teaching the students in many situations. Many students spoke about 'my SNA' in some instances there appeared to be a reliance on them. One student found it uncomfortable to taking part in the interview when the SNA was not present, when she was present he constantly looked to her for approval.

3. Supports such as visuals, organisational structures, task analysis and ICT were all valued by students who recognised that these supported them with their learning. ICT and laptops were identified as a significant support with reading, writing and spelling. However, these supports were used in the Special Class and not in the mainstream classes. Students really struggled to identify methodologies that supported them with their learning in class. In one school group work, project work was valued and students reported learning best when this was utilised. I questioned

whether students had exposure to a variety of methodologies as they struggled to identify what helped with their learning. From my own research previously, I noted that students need exposure to a variety of methodologies but they also need to be explicitly told what they are doing, what they are doing it and how they are doing it and the benefits of using such methods. It is only by doing this that students will have the vocabulary to identify what works and what doesn't work for them.

4. Throughout the process I was struck at how little students were aware of their own role in decision making or their role in learning. Students appeared to be passive recipients who do what they are told to do. James reported that teachers make all the decisions, and he just does what he is told. Students appeared to have little understanding of key concepts such as choice, decision making, rights, voice. As I became more immersed in the data and as I met more and more students who appeared separate or alongside their education I thought that these concepts need to be introduced from a very early stage. Students participation is not valued or perhaps they are not trusted to be actively engaged in their education. Students appeared to accept this as the norm.

Lots more work needs to be done to the data, I feel Reflective Thematic Analysis will allow me the opportunity to explore the common themes that are occurring across the dataset. I need to be open to what else comes from the data as I explore each stage of the process.