

Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

**The Opportunities and Challenges of Inclusive Education:
Centring Student Voice in Irish Primary Schools**

A thesis submitted as part of the requirements for a Doctorate of Education

in the

School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

Rosemarie Stynes

Supervisor: Professor Michael Shevlin

Submitted: March 2025

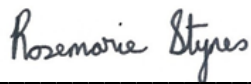
Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

I agree to deposit this thesis in the University's open access institutional repository or allow the Library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement.

I consent to the examiner retaining a copy of the thesis beyond the examining period, should they so wish.

Signed:



Date: 31st March 2025

Rosemarie Stynes

Summary

The broad objective of this study is to examine inclusive education, with a particular focus on the voice of the child, investigating how children's voices are heard, acknowledged, and facilitated as part of inclusive practice in a sample of Irish primary schools. It explores the perspectives of inclusive education in these schools and, finally, considers the effect of leadership on inclusive education and the enabling of student voice.

It seeks to answer three main questions:

1. What are the perspectives of inclusive education reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools?
2. Is the voice of the child heard as part of inclusive practice in these schools, and if so, how?
3. What effect does leadership have on inclusive education and the enabling of student voice in these schools?

To carry out the research, a mixed methods, multiple case study design, incorporating methodological triangulation and a participatory research element, was used. It consisted of a review of literature in the areas of inclusive education, student voice and leadership in schools. In each case study school, two focus group interviews were held with two groups of approximately five children, some with additional educational needs (AEN) and some without. Artwork was gathered from the children participating in the focus groups, portraying their images of a school they would like to attend and a school they would not like to attend. Separate, semi-structured interviews were held with the principal and the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) of each school. Questionnaires were issued to all teachers and members of the Board of Management (BoM). A focus group interview was held in each school with four parents of children with AEN. A document analysis was carried out on relevant documents pertaining to each school to gain a clearer contextual understanding of each one's policies and procedures. In addition, a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) was formed. The CRAG helped to design the questions used in the children's

focus groups and also the interpretation and analysis of the data garnered from those focus groups.

The findings indicate that student voice enables children to feel included and valued, enhancing their self-esteem and academic engagement. It also promotes empathy and peer collaboration. Currently, student voice is heard through conventional democratic streams such as the Student Council. While student voice tends to focus on non-academic issues, it does not feature strongly at classroom level or concerning teaching and learning. There is a further challenge for the voice of the child to be heard and acted upon in a meaningful way when the child has AEN. Teachers' perspectives show a willingness and openness to inclusive education and to hear, acknowledge and facilitate student voice, and an acknowledgement that it can benefit all children, not just those with AEN. However, there is a limited availability of continuing professional development and resources, which undermines confidence among teachers. Large class sizes make differentiation difficult, and teachers find it challenging to balance individual children's needs with curriculum demands due to a lack of support teachers, time and other resources. Parents of children with AEN feel they are mostly supported by their school. However, they struggle to access resources that their children should be automatically entitled to. Effective school leadership is essential to foster an inclusive school culture and enable the voice of the child to be heard. The importance of the role of the principal and SENCo in each school to build and develop rapport and relationships with stakeholders across the board is recognised.

It is important to acknowledge that this is a small-scale study involving three contextually different primary schools. Comparability across each school context allows for greater conclusions regarding inclusion, student voice and leadership in an Irish primary school context. This study has the potential to contribute to educational policy and practice, providing insights that can profitably inform teacher training, leadership development, and opportunities for meaningful student engagement and participation in Irish primary schools.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Michael Shevlin for his invaluable advice, guidance and support throughout this study.

I am also very grateful to Dr. Paula Kennedy Flynn for her initial support and encouragement at the outset of this academic journey.

Thank you to my D.Ed. cohort for their camaraderie and support throughout. We began together and progressed at our own paces, each navigating the path in our own way — Trish, Sinéad, Ciara, Linda, Paddy, Anna, Deirdre, and Siobhán — thank you for the encouragement, solidarity, and shared perseverance.

Many thanks to the children, principals, teachers, parents and school communities who were involved in this study and who so generously gave of their time, experiences and expertise.

Finally, I would like to thank, with all my heart, my husband, Cían, whose love, patience, encouragement, and unwavering belief sustained me throughout; my beautiful daughters, Áine and Róisín, who brought joy, perspective, and motivation along the way; my wonderful mother, Bernadette, and my father, Liam — who always referred to this entire endeavour as “*the book*” and never missed a chance to ask how *the book* was coming along. Thank you both for instilling in me from the very beginning a love of learning and the value of education, and for setting me on this journey in the first place. To my sister, Catherine, and my brother, James — thank you for your patience with proofreading and the occasional nudge to keep me going! To my extended family and friends — thank you all for your constant encouragement and understanding over the course of this study. It has been quite a journey, and it was only made possible through your steadfast love and support. I am forever grateful.

Table of Contents

Declaration	ii
Summary	iii
Acknowledgements.....	v
List of Appendices	xiv
List of Tables	xvi
List of Figures	xvii
List of Abbreviations	xviii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background and Context of the Research	1
1.3 Statement of the Problem	4
1.4 Research Aims and Objectives	4
1.5 Rationale	5
1.6 The Personal Significance of this Study	6
1.7 Methodology Employed in the Study	9
1.8 Thesis Structure	12
1.9 Conclusion.....	12
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	14
2.1 Introduction	14
2.2 Primary Schooling in an Irish Context.....	15
2.3 Educational Provision for Students with Additional Educational Needs (AEN)	16
2.4 Defining Inclusive Education.....	19
2.5 Approaches to Inclusive Education.....	23
2.6 Barriers to Inclusive Education	24
2.7 International Policy, Legislation, and Developments Regarding Inclusion.....	27
2.7.1 The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994)	28
2.7.2 The Dakar Statement and Framework for Action (2000) .	28

2.7.3 The Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action (2016)	29
2.7.4 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006)	29
2.7.5 Legislation Elsewhere	31
2.8 History of Additional Needs Education in a National Context	31
2.9 Irish Policy and Legislation	31
2.9.1 Investment in Irish Education (1965)	32
2.9.2 The Special Education Review Committee (1993)	32
2.9.3 The Education Act (1998)	32
2.9.4 The Equal Status Act 2000	33
2.9.5 The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004)	33
2.9.6 The Effects of Litigation on Inclusive Education	36
2.9.7 Policy and Legislation in Action	37
2.10 Perspectives of Inclusive Education	38
2.10.1 Universalists vs Moderates	38
2.10.2 Inclusion as a Human Right	41
2.10.3 Inclusion – A Matter of Respect	43
2.10.4 The Dilemma of Difference	45
2.10.5 Power Imbalances in Education	48
2.10.6 External Pressures on Inclusion	50
2.11 The Role of Teachers in Inclusive Education	52
2.12 The Role of Parents in Inclusive Education	56
2.13 The Role of Children in Inclusive Education	57
2.14 Voice of the Child	58
2.15 Defining Student Voice	60
2.16 The Irish and International Context of Student Voice	63
2.16.1 The Development of Irish Policy	63
2.16.2 The International Context of Student Voice	67
2.17 The Development of Student Voice	69
2.18 Student Voice as a Right	70

2.19 The Importance of Student Voice	72
2.20 The Opportunities of Student Voice	76
2.21 Student Voice: Power and Participation	78
2.22 Challenges in Implementing Student Voice Initiatives	79
2.22.1 Tokenism and Superficial Engagement	80
2.22.2 Representation and Whose Voices Are Heard	80
2.22.3 Limitations of the Concept of “Voice”	81
2.22.4 Challenges in Methods and Implementation	81
2.22.5 Power, Resistance, and School Culture	82
2.22.6 Towards Meaningful Engagement	83
2.23 Listening to the Voice of the Child with Additional Educational Needs (AEN)	85
2.23.1 What Has Emerged So Far?	86
2.23.2 Addressing the Gap in Literature	88
2.24 Leadership in an Inclusive School	88
2.24.1 The Role of the Principal in the Vision and the Culture of the School	89
2.24.2 A Willingness to be Inclusive	91
2.24.3 Leading as Part of a Wider Team	93
2.25 Conclusion	95
Chapter 3: Theoretical and Philosophical Underpinnings	99
3.1 Introduction	99
3.2 Social Constructivism as a Worldview	100
3.3 Theoretical Anchors	101
3.3.1 Student Voice	101
3.3.2 Inclusive Education	102
3.3.3 Educational Leadership	103
3.3.4 Interaction of Anchors	105
3.4 Paradigm and Philosophical Underpinnings	107
3.4.1 Ontology	107
3.4.2 Epistemology	107
3.4.3 Paradigm	109

3.5 The Lundy Model of Participation	110
3.5.1 Space.....	111
3.5.2 Voice	111
3.5.3 Audience	112
3.5.4 Influence	112
3.6 Conclusion	114
Chapter 4: Methodology	116
4.1 Introduction.....	116
4.2 Context of the Research	117
4.3 Application of Theoretical Framework.....	121
4.4 Reflexivity	124
4.5 The Role of the Researcher	126
4.6 Case Study	128
4.6.1 Why Use a Case Study?	130
4.7 Research Methods.....	133
4.7.1 Literature Review	133
4.7.2 Children’s Research Advisory Group (CRAG).....	134
4.7.3 Questionnaires	136
4.7.4 Focus Groups	144
4.7.5 Visual Depictions	151
4.7.6 Semi-structured Interviews	152
4.7.7 Document Analysis	156
4.8 Ethics.....	156
4.8.1 Ethical Foundations	157
4.8.2 Informed Consent and Assent.....	157
4.8.3 Anonymity and confidentiality	160
4.8.4 Data Protection	161
4.9 Recruitment of Participants	161
4.10 Analysis of Data	162
4.10.1 Quantitative Data	165
4.10.2 Qualitative Data.....	165
4.11 Conclusion	166

Chapter 5: Findings	169
5.1 Introduction	169
5.2 The Voice of the Child	174
5.2.1 Insight from the Children’s Advisory Research Group (CRAG)	174
5.2.2 Power Dynamics.....	177
5.2.3 The Hardest to Hear Voices	181
5.2.4 The Voice of the Child in Policy.....	182
5.2.5 Children’s Depictions of Their Ideal School	183
5.2.6 Relationships and Social Interaction.....	189
5.2.7 Integration of Autism Classes	192
5.2.8 Positive Effects of Student Voice in Schools	194
5.2.9 Challenges to Inclusion from the Perspective of the Children.....	194
5.3 The Importance of Leadership in Facilitating Inclusion and the Voice of the Child.....	201
5.3.1 The Role of the Principal.....	201
5.3.2 The Role of the Board of Management (BoM)	204
5.3.3 Leading through Policy Development.....	207
5.3.4 Staff Support	214
5.3.5 Modelling and Coaching	215
5.3.6 Continuing Professional Development (CPD)	218
5.3.7 Outside Agencies.....	220
5.3.8 Networking.....	223
5.3.9 Critical Evaluation	223
5.4 The importance of relationships and advocacy.....	224
5.4.1 Building relationships with the children	225
5.4.2 The Importance of a Child’s Special Needs Assistant (SNA)	228
5.4.3 The Need to Fight.....	229
5.5 Opportunities for and Barriers to Inclusion	232
5.5.1 A Lack of Staff to Support Classroom Inclusion	232

5.5.2 A Certain Discomfort in What Children May Say	235
5.5.3 Understanding of Parents	236
5.5.4 A Need for Training	238
5.5.5 Resources	241
5.5.6 Meaningful Differentiation.....	241
5.5.7 Staff Wellbeing	243
5.6 Conclusion	244
Chapter 6: Discussion and Analysis	247
6.1 Introduction.....	247
6.2 The Voice of the Child in Inclusive Practice.....	249
6.2.1 Meaningful Inclusion	251
6.2.2 The Role of the Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator (SENCo) in Facilitating the Voice of the Child.....	254
6.2.3 Teachers and the Voice of the Child.....	255
6.2.4 Benefits for the School Environment	257
6.2.5 Hearing the Voice of Every Child	259
6.2.6 Resistance from Teachers	261
6.2.7 Imbalance of Power.....	263
6.2.8 Children’s Vision for a Positive Learning Environment ...	264
6.2.9 Challenges to Enabling the Voice of the Child in Schools	267
6.3 The Effect of Leadership on Inclusive Education and Enabling the Voice of the Child	270
6.3.1 The Role of the Principal	271
6.3.2 The Role of the Board of Management (BoM).....	272
6.3.3 Policy Development.....	274
6.3.4 Staff Wellbeing	274
6.4 Supporting a Policy of Inclusion	275
6.4.1 Building Capacity of Staff.....	276
6.4.2 Quality Relationships.....	277
6.5 Conclusion	280
Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations	281
7.1 Introduction.....	281

7.2 Summary of the Research	281
7.3 Major Findings	284
7.3.1 Perspectives of Inclusive Education.....	284
7.3.2 The Voice of the Child	286
7.3.3 Leadership in Inclusive Education.....	289
7.4 Limitations.....	290
7.5 Contribution to Knowledge.....	291
7.5.1 Theoretical Contributions	292
7.5.2 Methodological Contributions	293
7.6 Implications and Recommendations	294
7.7 Future Research	298
7.8 Personal Reflection	299
References	303
Appendix A: Schedule of CRAG Activities (Background & Focus Group Input).....	335
Appendix B: Teacher Questionnaire	342
Appendix C: Board of Management Questionnaire	349
Appendix D: Focus Group Questions – Parents	352
Appendix E: Focus Group Questions – Children	355
Appendix F: CRAG Analysis of Data.....	357
Appendix G: Sample Focus Group Field Notes	358
Appendix H: Sample Visual Depictions	359
Appendix I: Semi-Structured Interview Prompts - Principal.....	365
Appendix J: Semi-Structured Interview Prompts – SENCo	369
Appendix K: Document Analysis	372
Appendix L: Rubric for Document Analysis.....	373
Appendix M: TCD Ethical Approval	375
Appendix N: BoM Information and Consent Form (CRAG).....	376
Appendix O: Principal Information and Consent Form.....	379
Appendix P: SENCo Information and Consent Form.....	383
Appendix Q: Parent Participant Information and Consent Form	387
Appendix R: Questionnaire Information Sheet.....	391

Appendix S: Parent/Guardian Information and Consent Form for U18 (Crag)	393
Appendix T: Parent/Guardian Information and Consent Form for U18	397
Appendix U: Children’s Information and Assent Form (Crag)	401
Appendix V: Children’s Information and Assent Form (Focus Group)	405
Appendix W: Sample Crag Feedback	408
.....	410
Appendix X: My Thoughts About School Checklist.....	411

List of Appendices

Appendix A	Schedule of CRAG Activities (Background & Focus Group Input)
Appendix B	Teacher Questionnaire
Appendix C	Board of Management Questionnaire
Appendix D	Focus Group Questions - Parents
Appendix E	Focus Group Questions – Children
Appendix F	CRAG Analysis of Data
Appendix G	Sample Focus Group Field Notes
Appendix H	Sample Visual Depictions
Appendix I	Semi-Structured Interview Prompts - Principal
Appendix J	Semi-Structured Interview Prompts - SENCo
Appendix K	Document Analysis
Appendix L	Rubric for Document Analysis
Appendix M	TCD Ethical Approval
Appendix N	BoM Information and Consent Form (CRAG)
Appendix O	Principal Information and Consent Form
Appendix P	SEnCo Information and Consent Form
Appendix Q	Parent Participation Information and Consent Form
Appendix R	Questionnaire Information Sheet
Appendix S	Parent/Guardian Information and Consent Form for U18 (CRAG)

Appendix T	Parent/Guardian Information and Consent Form for U18 (Focus Groups)
Appendix U	Children’s Information and Assent Form (CRAG)
Appendix V	Children’s Information and Assent Form (Focus Groups)
Appendix W	Sample CRAG Feedback
Appendix X	My Thoughts About School Checklist

List of Tables

Table 4.1 - Details of Participating Schools	118
Table 4.2 - Data Collection Methods in Each Participating School..	120
Table 4.3 - Alignment of Research Design with Social Constructivist Principles	122
Table 5.1 - Sample of Process of Thematic Analysis.....	171

List of Figures

Figure 3.1 - Guiding Theoretical Framework.....	106
Figure 4.1 - Stages of Thematic Analysis Incorporating Within-Case and Cross-Case Analysis	164
Figure 5.1 - Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Data in a Mixed-Methods Design	173
Figure 5.2 – The views of children are taken into account before making important decisions or developing important school policies.	205
Figure 5.3 – The views of parents are taken into account before making important decisions or developing important school policies.	205
Figure 5.4 – The views of staff are taken into account before making important decisions or developing important school policies.....	206
Figure 5.5 - I feel supported in providing an inclusive education in my class.	219

List of Abbreviations

AEN	Additional Educational Needs
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BoM	Board of Management
CRAG	Children’s Research Advisory Group
DE	Department of Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DEY	Department of Education and Youth
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
ERIC	Education Resources Information Center
EU	European Union
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
IEP	Individual Education Plan
ISM	In-School Management
IT	Information Technology
MSIP	Manitoba School Improvement Programme

NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
OT	Occupational Therapist
PE	Physical Education
RP	Restorative Practice
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
SENO	Special Education Needs Organiser
SET	Special Educational Teacher
SIM	School Inclusion Model
SLT	Speech and Language Therapy
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SSP	School Support Plan
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
UK	United Kingdom
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 Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund
USA	United States of America

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the study, gives an overview of the context for the research and explains the rationale behind the study.

Firstly, a brief overview of inclusive education is given, highlighting its relevance within the Irish primary school system, with particular reference made to the role of student voice and leadership in shaping inclusive practices. Following this, the research problem is then defined. Next, the aims, objectives, and research questions that the study strives to address are identified. Subsequently, the rationale and personal significance of the study are discussed. A brief overview of the methodology employed for the research is given. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the dissertation structure.

1.2 Background and Context of the Research

International developments in policy, research and practice have established the right of students with additional educational needs (AEN) to be educated in mainstream schools (Shevlin et al., 2009), starting primarily with the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) which established the fundamental principle of inclusion. That is, that inclusive education aims to ensure that all students, regardless of ability, background, or additional needs, have equal access to quality

education in a regular classroom alongside their peers with necessary support for learning and participation (Ballard, 1996).

The principles of inclusion have been further embedded internationally in policy and practice through the adoption of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD)* (United Nations, 2006).

In Ireland, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) informs the policy of inclusive practice in schools. However, despite these policy commitments, challenges remain in how inclusive education is implemented.

Inclusive education and policy in Ireland has evolved in recent years, shifting from a focus on integration to a more rights-based, child-centred approach (Kenny et al., 2020). Research has shown that inclusion is most effective when schools foster a culture of collaboration, equity, and student participation (Ainscow, 2020). However, studies in the Irish context have highlighted inconsistencies in how inclusive education is perceived and implemented across schools (Rose et al., 2015).

The voice of the child has also gained increasing recognition in educational discourse, starting initially with the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* (1989) almost four decades ago, which emphasises children's right to express their views in matters affecting them. Since ratifying the *UNCRC* in 1992, Ireland

has demonstrated a commitment to policy development to reflect the rights of children and young people (Flynn, 2018), translating into educational policies that encourage student participation in decision-making and respect for the right of children to have their voices heard within educational settings (Lundy & Hanna, 2020). Despite this, research suggests that in many schools, children's voices are still not fully integrated into inclusive practices (Kenny et al., 2023a).

Furthermore, it is generally accepted that leadership plays a crucial role in “developing appropriate school responses to the challenge of including children and young people who have SEN” (Rose & Shevlin, 2020, p. 81). School leaders set the tone for inclusive policies (Shevlin & Flynn, 2011), guide and motivate teacher engagement (Lambrecht et al., 2022), and are a key component in facilitating student participation by enabling children's voices (Mitra et al., 2012). However, there is a need to explore the extent to which leadership influences inclusive education and the meaningful inclusion of student voice in the Irish primary school context.

This study seeks to explore a variety of perspectives on inclusive education, including children, parents, principals, teachers, and Board of Management (BoM) members. It also seeks to explore the role of student voice in inclusive practice and the impact of leadership in enabling inclusive practices within a sample of Irish primary schools.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Despite Ireland's commitment to inclusive education through legislation, policy and guidelines, significant gaps remain in implementation (Kelly et al., 2014). While policies support the inclusion of students with additional needs, the extent to which these policies translate into daily practice remains inconsistent. Moreover, while student voice is recognised as an essential component of inclusive education, research indicates that children's participation is often tokenistic rather than meaningfully embedded in school decision-making processes (Lundy, 2018). Limited research has been carried out on the voice of the child in terms of pupils with AEN (Nic Aindriú, 2020).

The role of leadership in enabling inclusive education and fostering student voice also requires further investigation, particularly in the Irish primary school context.

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining how inclusion is perceived, whether children have a voice in inclusive education, and what role leadership plays in shaping these practices.

1.4 Research Aims and Objectives

The research which I am about to undertake is a multiple case study focusing on inclusive education in a sample of Irish primary schools.

It seeks to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of inclusive education reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools?
2. Is the voice of the child heard as part of inclusive practice in these schools, and if so, how?
3. What effect does leadership have on inclusive education and the enabling of student voice in these schools?

1.5 Rationale

While this is a small-scale study, it has significant implications for policy and practice. First, it addresses an important gap in the Irish education system by exploring not only how inclusion is perceived and put into practice, but also investigating how active student voice is in inclusive practices in these schools. While previous research has examined inclusion policies, student voice and leadership separately, fewer studies have explored the intersection of inclusive education, student voice, and leadership in the Irish primary school context.

Additionally, the inclusion of a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) which aligns with participatory research principles, ensures that children's perspectives are not only studied but also actively incorporated into the research process.

By investigating these elements together, this study has the potential to contribute to educational policy and practice, providing insights that may inform teacher training, leadership development, and opportunities for meaningful student engagement and participation.

1.6 The Personal Significance of this Study

Personally, I come to this research with a passion for inclusive education and almost 17 years of professional experience in primary education. Over the course of my career, I have held a range of roles including class teacher, special education teacher (SET), home school community liaison (HSCL) teacher, acting deputy principal, and, for the past nine years, principal of a primary school. My professional journey has included experience in both DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) and non-DEIS settings. DEIS schools are designated by the Department of Education as having high concentrations of students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The DEIS initiative seeks to address educational inequality through targeted supports such as reduced class sizes, literacy and numeracy programmes, school meals, and professional development opportunities for teachers (Department of Education and Skills, 2017).

These experiences have significantly shaped my beliefs about inclusive education, leadership, and the centrality of the child's voice in educational practice. As a school leader, I am privileged to work in partnership with staff, parents, and, most importantly, the children, to foster a school environment where the aim is for every child to be enabled to flourish and reach their full potential. My commitment to inclusion is grounded in practice and strengthened

by a belief in the transformative power of listening to and acting upon the voice of the child. I believe that inclusion cannot exist without the genuine and active presence and participation of children in decision-making processes. Nor can inclusion really be realised without effective leadership that actively supports and champions inclusive values and practices.

My research is motivated by a deep frustration with how inclusion is often conceptualised and operationalised in schools, compounded by the many obstacles and challenges to overcome, including policy inconsistencies, limited resources, differing stakeholder perspectives, ethical considerations, and power dynamics. Too often, inclusion is assumed to be occurring simply because a child is present in the classroom, when in reality it may be limited to surface-level accommodations, such as assigning a different worksheet. This form of 'passive inclusion' fails to challenge the underlying structures and attitudes that marginalise children with diverse learning profiles and additional needs. I was determined that this research would be both authentic and honest, grounded in current practice, reflective of real challenges, and responsive to the lived experiences of the children involved in the research.

A crucial aspect of my approach was ensuring that the voice of the child was not simply included, but meaningfully heard. I was conscious not to 'corral' or filter the children's perspectives to fit

adult expectations or pre-set agendas. Instead, I sought to create opportunities for children to express their thoughts, feelings, and ideas on their own terms, recognising their agency, individuality, and most importantly, their right to be meaningfully heard.

My dual role as principal and researcher offered valuable insights but also required critical reflection and ethical sensitivity. I was acutely aware of the power dynamics inherent in my position, and I took steps to mitigate these through participatory approaches and child-friendly methodologies. At times, balancing my professional responsibilities with the demands of the research process was challenging, but it also offered a unique vantage point from which to explore how leadership can facilitate, or hinder, inclusive practice and student voice.

I approached this study through a social constructivist lens, recognising the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and the participants. My methodological choices, discussed in further detail below, were informed by this epistemological stance, employing qualitative and quantitative methods, with participatory elements. These approaches allowed me to centre the voices of children, parents, teachers and educational leaders, to explore the nuanced and complex realities of inclusion in Irish primary schools.

As a practitioner-researcher, I place strong value on evidence-informed practice. I firmly believe that research must not only contribute to academic knowledge but also inform and enhance real-world educational practice. This research, therefore, is not just an academic endeavour; it is a continuation of my professional commitment to building inclusive, equitable, and child-centred schools. It is rooted in the belief that the voices of children are not an optional extra but essential to shaping meaningful, inclusive education systems, and that effective, reflective leadership is key to enabling this.

1.7 Methodology Employed in the Study

As mentioned above, this research adopts a mixed methods multiple case study design incorporating methodological triangulation and a participatory research element situated within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm.

To answer the research questions, firstly, an examination of the literature to date on the topics of inclusive education, student voice and leadership will take place.

A case study will be conducted in each of the three primary schools of varying locations and demographics referred to below:

- School A: One small, urban, co-educational school with multi-grade classes (i.e., classrooms where children from two or more year groups are taught together by the same teacher)

operating under the patronage of the Church of Ireland
(fewer than 100 pupils)

- School B: One medium-sized, rural, co-educational, single-stream school (i.e., classrooms where children of the same class level are grouped together in a single class with one teacher guiding their learning) operating under the patronage of the Catholic Church (fewer than 300 pupils)
- School C: One large, urban, co-educational, triple-stream school (i.e., the school operates three separate classes for each class level, running in parallel, accommodating a larger number of students while maintaining manageable class sizes) with two special classes for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) operating under the patronage of Educate Together, which is an equality-based national network of schools in Ireland (more than 600 pupils)

Furthermore, a CRAG, which will be explained in further detail later in Chapter 4, will take place in the researcher's school, which is a medium-sized, urban, co-educational, single-stream school operating under an independent patron but affiliated with Educate Together.

In each school, a focus group interview will be held with a group of four to five children from 1st – 3rd Class and a group of four to five children from 4th – 6th Class. Some of the children will have AEN. Artwork will be gathered from the children participating in the focus

groups, portraying their image of a school they would like to attend and a school they would not like to attend. A semi-structured interview will be held with the principal and the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) separately. Questionnaires will be issued to all staff members and BoM members. A focus group interview will be held in each school with approximately four parents of children with AEN. Finally, a document analysis will be carried out on relevant documents, where available, pertaining to each school, such as the Special Educational Needs (SEN) policy, the Code of Behaviour policy, the English as an Additional Language (EAL) policy and a selection of School Support Plans (SSPs), formerly referred to as Individual Education Plans (IEPs). SSPs are structured documents used in Irish primary schools to support students with AEN. They outline the specific supports, interventions, and strategies to help students access education in an inclusive environment. They operate for an agreed period of time and are subject to review. SSPs follow a continuum of support model, guided by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) (National Educational Psychological Service, n.d.).

The CRAG will be formed with ten children from the Student Council in the school of which the researcher is the principal. These children will help design the questions used in the focus groups with the children in the three case study schools. The children will help choose the language of the questions to ensure they are understood and set

at an appropriate level. The CRAG will also help interpret the data garnered from the children's focus groups.

Next, analysis of all data will be conducted. Finally, conclusions and recommendations will be drawn.

1.8 Thesis Structure

The thesis is laid out in seven chapters. Chapter 2 examines the literature in the area of inclusive education, the voice of the child and leadership within a context of inclusion. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings that inform this study, providing the conceptual framework through which the research is approached. Chapter 4 sets out the methodological approach adopted to collect the data required and the ethical procedures which are adhered to during this study. Chapter 5 details the findings from the research. Chapter 6 involves discussion and analysis of the findings. Finally, Chapter 7 summarises the study carried out, highlights the limitations of the study and provides recommendations from the research.

1.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, while previous research has often examined inclusion policies, student voice, and leadership as separate entities, fewer studies have explored how these critical elements intersect within the Irish primary school context. By investigating inclusive education,

student voice, and leadership together, this study offers a unique opportunity to contribute meaningfully to educational policy and practice. The insights generated seek to inform teacher training programs, enhance leadership development initiatives, and promote greater opportunities for authentic student engagement and participation, ultimately supporting more inclusive and responsive educational environments.

In this chapter, I have given a brief overview of the study to be carried out. I will now examine in detail the literature on inclusive education, the voice of the child and leadership within a context of inclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

For this study, a comprehensive literature search was conducted in the areas of inclusive education, the voice of the child, and leadership in education.

This chapter will explore the Irish primary educational context from the perspective of inclusion. Definitions and conceptualisations of inclusion will be examined from a practical standpoint, highlighting national and international perspectives, policies and legislative frameworks that influence inclusive practice in schools.

The chapter will then explore literature regarding the voice of the child in education, looking at its development as a key component of educational discourse, discussing its significance and addressing the opportunities and challenges of student voice in schools.

The final section of the chapter examines the literature on the role of leadership in enabling inclusion and fostering the voice of the child.

Drawing from a range of national and international research, this literature review critically examines how inclusive education and student voice are conceptualised and implemented, setting the foundation for the study's methodological approach in the next chapter.

2.2 Primary Schooling in an Irish Context

In Ireland, compulsory schooling for children begins at age six and ends at age 16. Children can be enrolled in primary school from the age of four, with most children engaged in school by age five (Rose et al., 2015). The primary school sector, in general, consists of denominational (religious) schools, multi-denominational schools (e.g., Educate Together and Community National Schools) and Gaelscoileanna. A Gaelscoil is a national school where everything is done through Irish, using the immersion education method. Gaelscoileanna are funded by the State under the same conditions as other national schools and follow the standard primary school curriculum. Immersion education is a system that helps children become fluent in Irish by giving them daily experiences in an Irish-speaking environment. All subjects, apart from English, are taught through the medium of Irish right up until 6th Class. Irish is the language of communication in the school, both inside and outside the classroom and in the playground (Gaeloideachas, 2025).

In the academic year 2023-24, there were 3,089 Department of Education-recognised mainstream primary schools (Department of Education, 2024b). Primary education consists of an eight-year cycle, with pupils usually transferring to secondary school at age 12.

2.3 Educational Provision for Students with Additional Educational Needs (AEN)

Additional education needs (AEN), or special educational needs (SEN), as they are still referred to in official government documentation and legislation, are defined as:

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

(Oireachtas, 2004, s. 1)

For children with AEN, there are currently three types of provision to meet the range of educational needs found amongst students in primary schools, namely mainstream classes in mainstream schools, special classes in mainstream schools and special schools.

A mainstream class in a mainstream primary school means the class teacher has primary responsibility for the progress of all students in the class, including students with AEN. Additional teaching support from a special education teacher (SET) may be provided to a child based on their needs. Special needs assistants (SNAs) can be allocated to schools to work with children who have specific care needs. They provide non-teaching care support. SNAs support pupils

who have care needs resulting from a disability, behavioural difficulties or a significant medical condition.

Special classes in mainstream schools offer a supportive learning environment for children with more complex needs where mainstream classes would not, or have been unable to, meet their needs. To be placed in a special class, a child must have a professional report stating that they have an additional educational need and that this need is of such complexity that a special class placement could be considered. Special classes have a lower specified student-teacher ratio according to the category of disability. This means that these classes have small numbers of students.

Placement in a special class is a flexible arrangement that may change as a student's learning develops. Where possible, students in special classes should be educated alongside their mainstream peers for some part of the day or week, or for some activities or subjects, in line with their needs and abilities.

Finally, special schools support students with more severe and/or complex special educational needs in cases where a full-time mainstream placement is deemed not to be in the student's best interest. These students may find the demands of mainstream schools very difficult.

To be placed in a special school, a child must have a professional report, such as one from a psychologist, stating that they have an

additional educational need of such complexity that a special school placement should be considered. Special schools, tend to have fewer students, with a lower student-teacher ratio specified according to the category of disability, so that classes have small numbers of students (National Council for Special Education, 2025a).

This range of provision is sometimes described as a continuum of provision, from fully inclusive mainstream classes at one end of the continuum, to placement in a special school at the other end (National Council for Special Education, 2025a).

In exceptional circumstances, children may be eligible for the Home Tuition scheme. This scheme provides funding to parents to provide education at home for children who, for several reasons, such as chronic illness, are unable to attend school. The scheme is also available to children with AEN who are awaiting a suitable educational placement.

It is envisaged that “wherever a child is placed, educational placements should be flexible. Educational placements should be reviewed periodically as a student’s needs change” (National Council for Special Education, 2025a).

This research will primarily focus on the education of children with AEN in the mainstream setting.

2.4 Defining Inclusive Education

Before examining national and international policies and legislation on inclusive education, inclusive education will first be defined, and its practical implications will be explored.

Inclusion is a multifaceted concept that is interpreted in various ways, depending on individual perspectives and contexts (Ainscow, 2020).

As Shevlin and Flynn (2011, p. 128) note, despite the significant developments and emphasis on inclusion and inclusive practice in policy and legislation internationally, “a fully accepted definition has yet to emerge”. This observation has been echoed by Krischler et al. (2019, p. 633), who say that inclusive education is “by no means a clearly defined or universally understood concept, demanding more in-depth, culture-specific research on understandings of inclusion”. Ainscow et al. (2006) view inclusive education as an approach that may be defined in three overlapping ways. It seeks to address and combat “barriers to learning and participation”, increase the competence of a school to respond to the broad diversity of students in its locality in a way in which they are treated equally, and put “inclusive values into action in education and society” (Ainscow et al., 2006, p. 297).

Inclusion has come to mean that schools should concern themselves with increasing the participation and broad educational achievements of an increasingly diverse group of learners who have

historically been marginalised (Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow et al., 2006; Kearney & Kane, 2006). Stainback et al. (1996, p. 36) describe inclusive schools as “places where everybody belongs, is accepted, and is supported by his or her peers and members of the school community in the course of having his or her educational needs met”. For inclusive education to take place, positive attitudes towards students with AEN and their participation in inclusive classrooms are essential (Antonak & Livneh, 2000).

Inclusion has in the past been rather narrowly conceptualised (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009) and originally referred primarily to children with learning difficulties or disabilities, as was reflected in literature and legislation (Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow et al., 2006). Drudy and Kinsella (2009) note that there is a need to widen its remit to respond to cultural/political imperatives to support diversity, including children and young people from ethnic minorities and disadvantaged communities. This is echoed by Travers et al. (2010) who state that, in Ireland, many serious obstacles are preventing the development of inclusive provision for children and young people with AEN from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and those for whom English is not their first language. As time has progressed, definitions of inclusive education have moved towards focusing more on social, cultural and political aspects of education (Kearney & Kane, 2006). Inclusive education has expanded to “include those who are at risk of marginalisation or exclusion for any reason” (Winter & O’Raw, 2010,

p. 4). Some of those reasons are ability, race, gender, ethnicity, language, care status, socioeconomic status, disability, sexuality, and religion (Gerschel, 2003).

Ainscow et al. (2003, p. 230) depict inclusion as a transformative task involving the “participation and achievement of all students in local mainstream schools, rather than simply focusing on any one group of vulnerable learners”. However, as Kearney and Kane (2006, p. 203) state, explanations of inclusion are often influenced by the context in which they are set, including its ethos, principles and culture, which is an “important variable in the success or otherwise of meeting the needs of a diverse student population”. This also resonates with Skrtic (1991) and Ainscow (2020), who indicate that inclusive education does not focus solely on the student but rather on the regular programme of education and how it is organised.

Booth and Ainscow (2016, p. 22) define inclusive education as the process of “increasing participation for everyone in the cultures, communities and curricula of local settings, and reducing all forms of exclusion and discrimination. It is concerned with listening to the voices of children and acting on them.” This definition of inclusive education serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it takes the focus of inclusion from being a “discernible event” (Kearney & Kane, 2006, p. 203) and moves it towards being a process without clearly defined beginnings and endings. The definition also conveys the fact that

inclusion and exclusion are not “two distinct, unrelated concepts” (Kearney & Kane, 2006, p. 205). Rather, they are inextricably linked, and to understand one, one needs to understand and relate to the other. Finally, it refers to the voice of the child and its role in inclusive education. Student voice will be explored in further detail later in this chapter.

Drudy and Kinsella (2009, p. 648) refer to the concept of inclusion as being related to the “recognition of the diversity of modern society”. This is in line with Morin et al. (2013), who believe that, when societal attitudes are positive, inclusion is then facilitated and fostered, furthering the acceptance of children with AEN by their peers, families and teachers.

Inclusive schools are seen as those that endeavour to ultimately remove exclusive practice entirely from their schools and, in turn, increase students’ participation in the life of the school and all aspects of the school community. According to Ainscow et al. (2006, p. 297), inclusion should be not just an aspect of education or a set of policies for education, but rather a “principled way of viewing the development of education and society”. It can also be understood more broadly as a framework that embraces and supports the full spectrum of learners’ diversity (Ainscow, 2020; Kiuppis & Sarromaa Hausstätter, 2014).

The aim of inclusive education is to facilitate full participation in adult life and to:

assist children with special educational needs to leave school with the skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity, in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives.

(Oireachtas, 2004, p. 5)

The various approaches to inclusive education, to achieve this aim, will now be explored.

2.5 Approaches to Inclusive Education

Meijer et al. (2003) describe three approaches to educational provision for pupils with AEN:

1. One track, where all pupils are in the mainstream classes
2. Multi-track, where multiple approaches are used
3. Two-track, where mainstream and special schools operate as distinct entities

The second, multi-track, approach is used in Ireland to encompass a continuum of educational provision ranging from mainstream to special schools, responding to the variety of needs presented by children with AEN, whilst being supported by a continuum of services (Rix et al., 2013). This conceptualisation “underpins the legislation and policy documents in Ireland” (Rix et al., 2013, p. 1). However, it

is worth noting that widely differing, sometimes contradictory interpretations and manifestations of the idea of continuum exist, with 29 interpretations of continuum noted internationally (Rix et al., 2013), due to differences in the conceptualisation of inclusion (Krischler et al., 2019). Therefore, caution is recommended when referring to the continuum (Rose et al., 2015). When considering attitudes toward inclusive education policy and practices in various cultural contexts, it is important to recognise these conceptual differences since they affect “not only inclusive policies and practices within the education system but rather illuminate the positioning and production of disability [and difference] in society as a whole” (Krischler et al., 2019, p. 649).

2.6 Barriers to Inclusive Education

Barriers to inclusion can take various forms, “many of which are to do with the assumptions upon which practice is based” (Messiou & Ainscow, 2020, p. 671). As Kozleski et al. (2014) explain, progress in relation to inclusion is complex, context-specific and connected to deeply entrenched systems of marginalisation that sort and segregate students by several classifications, including race, ability, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status.

Schools often find it challenging to provide equal education without acknowledging differences. For example, the very language of SEN is rooted in the medical model of disability, which legitimises the notion

that some children are “normal” while others are “special” (Jones, 2004). Consequently, unlike the inclusion model that should be encouraged, “groups and individual children are assigned specific labels, often leading to special or segregated provision” (Jones, 2004, p. 11). McDonnell (2003) also critiques the dominant psycho-medical model underpinning developments in AEN. Shevlin et al. (2013, p. 1120) state that “the continual emphasis on addressing individual deficits in children and young people categorised as disabled and/or having special educational needs rather than a sustained critique of existing organisational structures will result in a perpetuation of the psycho-medical model of provision”, a view which Ainscow (2020) concurs with. Rogers (2012, p. 480) also regards the medical model as a barrier to inclusion as “it fails to see education (policy and practice) as in need of reform, thereby leaving the child as problematic and often excluded”. Kinsella and Senior (2008) suggest a cultural change away from the focus being on “individual pupil pathology” exclusively, which emphasises deficits in the individual child, and moving towards a critique of existing policies and practices for inclusion to become a reality in Irish society (Rose et al., 2015). Meijer (2003) speaks of attempts to shift away from psycho-medical models of thinking about need, with greater emphasis on the use of Individual Education Plans (IEPs), or what are now referred to as School Support Plans (SSPs). Rose et al. (2012) found that many of the schools participating in their longitudinal research study formulated

their own versions of individual support plans. They also point out that even when such plans are in place, “they do not always follow a consistent format even within an individual school” (Rose et al., 2012, p. 112). Progress has been made, however, in recent times to standardise SSPs and to streamline resource deployment in primary schools (Department of Education, 2024a). Furthermore, Rix et al. (2013, p. 376) report “a trend towards decentralisation of governance ... and recognition that service quality needs closer monitoring”.

Some of these changes have occurred through the new allocation model. It aims to support a more equitable, rights-based approach towards resourcing provision for students with AEN without a diagnosis of disability (National Council for Special Education, 2013) by automatically providing resources for AEN provision within schools via a “frontloading” system based on an individual school’s profiled need (National Council for Special Education, 2017). However, challenges continue to surround the assessment and enrolment procedures, which can be a source of stress for parents. The reality remains that “gaining psychological assessments and access to professional support is particularly difficult during the period before a child is accepted into the formal education system” (Rose & Shevlin, 2020, p. 173).

2.7 International Policy, Legislation, and Developments Regarding Inclusion

An increasing number of government policies internationally and nationally have established the right of the child with disabilities and/or AEN to be educated in mainstream settings and have sought to shift provision from segregated to mainstream provision (Kenny et al., 2020). Since the late 1980s, “inclusion” has replaced “integration” in the language of special educators. The word “inclusion” was first mentioned in an educational context in Canada in 1988 (Brien & Forest, 1989). The notion of an inclusive school is one that caters for all students and is accepting of all children (Thomas, 1997). In contrast, integration regards the physical movement of the child from one place to another, depending on the “readiness” of the child (Thomas, 1997). Children with AEN had to prove their readiness to be integrated (Thomas, 1997). So, while integration implies a process of assimilation where the individual adapts to their circumstances to “fit in”, inclusion requires a much more radical set of changes where schools need to restructure themselves to meet the diversity of the pupils it caters for. Therefore, inclusive education requires the system, rather than the child, to change. It involves adapting teaching methods, curricula, materials and procedures, becoming more responsive to the children they are catering to (Ainscow, 1999, 2020). This not only benefits the child with disabilities or AEN, but all

children, and society as a whole (Ainscow, 2020; Drudy & Kinsella, 2009).

2.7.1 The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994)

The *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* (UNESCO, 1994) required that ordinary, everyday schools create an effective means of combatting discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all and that school should accommodate all children including those with a disability and/or AEN (Shevlin & Flynn, 2011). It represents a shift of policy focus from special education to responding to the diversity that is a reality in a typical neighbourhood school (Ainscow, 2020; Vislie, 2003). Vayrynen (2000, para.3) says it “provides the clearest and most unequivocal call for inclusive education” and dictates clearly that education is for all (Vayrynen, 2000, para.4).

2.7.2 The Dakar Statement and Framework for Action (2000)

Later, the *Dakar Statement and Framework for Action* (UNESCO, 2000), arising from a World Education Forum, gave a strong indication of international commitment towards providing education for all in an inclusive, educational environment by 2015. It played a significant role in shaping global education policies and, although it does not often mention children with disabilities, it calls for the

“inclusion of children with special needs” (UNESCO, 2000, p. 15) to achieve Universal Primary Education.

2.7.3 The Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action (2016)

By 2015, while progress had been made, many goals of the *Dakar Statement and Framework for Action* remained unachieved, leading to a renewed focus on education in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (UNESCO, 2016). The *Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action* explicitly aims to “[e]nsure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” saying: “[n]o education target should be considered met unless met by all” (UNESCO, 2016, p. 7).

2.7.4 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006)

An important breakthrough in international developments regarding the urgency of addressing the needs of persons with disabilities was evident in the adoption of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)* (2006). It obliges state parties to recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education, without discrimination and based on equal opportunity. State parties must ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning. This is intended to support the full development of human potential and a sense of dignity and self-worth; to strengthen respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and

human diversity; and to enable persons with disabilities to develop their personality, talents, creativity and abilities, both mental and physical, to their fullest potential, thereby supporting their effective participation in a free society (United Nations, 2006).

In 2016, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities issued *General Comment No. 4 on the right to inclusive education*, which provides an authoritative interpretation of Article 24 of the Convention. It clarifies that inclusive education is not simply about placing students with disabilities in mainstream settings. Instead, it emphasises a system-wide transformation in culture, policy, and practice to remove barriers, provide reasonable accommodations, and foster genuine participation and belonging for all learners. The General Comment sets out that inclusive education must be rights-based, learner-centred, and responsive to the diverse needs of all students, requiring the active involvement of persons with disabilities, including children, in shaping educational policy and practice (United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016).

To date, the Convention itself has been ratified by 191 parties which consist of 190 states and the European Union (EU). Ireland has been a signatory since 2007, and the Convention was ratified in 2018 (National Disability Authority, 2025).

2.7.5 Legislation Elsewhere

Specific legislation is in place in the United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK), Canada and Australia that aims to support the right of students with disabilities and/or AEN to be educated in mainstream schools, aiming to reflect societal diversity, with the current trend in Europe leaning towards developing and enhancing a policy of inclusion. This is aided by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2009), whose extensive set of indicators of inclusive education are based on prior consultation with EU member states (Shevlin & Flynn, 2011).

2.8 History of Additional Needs Education in a National Context

Looking at the history of additional needs education in Ireland, it can be seen that special and general education provisions developed mostly in parallel and separately from one another (Kenny et al., 2020). By the mid-1970s, there was a network of over 100 special schools – an expression of care for pupils with special needs – and there were a growing number of special classes in mainstream schools (Shevlin & Flynn, 2011).

2.9 Irish Policy and Legislation

Irish policy and legislation will now be examined and critically analysed in the context of inclusive education.

2.9.1 *Investment in Irish Education (1965)*

In an Irish context, *Investment in Irish Education* (Department of Education, 1965) can be described as “the foundation document” (Clancy, 1996, p. 28) of modern Irish education. While it may not have specifically addressed SEN, it represented the first move in policy towards addressing the inequality in educational participation linked to socio-economic and regional disparities (Loxley et al., 2014).

2.9.2 *The Special Education Review Committee (1993)*

The *Special Education Review Committee Report* (Department of Education, 1993) introduced for the first time the concept of the continuum of provision for students with AEN in special and mainstream settings (Kenny et al., 2020). It encouraged “as much integration as is appropriate and feasible, and as little segregation as necessary” (Department of Education, 1993, p. 22) and recommended the allocation of substantially increased resources and support for the education of children and young people who have AEN (Shevlin et al., 2013).

2.9.3 *The Education Act (1998)*

The Education Act (1998) moved Irish schools towards inclusion by putting into effect the constitutional right of all children to an education (Winter & O’Raw, 2010). It stipulates that the first function of the Minister of Education is to ensure:

that there is made available to each person resident in the State, including a person with a disability or who has other special educational needs, support services and a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person.

(Oireachtas, 1998, s. 7)

This means that regardless of disability or other educational needs, all schools are obliged to identify and provide for a child's educational needs.

2.9.4 The Equal Status Act 2000

The Equal Status Act (2000) supports the Education Act by specifying the obligation to support the needs of children and young people with disabilities and/or AEN (Oireachtas, 2000). It requires schools to provide reasonable accommodation, including special treatment, facilities or adjustments for the needs of the child with a disability if that child would find it unduly difficult to participate in school without it (Rose et al., 2015).

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

Subsequently, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) was the most significant piece of legislation in Ireland regarding children with AEN (Carey, 2005). It focused on

individual educational planning, educating children in inclusive settings and ensuring the provision of a wide range of services including timely assessments and educational support (Winter & O’Raw, 2010). It represented a pivotal moment in supporting the education of children and young people with AEN (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011; Rose et al., 2015) by bringing about a clear policy and legislative framework for the education of children with AEN. It specified detailed guidance in relation to “systemic responsibility for ensuring assessments were carried out in a timely manner” (Shevlin et al., 2013, p. 1120). Inclusion is a core principle informing this legislation detailing that:

wherever possible, [education should] take place in an inclusive environment with those who do not have such needs, to provide that people with special educational needs shall have the same right to avail of, and benefit from, appropriate education as do their peers who do not have such needs. (Oireachtas, 2004, Preamble)

However, although the Act promised immediate access to assessment and mandatory IEPs over its ten-year enactment plan (Oireachtas, 2004), some provisions have not yet been realised more than twenty years later. The practice of carrying out IEPs, or SSPs as they are now known, in schools is still relatively ad hoc, and they are not legally enforced so schools can get away with either not having

them done or not doing them to a good standard. Therefore, they are not compulsory, regulated or assessed, despite the Act's relevant provisions (Gormley et al., 2024). This results in the standard, quality and content of SSPs being varied. Moreover, timely assessments continue to pose significant challenges.

In addition, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was established in 2005 under the EPSEN Act, with a statutory role to carry out research in special education. Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) were appointed to deal with additional teaching applications and SNA support, which were required (Rose et al., 2015; Winter & O'Raw, 2010).

Following the EPSEN Act, an NCSE consultative forum was formed that drafted the legislative framework to support inclusive education (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009; Shevlin & Rose, 2008). It comprises several thematic headings, including Provision of Information, (Appropriate) Physical Features, Inclusive School Policies, An Individual Education Plan (IEP), Student Interactions, Staffing and Personnel, External Links, Assessment of Achievement and Curriculum and Teaching Strategies.

The Act stops short of being fully "rights-based" however, since the phrases "having regard to the resources available" and "as resources permit" are used in a qualificatory manner (Oireachtas, 2004, s. 39).

In response to these issues, the Department of Education and Youth (DEY) initiated a comprehensive Review of the EPSEN Act in December 2021, culminating in the publication of the Report on the Review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 (Department of Education and Youth, 2025b) in June 2025, following extensive consultation with students, parents, educators, and advocacy groups. The Review contains fifty-one recommendations, including proposals to consolidate education under a rights-based single Act, legislate for Student Support Plans, and strengthen student voices and transitions across educational settings. An implementation plan to translate these recommendations into policy and legislative reform is expected before the end of 2025 (Department of Education and Youth, 2025a).

2.9.6 The Effects of Litigation on Inclusive Education

Ireland, in the 1990s and 2000s, made moves towards creating policy regarding inclusive education, but there was much frustration among families of children with AEN about the lack of educational opportunities. This led to a series of legal cases against the state during those decades. This litigation was an important agent of change regarding special education. The landmark cases of *O'Donoghue v. Minister for Health & Ors* (1993) and *Sinnott v. Minister for Education* (2000) confirmed that parents had the constitutional right to have their children, including those with AEN, educated at

their local school. These rulings had a fundamental impact on educational provision and resulted in significant changes in such provisions for children with AEN (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011), particularly those with profound disabilities (Kenny et al., 2020).

2.9.7 Policy and Legislation in Action

According to Lindsay (2007), educational policy has been driven by the need for children's rights to an education. Segregation is seen as a matter of policy to be a form of discrimination and so children's rights are "compromised by special education, isolated from typically developing peers, mainstream curricula and educational practice" (Lindsay, 2007, p. 2).

Although policies to ensure the education and care of all children are evident, the question needs to be asked whether they are meaningful in that they are put into practice. Grenfell (2013, p. 13) acknowledges that "of all the oppositions that artificially divide education, the most fundamental, and the most ruinous, is the one that is set up between theory and practice". Rogers (2012, p. 475) observes that vast numbers of pupils "are not included, have poor educational experiences and are either marginalised or demonised". There is a huge gap between the spirit of legislation and to what extent it is put into practice (Shevlin & Rose, 2008). Furthermore, there is a need for policymakers and government to address deeply embedded structures of inequality (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009). For example, there

are huge inconsistencies in terms of tangible support and opportunities for the involvement and consultation by students because of the deferral of key aspects of the EPSEN Act 2004 and Disability Act 2005.

Shevlin et al. (2013) question the ability of schools to translate policy into credible practice. Whilst acknowledging individual schools' ethos as an essential starting point for inclusive practice, Shevlin et al. (2013) also recognise the need for professional development of teaching and other staff as a critical factor to ensure consistency of inclusive practice (Rose et al., 2015).

2.10 Perspectives of Inclusive Education

The perspectives of inclusion will now be outlined and examined to give a sense of the multiple lenses through which inclusion is viewed.

2.10.1 *Universalists vs Moderates*

Regarding inclusion, Cigman (2007) suggests that two types of people emphasise the need for inclusion in schools – universalists and moderates. Inclusive education is, for both, a hugely emotive subject. In Cigman's opinion, moderates see inclusive education as "compatible with, and indeed as requiring, the existence of 'special schools' for a small number of children", while universalists see inclusive education as "antagonistic to such schools, seeing them as threatening the project of universal inclusion" (Cigman, 2007, p. 776). However, even the words used to describe these stances are laden

with meaning. The word “moderate” suggests that the opinion is reasonable and temperate. At the heart of this difference is something called the “possibility clause” (Cigman, 2007, p. 776). Universalists believe it is possible to include everybody, while moderates deny it. Moderates argue that the best place for a small minority of children might be in a special school setting and that if this option is removed, their freedom of choice is significantly reduced (Cigman, 2007; Kauffman & Hornby, 2025). Universalists believe that children, irrespective of their interests or needs, should be required to attend mainstream schools. Cigman (2007, p. 781) argues that there are “practical difficulties ... educating children with widely disparate needs and abilities together”. This is also iterated by Hornby and Kauffman (2024). Not only that, but some parents may regard a special school setting not as an “inherently demeaning” environment but rather as liberating and, from an educational point of view, the best setting for their child (Cigman, 2007, p. 788). Kauffman et al. (2022) agree that trying to force all students into a model that we view as inclusive is just as damaging and discriminatory as trying to force all students into the model of special education. Meanwhile, Florian (2019, p. 699) argues that “inclusive education assumes that the mainstream is a good place” and poses a key question central to the debate: “inclusive education: has it delivered on its promise to provide for everyone?”. According to Cigman (2007, p. 783) the moderate view “exhibits a distinguishing

tendency, which draws attention to individual differences (and particularly individual needs), in part as a corrective to the homogenising tendency of the universalist”.

While inclusive learning environments are guided by the core principle that all children and young people should be educated in their local school despite whatever AEN they experience (Ainscow, 2020; Florian et al., 2010), inclusion needs to evaluate “the extent to which all pupils with disabilities from a school’s catchment area are accessing school, the level of their social participation within the life of the school, and the learning outcome, and quality of education experience of such pupils” (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009, p. 658). This perspective is echoed by Kauffman et al. (2022).

MacRuaric (2013, p. 12) states that inclusion “implies a bringing in and therefore carries within it a presupposition of a centre/an ideal centre or a place worthy of being brought into”, with that centre/ideal centre being the mainstream setting. However, being removed from a special education setting and placed in a mainstream one can be quite stressful for a child with AEN, especially if the model of instruction is “deficiency-based” rather than one that strives to meet diversity in a fully inclusive setting (Moriña Díez, 2010). This observation reinforces the need for a full restructuring of the way in which we think about teaching and learning. We should move towards school settings in which every child feels valued and where

the goal is to ensure all children have an education in which they can fully participate (Ainscow, 2020), “where the processes and practices holding up the wall of exclusion are brought to a halt” (Moriña Díez, 2010, p. 174).

2.10.2 Inclusion as a Human Right

Booth (1996) argues that the values of social justice and equity are paramount for advocates of full inclusion. Ainscow et al. (2006) claim that using the “rights” perspective that emphasises that all children have the right to a mainstream education that suits their needs invalidates any viewpoint which seeks to segregate children in the name of “special education” and thereby prevents all children from learning together in the same classroom. Warnock (2005, p. 36) proposes that “inclusion should mean being involved in a common enterprise of learning, rather than being necessarily under the same roof”. It is further argued that the emphasis should be placed on the human right of the child to learning and quality education, rather than on the educational setting in which it takes place (Merrigan & Senior, 2023; Warnock & Norwich, 2010).

Although, in the context of inclusion, children’s rights are seen as paramount, according to Lindsay (2003, p. 10), “inclusion is the policy framework”. Hence, there are issues around how inclusion is interpreted and implemented in practice. Lindsay argues that a dual approach, which focuses not only on the rights of the child but also

on the effectiveness of their education, is needed. There is a “need to develop beyond concerns about inputs and settings to a focus on experiences and outcomes and to attempt to identify causal relationships” (Lindsay, 2003, p. 10). It is, therefore, important to get the balance right between mainstream education and the putative right to appropriate education. While legislation insists that “all children have a right to a mainstream education”, Cigman (2007, p. 780) argues that this can be problematic since it may be seen to suggest that “all parents have a duty to send their children to a mainstream school, irrespective of the nature or severity of the child’s difficulties or disabilities”. However, parents do have a right to send their children to a special school if they believe it best suits their needs, and some parents view special schools and settings “not as inherently demeaning environments, but as liberating and in the best sense *educational* environments for their children” (Cigman, 2007, p. 782). This perspective is further supported by Kauffman and Hornby (2025) who argue that specialist settings can provide meaningful and effective educational experiences for some learners. Although other parents may prefer their children to be in a mainstream setting, the child “for whom interaction with peers who understand their issues is paramount may prefer segregated settings” (Winter & O’Raw, 2010, p. 18). Conflicts can, therefore, arise between parents and children if a model of inclusion is viewed exclusively through a human rights lens. Farrell (2000) discusses the dilemma between placing a

child in a mainstream setting that may not adequately meet their needs, and the risk of potential humiliation in a special setting that fails to challenge their abilities. He further elaborates on the consequences of an inappropriate placement by highlighting the potential disruption to the education of other pupils when the needs of the child with AEN are not adequately supported. Similarly, Byrne (2022) emphasises the importance of a structured transition plan towards inclusion, noting its potential to help identify and dismantle the barriers posed by mainstream education. She underscores this within the broader understanding of inclusive education as being for all children, “not only for those who are perceived ‘easier’ to include” (Byrne, 2022, p. 317).

2.10.3 Inclusion – A Matter of Respect

Cigman (2007) states that the basic principle for each inclusionist is respect. She sees a dilemma between the prospect of respect being denied by full inclusion in an environment that a child can’t cope with and the possible humiliation of a child by being catered for in a special needs setting. Cigman (2007) gives an example of a child who may have sensory issues or other difficulties, so that the mainstream classroom environment causes them even more distress. Cigman (2007, p. 792) argues further that it is essential that “educators hear individual voices and attend to the realities to which they draw attention” since what is needed is “truly *inclusive* dialogue, in which

differences between disputants are heard and treated with respect”.

Dyson (2002) suggests that there should be focused individualised special needs strategies on the small minority of children who need provision that cannot be catered for in a mainstream setting. Cigman (2007, p. 792) states that failure to meet the needs of this admittedly small minority results in “failure to accord respect to all, in favour of the spurious notion of inclusion for all”. However, it is this recognition that a lack of respect exists which spurs on the movement for inclusion to being with.

Young (1999) recognises that, as a society, we are proactive in celebrating diversity and difference. However, Reindal (2010, p. 4) warns that we need to be cautious of being “perilously close to ignoring the reality of difficulties that pupils with impairments experience”. Furthermore, Rogers (2012, p. 476) suggests that we are not good at dealing with difficult differences – whether they are “disabled others who are difficult to teach, difficult others who are difficult to control or culturally diverse others who are difficult to understand”. Dealing with difficult differences is relevant since inappropriate pupil behaviour and high levels of pupil absenteeism prove a problem in schools, often as a result of undiagnosed AEN or inadequate support for already-diagnosed AEN (Shevlin et al., 2013) which manifests itself due to the lack of timely assessments available to children in need.

Inclusion can be seen as a broader political and ethical project (Allan, 2005; Arnot et al., 2010). Rogers (2012) argues that the engagement of community, relationality, care and ethics can be regarded as the basis of inclusion. The failure of education as a social institution to eliminate social, class-related inequalities is well-documented in Ireland and elsewhere (Lynch & Lodge, 2002). This inequality, which includes disability, increases the likelihood of disadvantage, exclusion, poverty and unemployment (Slee, 2010).

2.10.4 The Dilemma of Difference

Taking a critical look at how law and society impose rigid categorisations, some of them can lead to predictable consequences. It is worthwhile to consider the practice of assigning labels to children with AEN. There is always a dilemma over the true meaning of inclusion. For example, there are issues associated with labelling. Labelling arguably contributes to the stigmatisation of difference. Schools struggle to deal with children who are defined as “different without stigmatizing them.... when does treating people differently emphasise their differences and stigmatize or hinder them on that basis? And when does treating people the same become insensitive to their difference and likely to stigmatize or hinder them on *that* basis?” (Minow, 1990, p. 20). Minow describes this question as “the dilemma of difference” (Minow, 1990). It comes into play when society assigns individuals to categories, and, based on this

assignment, decides whom to include or exclude from political, social and economic activities (Minow, 1990). Difference is exemplified when categories such as age, race, gender, ethnicity, religion or disability determine eligibility for enrolment, whether in societies, clubs or schools. In broader society, “problems of inequality can be exacerbated both by treating members of minority groups the same as members of the majority and by treating the two groups differently” (Minow, 1990, p. 20). School, as a mini society, reflects this dilemma of difference. If activities are designed within education with the “majority” or “dominant culture” in mind, the excluded comprise students whose forms of knowledge or capabilities are neither represented nor valued (Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Minow, 1990). Flynn (2013) adds that students who are part of the marginal group or minority within a school may consequently be identified as “other” or inferior within the prevalent or dominant culture of learning. It can render them invisible, cause them not to be recognised, or implicitly rejected. A failure to acknowledge and respect a child’s difference can mean that the child is scarred by such silent misrecognition and is at the crux of the “dilemma” (Minow, 1990). While recognising difference may cause labelling, stigmatisation and exclusion to occur, failing to recognise them may cause a lack of acknowledgement of individual needs (Norwich, 2008).

It can be argued that the process of categorisation, along with the specific and limiting language and practices that it uses, acts as a considerable obstacle to the development of a broader, more comprehensive view of inclusion (Ainscow et al., 2006). Categorisation leads to schools struggling to deal with children whom assessing professionals have defined as different without also creating an atmosphere of stigmatisation and isolating those children even more (Minow, 1990). There is, therefore, a basic tension that arises from the desire to treat all children the same while also treating them, individually, as different (Warnock, 2005). While recognising difference can lead to inferior educational provision, as well as stigmatising and perhaps even devaluing, not acknowledging difference can lead to inadequate provision for individual children's needs (Norwich, 2007).

Norwich (2007, p. 72) identifies three aspects of education which the dilemma of difference centres around:

1. Identification: Whether to attribute SEN/disability or not?
2. Curricula: When to have common curriculum programmes and when to have specialised programmes?
3. Location: Whether to place the children in mainstream or separate settings and have ability or mixed-ability classes and groupings within classes?

However, for some children, their parents and families, the practice of labelling is a valued asset with which they can gain access to further educational resources and gain a greater understanding from others around their needs (Cigman, 2007). This point of view is in stark contrast to the view of universalists, who see labels as affixing a negative image to children and thereby encouraging people to regard them as deficient. Ainscow (1998, pp. 11–12) claims that teachers must “overcome the dangers and limitation of deficit thinking,” since “only in this way can we be sure that pupils who experience difficulties learning can be treated with respect and viewed as potentially active and capable learners.” Furthermore, Ainscow (2020) argues that deficit thinking distracts attention from questions about why schools fail to teach so many children successfully and shifts the focus away from the presence, participation, and achievement of all children, with an emphasis placed on those groups of learners regarded as being at risk of marginalisation, exclusion, or underachievement.

2.10.5 Power Imbalances in Education

Additionally, it is important to examine the concept of power and its relevance to inclusive education. Furthermore, exploring the concept of normality, we need to consider what is regarded as “normal”. Garner (2009) and (Holt, 2004b) pose the question as to who decides what is normality. Slee (2010) asks who should be included, and what

exactly do we regard as the “normal child”? According to Minow (1990, p. 111), those with the “power” will be seen as the norm and “though the difference does not reside in any one person, the comparison is drawn by some to distinguish themselves from others”. The concept of “normalised” expectations or the “normally developing child” is a socio-cultural construct influenced by the hidden curricula of schools (Garner, 2009; Holt, 2004a, 2004b). This concept is unconsciously underpinned by normative representations of development. Horn (2003) considers the hidden curriculum of a school as one that encompasses all the unrecognised and sometimes unintended knowledge, values and beliefs that form the learning process.

Holt (2004a) adds that teachers and students do not set out to intentionally reproduce notions of ability and disability. They are often instead unintended consequences of everyday practices associated with fulfilling the purposes of schools. The positioning of students as different or “other” in relation to the majority of their peers can foster a sense of rejection and invisibility (Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Minow, 1990). For example, despite the “tolerance of difference” within inclusive education, it is evident that achieving high academic grades is privileged over and above non-academic achievements (Arnaud et al., 2024; Rogers, 2007, 2012).

The concept of power also relates to the relationship between teacher and child. Smyth et al. (2010) suggest that good learning takes place within and through relationships. These relationships can significantly impact a child's sense of self. They can affect their confidence and self-esteem, as well as the value they place on themselves.

A further discussion of power will follow later in the chapter, framed through the lens of student voice and its role within inclusive education.

2.10.6 External Pressures on Inclusion

The presence and threat of league tables or their equivalent within schools “does not encourage school managers to prioritise provision for pupils with disabilities/special educational needs” (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009, p. 656) because, while “in principle higher standards of attainment are entirely compatible with inclusive school and educational system development, the standards agenda has concentrated on a narrow view of attainment” (Ainscow et al., 2006, p. 296). This can be seen in our national standardised tests in relation to numeracy and literacy. Huge tension can be created as a school strives to be more inclusive whilst also trying to meet the expectations of the standardised tests (Arnaud et al., 2024; Booth et al., 1997; Rouse & Florian, 1997). Rogers (2012) highlights “teaching to the test” and league tabling negatively affecting the quality of

education being sought to be delivered in an inclusive manner. It can mean children who do not conform to school and behavioural classroom norms, low-attaining students or students requiring high levels of attention and resources are undesirable to schools (Ainscow et al., 2006; Rose & Shevlin, 2020). This hidden curriculum conveys a message to non-academic students that there is a value assigned to specific sets of qualities. In an effort to strive for better grades and higher percentages of children progressing to third-level education, it can be easy to place children in different categories to suit such outcomes (Hodkinson, 2010).

A further complication—perhaps even a juxtaposing scenario—arises in that schools achieving higher results in standardised tests may receive fewer additional resources or interventions, such as SET teachers, through the SET Allocation Model. This model uses standardised test outcomes as one of several indicators in constructing a school’s educational profile, based on the assumption that higher-achieving schools require less support (National Council for Special Education, 2014). However, this approach can overlook the nuanced and complex needs that may exist beneath surface-level indicators of success. It highlights the risk that schools perceived as high-performing may not receive the necessary supports to sustain inclusive practices or to address the needs of particular groups of learners, such as those at risk of underachievement or exclusion (Banks, 2021).

2.11 The Role of Teachers in Inclusive Education

The role of the classroom teacher in inclusive practice will now be explored. Teacher attitudes have a significant impact on inclusive practices (Rice et al., 2023). Negative attitudes on the part of teachers can lead to low expectations by schools and in general of a child with AEN (Forlin et al., 1999). These reduced expectations can limit the child's learning opportunities, impair their performance, and further reinforce low assumptions about their potential — not only within the school but also among parents and even from the child themselves (Tiwari et al., 2015). Boyle et al. (2013) highlight the importance of teachers developing positive attitudes towards disability early in their professional development. Such positive attitudes can encourage higher expectations, increasing both learning opportunities and the learner's performance (Forlin et al., 1999; Krischler & Pit-ten Cate, 2018).

Avramidis and Norwich (2002) found that, while teachers were generally positive about inclusion, they often expressed reservations about whether the mainstream setting was appropriate for all students based on the perceived severity of need and behaviour of students. A later review conducted by de Boer et al. (2011) suggested that there had been little change in teachers' attitudes and that most teachers have a neutral attitude towards inclusion. Teachers' attitudes can be complex, often with positive support for the concept

of inclusion but concerns about implementation in their own classrooms (Krischler & Pit-ten Cate, 2018; Lüke & Grosche, 2018; Rice et al., 2023). The resources and support available to teachers that Avramidis and Norwich (2002) identified remain “a critical influence upon teacher perceptions of their ability to address the needs of a more diverse school population” (Rose & Shevlin, 2020, p. 68). Factors such as national policy and understanding of inclusion influence attitudes and practices also (Jury et al., 2021).

Teachers can become confused by lack of clarity from policy makers, so that AEN provision is merely seen as an “add on” rather than an integral part of the education they deliver to the children in their care (Winter & O’Raw, 2010). In Ireland, there has been a significant policy shift from parallel systems of special and mainstream education towards provision that is underpinned by enabling legislation and brings a presumption of inclusion (Shevlin et al., 2013). Currently, educational provision is in a transitional phase as, despite many advances in support provision and the emergence of a national support infrastructure, persistent difficulties remain (Shevlin & Banks, 2021). MacGiolla Phádraig (2007) suggests that the reality of inclusion in Irish schools diverges significantly from the vision that is formulated in recent policy and legislation. He makes the point that the withdrawal of children with AEN for support outside of the mainstream class and the common arrangement of small groups who receive what can only be seen as a restricted curriculum does not

contribute to inclusive education. The rapid expansion of the special class model to facilitate provision for children with additional needs in mainstream schools is another case in point (Shevlin & Banks, 2021). However, there has been an increased emphasis on collaborative practice between mainstream and SET teachers, with increased encouragement of team teaching and in-class support. In primary education, Rix et al. (2013, p. 377) report that class teachers frequently receive support from “specialist staff either situated externally, internally or within special schools, with support directed towards themselves or the pupil”.

Unfortunately, one of the conclusions by Rix et al. (2013, p. 388) is that current provision of inclusive practice is only “collaborative, representative and inter-connected in small pockets”. So, although stakeholders may be using the same language and talking about the same things, there is discordance in their actions and methodologies (Ainscow, 2020).

Teachers are at the forefront in the classroom (Leonard & Smyth, 2022) and so inclusive practice relies heavily on teacher knowledge, skills, understanding, capacity and attitudes (Hornby, 2010; Horne & Timmons, 2009). Teachers can encounter difficulties implementing inclusive practice among children who present with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in the classroom (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011). The implementation of inclusive practice can cause similar difficulties

when teachers are dealing with children on the autism spectrum (Jury et al., 2021; Shevlin et al., 2013). Sometimes, children with AEN can be seen by more experienced or older teachers as “someone else’s problem” — that is to say, the responsibility of a member of the AEN team rather than the class teacher (Avramidis et al., 2000; Conway, 2010). Perhaps this is due to the lack of confidence many teachers have regarding teaching children with AEN (Anglim et al., 2018). This uncertainty may arise from a perception that addressing AEN requires a level of “expertism” leading from a “specialist” pedagogy to counteract the “deficit” needs of children with AEN (Skidmore, 2004). This notion, however, can promote the idea that mainstream schools are unable to cater to the needs of children with AEN, and compromises the implementation of inclusive practice in schools in general (Shevlin et al., 2013). The notion that mainstream schools cannot cater could partly be due to inadequate training regarding AEN for both newly qualified teachers and experienced ones. The continuation of restricted access to continuing professional development (CPD) in this area does not ease this attitude or help to promote inclusive practice (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Hollins & Torres Guzman, 2005; MacKenzie et al., 2023).

This is in line with Kinsella and Senior (2008), who suggest that, to develop inclusive provision for children, there needs to be increased expertise within schools and the creation of “an integrated service model at school level involving a high degree of collaboration

between education and health professionals” (Shevlin et al., 2013, p. 1120).

For teachers, it is important that education is meaningful and, from an ethical standpoint, that it is “for the purpose of something — that is, inclusion is for participating in something that is valuable” (Reindal, 2010, p. 8). It is vital that high expectations are held for all children and there is a focus on suitable academic targets and teaching for all. Deng (2010) talks about meaningful instruction and teachers who can successfully include children with AEN by constantly deciding what learning content can be adapted and how. Deng (2010) adds, however, that teachers have to believe that they can achieve the successful inclusion of children and that effective pedagogies for inclusion depend upon their skills in understanding and responding to difference and diversity (Riddell et al., 2006). There is a need for more training around these skills, as Rix et al. (2013) identify that the area in need of greatest development when training teachers is the teaching of students with additional learning needs.

2.12 The Role of Parents in Inclusive Education

Parental support for inclusion is vital, and there is a need for co-operation and communication between teachers, students and parents (Shevlin et al., 2013), especially in an inclusive school environment where families play an integral role in the educational

context (Ainscow, 2020). Equality and a confidential relationship enable a pathway for effective co-operation (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010). This co-operation extends to good relationships with the community in partnership with parents (Smyth et al., 2010). Strong family and community engagement is generally recognised as a fundamental criterion of an inclusive school (Ainscow, 2020; Morningstar et al., 2015). Parental support is highlighted as being highly influential in academic achievement and in facilitating progress through mainstream school settings despite attitudinal barriers (Antony-Newman, 2024; Buchner et al., 2014). Furthermore, the intervention of parents plays a significant role in shaping their children's responses and actions to hostile learning environments as well as enabling resilient strategies in children with AEN (Buchner et al., 2014).

Rix et al. (2013) acknowledge a rising recognition of the importance of parental choice whilst also recognising the inherent imbalances in support planning processes to ensure that parents can actively and meaningfully engage in central discussions about their children's needs (Koskela & Sinkkonen, 2025).

2.13 The Role of Children in Inclusive Education

We will now look at the role of children in inclusive education and how their opinions, needs and wants are addressed through the lens of the voice of the child. The meaning of "student voice" will be

examined. We will look at policy supporting the development and implementation of student voice both nationally and internationally. Finally, we will look at the challenges student voice faces and the opportunities it presents for schools, educators, children and parents.

2.14 Voice of the Child

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in children's experiences and perspectives of their own lives (Tangen, 2008). This interest is partly due to the awareness generated by legal and political initiatives such as the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*, especially Article 12, which refers to the child's opinion by emphasising children's right to express their views on matters affecting them (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). This measure has been reinforced by theoretical developments in education and social science disciplines where the child is at the centre of their learning. Children are regarded as "beings" whose ideas, experiences, choices and relationships are interesting and valid in their own right (Christensen & Prout, 2005; Clark et al., 2003; Hogan, 2005). Children, like adults, are now regarded as "social agents" who can make sense of their own experiences.

Within early childhood educational traditions, listening and responding to young children's needs was recognised as being essential to good practice (Bae, 2004; Clark et al., 2003; Lundy et al.,

2011; Lundy et al., 2024). Sociocultural as well as cognitive theories of learning emphasise the active participation of the learner (Tangen, 2008). Furthermore, according to Tangen (2009), when children are listened to, they are seen as being empowered, which contributes to the growing interest in children's experiences and perspectives. Meanwhile, children who live with serious learning, developmental or other difficulties are often not listened to and are seen as being "disempowered".

The importance of "inter-dependency as a necessary component of inclusion and the school as a democratic space in which children gain 'real' experience of being citizens" (Reindal, 2010, p. 2) needs to be addressed as an issue. Rose and Shevlin (2010) maintain that children want to talk about access, ambition and achievement. They want to voice their concerns and be part of the decision-making process regarding their future, which is currently controlled by adults. Furthermore, children see school not only as a place to learn formal education but also as a place where they learn about social, cultural and personal issues. Shevlin and Rose (2008) argue that it is vital that children with disabilities and/or AEN are allowed to be active participants in their education. If this fails to happen, "there is a real danger that they will remain on the margins of mainstream schools and on the periphery of society" (Shevlin & Rose, 2008, p. 427). There has been an increase in the expertise and experience of listening to

children regarding topics that involve them, such as education, legal issues and health (Clark et al., 2003).

School experiences of children with additional needs and those who feel marginalised have been focused on by several researchers such as Allan (1999) and Messiou (2006). It is important to bear in mind that research that focuses solely on children who are defined as having additional needs can distract from wider contextual issues that impact children's lives and, in the context of this research, their education. It also risks reinforcing stereotypes. Tangen (2008) insists that research should be conducted in a way that promotes agency, mastery, experiences and inclusion. She also says that having an open insider epistemology concerning knowledge and experience, including reflections upon various conceptualisations of the subject, may assist greatly in the challenging task of listening to children's voices.

2.15 Defining Student Voice

Noyes (2005) observes that any attempt at a single definition of voice is fraught with difficulty. Fleming (2015, p. 237) concurs by noting that "student voice is complex and contested in its positioning within policy and practice". Its definition, motivation and actual translation into policy requires discussion, debate and clarification at policy and school level (Fleming, 2015). The concept of student voice is referred to in various ways, including pupil voice, student as a researcher,

consulting pupils, and learner voice (Flynn, 2017). While different perspectives exist regarding student voice, there is common ground in discussions about its significance. However, viewpoints about the purpose behind student voice initiatives often vary (Leitch & Mitchell, 2007).

The language and terminology surrounding student voice differs across literature, research, and policy documents (Fleming, 2015). Terms used include “participation of students”, “involvement of students”, “listening to students”, “consulting with students”, “dialogue with students”, “researching with students”, “students’ perceptions”, “students’ perspectives”, “evaluation by students” and “empowering of students” (Fleming, 2015, p. 223). Furthermore, terms such as “consultation”, “communication”, “debate” and “dialogue” are frequently used interchangeably and are seen as integral to the practice of successful student voice initiatives (Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

Student voice “does not simply mean the words spoken by pupils but includes the many ways in which pupils choose to express their feelings or views about any aspect of their school or college experience” (Robinson & Taylor, 2007, p. 6). Student voice encompasses a spectrum of levels of engagement, with schools starting from different points—some at a significantly low level (Leitch & Mitchell, 2007).

Voice implies dialogue, and student voice fosters dialogue between students and teachers (Cook-Sather, 2002). However, active listening by all participants is necessary for dialogue to be meaningful (Baroutsis et al., 2015). The various terms used to refer to student voice reflect the evolving role of students in becoming more engaged and involved in their education (Fleming, 2015). It demonstrates the lived experience of active citizenship (Holdsworth, 2000), with Fielding and McGregor (2005) referring to student voice as reflection, dialogue and action combined with discussion, since student voice encourages such actions. Student voice is also associated with feelings of “trust” (Cook-Sather, 2002) and “respect” (Baroutsis et al., 2015). This is reinforced by Mitra (2009), who considers student voice as allowing the teacher and the student to become co-participants in learning that is based on trust and respect.

Fletcher (2005) uses the term “meaningful student involvement” instead of “student voice” to ensure that student tokenism, that is, “asking students to express opinions without the power to change anything in education without adult permission” does not become part of the concept (Giannakaki et al., 2018, p. 7). Fletcher (2005, p.5) defines “meaningful student involvement” as:

the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change...instead of allowing adults to tokenize a contrived ‘student voice’ by inviting one student to a meeting,

meaningful student involvement continuously acknowledges the diversity of students by validating and authorising them to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge, and experiences.

The terms “student voice” and “pupil voice” are often used interchangeably and simultaneously (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). In this research, student voice is also referred to as “the voice of the child”.

2.16 The Irish and International Context of Student Voice

The evolution of student voice initiatives within Ireland and the broader international landscape will now be explored. Significant policy developments, practices and research that have shaped student voice discourse and implementation will be examined.

2.16.1 The Development of Irish Policy

Ireland does not have a historically strong tradition or culture of student voice (Lodge & Lynch, 2000; Shevlin & Rose, 2008). The emphasis on student voice in Irish educational policy gained significant momentum following the ratification of Article 12 of the *UNCRC* in 1992 (Fleming, 2015). Following this, a period of partnership in policy development emerged in Irish education and reached a focus in the *National Education Convention* in 1994 (Fleming, 2015). Ironically, this Convention involved all stakeholders except students, which resulted in the drafting of the *White Paper of*

Education (1995), which was the first to mention a student council in policy. This paper informed the Education Act (1998), which entailed the first mention of a role for students in relation to the role of the principal, limited though it was.

The *National Children's Strategy: Our Children - Their Lives (2000-2010)* was a key document developed in response to the requirements of ratification of the *UNCRC* and was a significant step in advancing student voice within Irish policy and the progression of the Convention. A review of the *National Children's Strategy (2000)* by the Children's Rights Alliance in 2011 found progress was evident in two of its three national goals: "Children will have a voice" and "Children's lives will be better understood" (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014, p. 17). Initiatives such as the establishment of Comhairle na nÓg— local youth councils that give young people aged 12–18 a voice in shaping policies and services within each of Ireland's 31 local authorities — and Dáil na nÓg, Ireland's national youth parliament which brings together approximately 200 elected delegates, aged 12–18, from across these councils for a two-year term to discuss and vote on issues of local and national importance (Comhairle na nÓg, 2025), reflect government-backed efforts to amplify children's voices. These initiatives, along with the national longitudinal study *Growing Up in Ireland* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014) highlight a growing commitment to including young people in policy development.

Guidance on how student councils should be organised and implemented in schools was provided in the publication *Student Councils: A Voice for Students* (Department of Education and Science, 2002). It emphasised concepts such as “partnership” and “involvement” and established foundational principles for the operation of student councils in fostering meaningful engagement (Fleming, 2015).

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020 identifies six transformative goals, including a commitment to “listen to and involve children and young people” (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014, p. 24).

The importance of student voice was further supported in 2004 with the establishment of Whole School Evaluations (WSE), which included standardised questions for children and their parents (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) and the introduction of the *Quality Framework* section of the *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines (2016-2020)* promoting “active citizenship and lifelong learning” and determining that the education that schools provide for students must be “explicitly learning-centred” (Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p. 16).

The Teaching Council of Ireland developed a *Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers (2016)*, reinforcing the centrality of student

perspectives in shaping education and outlining the ethical values of care, respect, integrity and trust that underpin teacher professionalism.

Other recent initiatives include the *Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) "Child Talks"*, established in 2018, giving children the opportunity to talk about children's rights and issues that matter to them. Its aim is to elevate the voice of young people and provide a positive platform for all young people to tell stories that are personal to them (OCO, 2025).

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) studies on curriculum reform underscore Ireland's ongoing commitment to fostering student voice. For instance, post-primary students were consulted on curriculum structure for the first time in 2017, while the *Children's School Lives* study (Children's School Lives, n.d.) carried out by University College Dublin (UCD) directly informed the redevelopment and current implementation of Ireland's new *Primary Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2023).

Most recently, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2023–2028)* (Department of Children, 2023, p. 8) expressed a vision of "[a]n Ireland which fully respects and realises the rights of children and young people".

Finally, the action plan *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision Making: Action Plan (2024–2028)* (Department of Children, 2024) provides a framework to support all government departments and state agencies in meaningfully engaging with children and young people when developing relevant policy, legislation, research and services.

2.16.2 The International Context of Student Voice

The active participation of young people in the lives of their schools is supported by the *UNCRC* (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). It states that children are capable of forming their own views and have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child (Baroutsis et al., 2015).

In addition, historically, children with disabilities were largely overlooked in international human rights law—both because they were children and because they were disabled (Byrne, 2023). That changed when the *UNCRC* finally acknowledged them as full rights-holders, equal to their non-disabled peers.

Globally, student voice initiatives have developed in varied contexts, influenced by formal directives, such as the *UNCRC*, and national efforts to promote children’s rights (Cook-Sather, 2014). This section examines key international examples of student voice initiatives and their impact.

In the UK, Elwood (2013) investigated the role of student voice in shaping national educational reforms. Focus groups revealed mixed experiences where students felt somewhat included in local educational decisions but excluded from broader regional or national policymaking. National frameworks (Department for Education and Skills, 2004), aimed to normalise student voice by integrating it into educational practice, emphasising its potential to become a core rather than a peripheral aspect of schooling (Bragg, 2007, 2010).

New Zealand's education system encourages schools to involve students directly in learning-related decisions (Ministry of Education, 2007). Using a national curriculum as a guide, schools design local curricula tailored to their communities' needs, often incorporating student perspectives (Nelson, 2014). Practices such as student inquiry learning, student leadership, e-learning and teaching for diversity exemplify New Zealand's commitment to embedding student voice in pedagogy (Hipkins, 2010).

In the USA, studies on student voice have focused on marginalised students and youth-adult partnerships (Mitra, 2003, 2007). The importance of listening to students' voices to address educational inequities and improve engagement is highlighted in these studies.

The Manitoba School Improvement Programme (MSIP) in Canada, a 15-year state-wide initiative, has demonstrated the transformative potential of student voice in fostering meaningful change in school

culture. By prioritising student engagement, the MSIP has highlighted the role of student voice as a catalyst for educational reform (Pekrul & Levin, 2007).

Finally, in South Africa, innovative methods such as PhotoVoice have been employed to amplify student perspectives (Fleming, 2013). Through photography and focus group discussions, primary school students documented their understanding of HIV issues, contributing to the development of sexuality education curricula (McLaughlin & Kiragu, 2011).

Both in Ireland and internationally, student voice has emerged as a vital component of educational policy and practice. While the contexts and methods vary, the underlying principles of participation, inclusivity and empowerment remain consistent. These initiatives illustrate the transformative potential of student voice when students' perspectives are genuinely considered and integrated into decision-making processes. By building on these experiences, educators and policymakers can continue to foster democratic, student-centred learning environments.

2.17 The Development of Student Voice

A major turning point in the development of student voice was the *UNCRC* (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) which formally recognised children's rights to actively participate in decisions affecting them. Although the Convention has raised global

awareness, and sparked significant scholarly interest in children's rights (Byrne & Lundy, 2019), its implementation remains somewhat limited. It is worth noting that the USA has not yet ratified the Convention (Flynn, 2013). However, since the publication of Article 12, which emphasises children's right to express their views on matters affecting them, there has been an increase in focus on the role of children and young people in society, whether their opinions and perspectives are listened to and where they have agency to influence decisions that affect their lives (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Tisdall et al., 2009).

Student voice has made significant progress globally (Fielding, 2011). Fielding (2011) argues that, to create better schools and improve society, it is essential to reflect on the journey taken thus far to make a pathway forward. The concept of student voice has gained considerable attention in the Irish educational context, particularly since Ireland ratified the *UNCRC* in 1992 (Fleming, 2015). Prior to the ratification of this important document, student voice did not receive as much attention, nor were the benefits of student voice fully appreciated.

2.18 Student Voice as a Right

The traditional notion that children "should be seen and not heard" is increasingly being challenged (Lodge, 2005, p. 127). Thomson (2011) defines student voice as children using their voice to express

their opinions about their education, which highlights the right of students to have a voice “which has volume in pursuit of action” (Fleming, 2015, p. 224). Cook-Sather (2006) also emphasises students’ rights, suggesting a shift from a position of silence to that of active, engaged participants (Fleming, 2015).

The *UNCRC* (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) states that children are capable of forming their own views and have the right to “express those views freely in all matters affecting the child”. The *UNCRC* stands as a significant contemporary indicator of the importance of children’s voices, particularly their right to have a say about matters that affect them. However, the implementation of Article 12, which emphasises children’s right to express their views on matters affecting them, “depends on the cooperation of adults,” some of whom may choose not to comply with the legislation (Lundy, 2007, p. 929; Templeton et al., 2023; Thomson, 2011). Reasons for this non-compliance can include adults’ attitudes, such as believing that children lack the capacity to contribute meaningfully, that student voice undermines authority, or that incorporating student voice in education demands too much time and effort (Lundy, 2007; Templeton et al., 2023). Lundy (2007) also points out a lack of awareness regarding Article 12 and, more critically, a failure to recognise that it is a “legally binding obligation ... and applies to all educational decision-making” (Lundy, 2007, p. 930). Countries that have ratified the *UNCRC* have established initiatives, programmes

and policies to ensure students' voices are heard. However, it is essential to recognise that the implementation of student voice policy and initiatives does not guarantee that these voices are then afforded true respect and consideration for the child (Byrne & Lundy, 2019).

2.19 The Importance of Student Voice

The re-emergence of thinking that aims to “reposition students in educational research and reform” is premised on the belief that children have “unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling; that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the response of adults; and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 359). It builds on the realisation that “listening to pupils does not lead to a dangerous place” (MacBeath et al., 2001, p. 78). It involves the active involvement of students, even those of a very young age, in their learning, with their insights and suggestions not only being heard but also acknowledged and responded to (Cook-Sather, 2006; Lundy et al., 2024). While these beliefs and practices may vary across different settings, “student voice” has emerged as the term to represent this repositioning of students in educational research and reform (Cook-Sather, 2006). The role of students as active participants in their learning experiences has grown both nationally and internationally, with this heightened interest in student voice

often linked to the ratification of the *UNCRC* (Cook-Sather, 2014; Lundy, 2007; Lundy et al., 2024; Templeton et al., 2023).

Flutter and Rudduck (2004) emphasise student consultation, a key element of student voice, as a key driver for improving teaching and learning. This perspective is often linked to notions of performativity, where schools leverage student input to enhance measurable academic outcomes rather than being an attempt to “mobilise a curriculum that is more attentive to the lives and needs of young people” (Smyth et al., 2013, p. 309). Fielding (2004a, p. 208) suggests that “opportunistic forms of student voice” are often contrived through neoliberal perspectives, where young people may be consulted about their learning so that “standards rise and attainment increase” (Fielding, 2004a, p. 203) for reasons of measurement and comparison data, rather than developing active citizenship in school communities. Both Fielding (2004b) and Bragg (2007) point to the fact that student voice is typically mediated and, therefore, can be vulnerable to manipulation.

The research of Fielding and Bragg (2003), among others, takes a social justice approach, viewing students as creators of active knowledge. This perspective seeks transformative change beyond academic achievement, focusing instead on reshaping students’ overall school experiences in a more holistic way. It advocates in favour of an educational practice that empowers students to shape

their own learning environments rather than conforming to predefined roles dictated by others. This social justice perspective underscores the role of power dynamics in student participation, highlighting the need for student voice initiatives to challenge hierarchical structures and promote democratic partnerships (Bragg, 2007).

The success of student voice initiatives is strongly influenced by their underlying motivation. Brooker and MacDonald (1999) argue that many efforts on behalf of student voice adopt a positivist or technical approach, prioritising the students' academic performance over genuine student empowerment. Rudduck and Flutter (2000) refer to this tendency as catering to the limiting outcomes of a grade-driven society. Bahou (2011) similarly warns against an instrumentalist approach where student voice is treated as a tool to enhance measurable outcomes, often emphasising performativity and surveillance.

Although it is clear that young people have important insights into the teaching and learning environment, which may serve as a “commentary on the curriculum”, there are difficulties in eliciting their views on the curriculum beyond “bits and pieces”, such as what does or does not engage them (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000, p. 75). As a consequence, there is a need to support students in developing a language for “talking about learning and about themselves as

learners, so that they feel it is legitimate for them to actively contribute to discussions about schoolwork with teachers” (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000, p. 76).

Fleming (2015) lists the purposes of student voice work as ranging from fulfilling a rights-based position founded on legislation and the *UNCRC* to promoting active citizenship, inclusion, participation and student retention. Other motivations include enhancing teaching practices and fostering a democratic school culture. Despite diverse approaches to student voice, Streeting (as cited in Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011) notes that most practitioners share a commitment to principles of social justice, democracy, and children's rights.

Students are often excluded from the decision-making processes related to their education (Islam, 2012), with educators and policymakers making those decisions instead (Nelson, 2014). Beattie (2012) points out that students tend to comply with the education system. When students are involved in decision-making, it is usually only after major decisions have already been made and those in charge have established the curriculum (Brooker & MacDonald, 1999). Similarly, Oldfather (1995) observes that, as our understanding of educational research grows, the primary participants in education, which are, of course, the children, are often overlooked. Busher (2012) highlights the fact that student voice acknowledges the rights of children, emphasising that “students are

citizens, not merely citizens in preparation, whose rights should be respected in the present as well in the future” (Busher, 2012, p. 13). Likewise, children should be regarded as citizens of the present, not just citizens in waiting (Osler, 2010; Verhellen, 2000). Incorporating student voice can transform and improve classroom traditions, instructional practices, and school-wide procedures (Bourke & Loveridge, 2016). Learning and teaching are enhanced when teachers have the tools and understand the value of being learners within their own classrooms (MacBeath, 1999). Finally, it is important to recognise that student voice is an emerging and complex concept that presents numerous challenges in defining and understanding it within an educational context (Pearce & Wood, 2019).

2.20 The Opportunities of Student Voice

Mitra et al. (2012, p. 2) highlight how student voice activities can serve “as a catalyst for positive changes in schools”, such as improvements in instruction, curriculum, teacher/student relationships (Rudduck, 2007), teacher preparation (Cook-Sather, 2002), assessment systems (Fielding, 2001) and visioning and strategic planning (Zeldin, 2004).

Students who feel disengaged or isolated from school life often report feeling unheard or treated unfairly, which can lead them to drop out of school early (McGregor & Mills, 2012). Consequently, Lamb and Rice (2008, p. 1) note that “early leavers are more likely to

become unemployed, stay unemployed for longer, have lower earnings, and over the life-course accumulate less wealth”. Finding ways to keep students engaged in school is, therefore, crucial to reducing dropout rates. Student voice initiatives provide a meaningful approach to addressing “such socially unjust outcomes” (Baroutsis et al., 2015, p. 126).

Moreover, the growing interest in student voice can be viewed as a political issue, with governments advocating for greater youth involvement in their communities (Bragg, 2010; McNeish & Newman, 2002). Citizenship education encourages students to become active participants in their schools, not just to learn about citizenship (Bragg, 2010). Students are the experts on their own perceptions and experiences as learners (Oldfather, 1995), and consulting these young people about their educational experiences enables teachers and school leaders to better meet their needs and enhance the learning environment. This viewpoint is echoed by Fielding and Bragg (2003) who conclude that consulting with students and involving them in organisational and pedagogic decision-making can bring improvements in “academic, communication and civic skills...as well as an increased sense of agency motivation and engagement in school affairs” (Flynn & Hayes, 2021, p. 47). This conclusion is also supported by Leitch and Mitchell (2007).

Inclusive classroom practices that promote ownership and engagement enable young people to become “agents in their own learning” (Rainer & Matthews, 2002, p. 22). Enabling student voice builds potential for present and future democratic participation in society (Mitra, 2009) and enhances the development of critical thinking in individuals who are able to challenge and change injustices in society (Baroutsis et al., 2015). It enables the development of confident, self-aware young citizens (Ranson, 2000) who can build and maintain strong relationships based on trust and openness (Mitra, 2009).

2.21 Student Voice: Power and Participation

For students to be given the ability to shape discourse, those with authority must confront “the power dynamics inside and outside our classrooms [that make] democratic dialogue impossible” (Ellsworth, 1992, p. 107). We must use our power “in an attempt [that might not be successful] to help others exercise power” (Gore, 1992, p. 59).

Engaging the voice of children in student voice work “challenges power relations and the privileging of one voice over another” (Flynn & Hayes, 2021, p. 46). Shohamy (2001) argues that shared power and mutual respect create opportunities for collaboration, while Freire (1994) suggests empowering students through dialogue to enable marginalised voices to contribute meaningfully. As Freire notes, such

efforts create contexts where the voiceless gain voice and the powerless gain power, fostering hope and transformation.

Bragg (2007) questions the liberal perspective on student voice, which views its rise as a sign of adults' willingness to share power. She argues that this view often overlooks underlying power imbalances and risks co-opting student voice for institutional agendas. The potential for student voice to be manipulated rather than empowering calls for critical scrutiny of the motives behind its promotion.

Participatory democracy underpins many student voice initiatives, advocating that all citizens, especially those who have been traditionally excluded, should have a role in societal decision-making (Hildreth, 2012). Cook-Sather (2002, 2006, 2007) emphasises that student voice is integral to democratic education, equipping students with the skills to become informed and engaged citizens. By involving students in decisions that affect them, educators can demonstrate how their voices matter, bringing a sense of agency and responsibility.

2.22 Challenges in Implementing Student Voice Initiatives

Despite the numerous benefits associated with student voice initiatives, several challenges hinder their effective implementation.

2.22.1 Tokenism and Superficial Engagement

Osler (2010, p. 27) notes that student perspectives have frequently been overlooked in educational research, with children often treated as an “invisible minority”. In some instances, school leaders superficially adopt student voice initiatives as a means of publicising efforts rather than fostering meaningful change (Frost, 2008; Rudduck, 2006; Thomson, 2011). This tokenistic approach is unlikely to lead to genuine improvements in students’ learning experiences (Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

Hart (1992) previously noted the persistence of tokenism in children’s participation, a concern that remains largely unresolved (Lundy, 2018). Tokenistic or decorative participation is not only in breach of Article 12, but also can be counter-productive in giving children a false sense of having been consulted or having participated in a meaningful way (Flynn & Hayes, 2021; Lundy, 2007).

2.22.2 Representation and Whose Voices Are Heard

Another challenge concerns whose voices are being heard. Typically, confident, articulate, and high-achieving students are given platforms to express their opinions, while marginalised groups—including students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, those who are non-verbal, and school refusers—are often excluded (Bahou, 2011; Brooker & MacDonald, 1999; Cook-Sather, 2006; Finneran et al., 2021; Lundy, 2007). Fielding (2010) describes this phenomenon as “prudential inclusion,” in which schools selectively amplify voices

that confirm existing perspectives, while Tangen (2009) notes that students who express themselves disruptively may be the least likely to have their voices acknowledged.

Additionally, initiatives that purport to be student-led can be dominated by adults, resulting in a failure to address issues that students themselves consider significant (Simmons et al., 2015). Some initiatives may even reinforce existing hierarchies of power and privilege among students, thereby undermining the very reforms they seek to advance (Finneran et al., 2021; Silva, 2001).

2.22.3 Limitations of the Concept of “Voice”

The very concept of “voice” has been criticised for oversimplifying students’ diverse perspectives, often prioritising spoken communication over alternative forms of expression (Kenny et al., 2023b; Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Pearce and Wood (2019) emphasise the importance of respecting the various ways in which children choose to convey their views, suggesting creative methods such as drawing, painting and photography to accommodate different abilities and communication styles (Kenny et al., 2023b; Marchant & Kirby, 2005; Wall et al., 2019).

2.22.4 Challenges in Methods and Implementation

A significant challenge lies in identifying authentic methods for collecting and representing student voices in ways that genuinely reflect their experiences (Bragg, 2007; Fielding, 2004a, 2004b; Kenny

et al., 2023b). Student voice initiatives can become performative, allowing students to express opinions without their being granted influence on decision-making (Cook-Sather, 2006; Leitch & Mitchell, 2007; Simmons et al., 2015). Arnot and Reay (2007) further argue that student voice can sometimes serve as a façade, disguising a lack of substantive engagement with students' perspectives.

Innovative approaches for capturing student perspectives include tools such as exit cards, idea books, photography, multimedia projects and scrapbooks, which can supplement traditional surveys and interviews to make student thinking more visible (Bragg, 2010; Flynn, 2013; Leitch & Mitchell, 2007). These alternative avenues for gathering student voice complement the necessity to adopt a dialogic model that treats children as co-participants in the educational process (Fielding, 2004a; Fielding, 2010).

2.22.5 Power, Resistance, and School Culture

Despite these efforts, challenges persist. Some educators may be unwilling or unprepared to confront the “unwelcome truths” that emerge from student voice initiatives (Cook-Sather, 2006). Resistance to change remains a substantial obstacle, with teachers facing increasing pressures and performativity demands that create inconsistencies in the implementation of student voice practices (Fink & Stoll, 2005).

Moreover, students themselves may hesitate to share honest opinions about teachers and school policies due to concerns about potential repercussions. School personnel may also lack the expertise needed to pose questions likely to uncover core issues or to elicit genuine responses from students (Crane, 2001). Even when schools express a willingness to implement student voice initiatives, competing demands often limit their success (Frost, 2008).

Robinson and Taylor (2007, p. 14) add that “listening to pupils itself is not sufficient, it is what happens with the information, what is done with it, that is also of great importance”. When no action is taken, young people do not have an authentic or active voice, and, consequently, voice becomes a tokenistic action of no value in promoting democratic engagement or change (Baroutsis et al., 2015, p. 127).

2.22.6 Towards Meaningful Engagement

For student voice initiatives to be effective, they must go beyond selective listening to engage with perspectives that challenge dominant narratives. This requires valuing students as individuals rather than as performance indicators (Mitra, 2005). Recognising students’ lived experiences fosters a sense of belonging and meaningful engagement (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2010; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Establishing genuine dialogue through active

listening and reciprocal engagement is central to this process (Fielding, 2010; Mitra, 2005; Thomson, 2011).

Creating a new set of working conditions that incorporate student voice in a meaningful way requires the development of new norms, relationships, and organisational structures (Della Porta & Diani, 2020). Such development means that adults must relinquish some of their power and work to build a tone of trust between them and their students (Cervone, 2002). Without an intentional focus on building relationships, student voice can easily become tokenistic (Mitra et al., 2012).

While collaboration among teachers and administrators can be quite difficult, “partnerships between adults and students can be even more challenging” (Mitra et al., 2012, p. 104). Differences in power and status within school environments pose challenges to initiatives aimed at amplifying student voices in classroom settings. Often, adults either perpetuate hierarchical relationships or assume the other extreme and “get out of the way,” allowing the students to take charge (Camino, 2005, p. 75). The skills of the adult advisors have been consistently shown to be a critical component in the successful activation of student voice (McQuillan, 2005).

One of the biggest struggles in student voice efforts is engaging students as active partners in school change. This is challenging due to power dynamics, such as norms of deference to adult authority

and embedded practices that separate adult and youth roles in schools (Mitra et al., 2012).

In summary, while student voice initiatives have the potential to transform how schools engage with and support all learners, especially within inclusive settings, their impact depends on how genuinely they are implemented. Without intentional efforts grounded in trust, equity, and meaningful dialogue, there's a real risk that such initiatives become tokenistic or performative, missing the opportunity to truly listen to and learn from children.

2.23 Listening to the Voice of the Child with Additional Educational Needs (AEN)

It is important to note that while inclusion and the voice of the child have been explored extensively in their own right, internationally, limited research has been conducted on student voice regarding children with AEN (Nic Aindriú, 2020; Templeton et al., 2023). This is despite the fact that pupil voice is a critical component of educational research and practice for supporting such learners. The recognition of their voice in educational policy, planning, and intervention development has been increasingly promoted (Porter, 2014; United Nations, 2006) since their experiences and perspectives can better inform practices and policies (Horgan et al., 2023; Nic Aindriú, 2020). However, educational systems are often slow to listen to children's voices, particularly children with social, emotional and/or

behavioural difficulties (Flynn et al., 2011). Yet, when they are listened to and heard, “the potential between ‘voice’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘transformation’” (Flynn, 2014, p. 162) is very real.

2.23.1 What Has Emerged So Far?

Throughout the existing research that has been conducted, some common themes have emerged.

Friendship in school has emerged as a very positive aspect for children with AEN, as it provides them with an informal support system (Gaona et al., 2018; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Prunty et al., 2012; Ring et al., 2018; Sellman, 2009), through playing together, talking and listening to each other (Travers et al., 2010). These friendships give the children a way of being included and belonging (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2018; Travers et al., 2010).

Additional support outside of the mainstream class mostly emerged as a positive for the children, allowing them to build a positive relationship with their SET teacher, and the ability to focus more succinctly (Squires et al., 2016). However, there were negatives associated with the withdrawal from the mainstream classroom, such as being without their friends and being asked to work too hard. Furthermore, some children report “professional support being inadequate or inappropriate” (Rose & Shevlin, 2020, p. 53). These

students would appreciate opportunities to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives significantly.

Subjects such as art, computers and physical education (PE) appear to be preferred by children with AEN due to their being more inclusive in their pedagogy (Prunty et al., 2012; Squires et al., 2016; Travers et al., 2010), allowing more pupil-centred teaching methodologies.

Teachers play an important role in developing social awareness and understanding for children with AEN. There is a need for explicit teaching of skills to enhance social relationships between learners (Balfe & Travers, 2011, p. 20). In general, children perceive their teachers to be kind and want to have a positive relationship with them (Norwich & Kelly, 2004).

The role of the principal also plays an important factor in the positive engagement of children with AEN in schools, with the need for “the principal to communicate with the students and listen to their voices” (Balfe & Travers, 2011, p. 18). The principal plays a vital role in legitimising and sustaining a school culture that bolsters student voice (Cook-Sather, 2007; Flores & Ahn, 2024). However, there is a need for the school leader to decentre their power and privilege in order to be able to authentically listen to students (Salisbury et al., 2023). By seeking out and listening to student voice, schools can shift to more productive learning environments through examining

educational policies (Lac & Mansfield, 2018), teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, 2020) and student empowerment and leadership (Green, 2018). The role of the principal is discussed in further detail below.

2.23.2 Addressing the Gap in Literature

This small-scale study aims to address a gap in the literature by focusing on the voice of the child in an inclusive setting. However, it aims to gather data from children both with and without AEN. It is important as schools need to hear not just the “articulate” voice (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), but also “the expert voices of all young people in their own schools in the pursuit of inclusion” (Flynn, 2014, p. 173; Kenny et al., 2023b). This takes initiative, forethinking and courage, and, most importantly, leadership. Leading on from this point, the role of leadership in schools will now be explored, with a particular focus on its influence in promoting inclusion and enabling the voice of the child within an inclusive school context.

2.24 Leadership in an Inclusive School

Although, for children and young people with AEN, “capable school leadership is an essential prerequisite for the development of a suitable learning environment” (Shevlin & Flynn, 2011, p. 126) there is little evidence to show that the connection between school leadership and effective provision has been explored. Responding to

the diverse and wide-ranging needs of children with AEN is a complex, thought-provoking and challenging task.

Inclusive schools are seen to have an emphasis on “the presence, participation and achievement of children with SEN in all aspects of school life” (Shevlin & Flynn, 2011, p. 126). Effective school leadership, with this in mind, needs leaders to be proactive rather than reactive (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Horne & Timmons, 2009; Shevlin & Flynn, 2011). Ainscow et al. (2006, p. 303) refer to the ability of school leaders to be open to questions and possibilities. This aligns with what Lambert et al. (1995) refer to as “constructivist” leadership, which engages colleagues in “shared meaning-making”, fostering an openness and willingness to negotiate between the agenda set aside for academic standards and the agenda for meaningful inclusion. The attitudes and values of school leaders are reflected in their practice, and they exercise positional power according to those attitudes and values (Ainscow et al., 2006).

2.24.1 The Role of the Principal in the Vision and the Culture of the School

Watkins and Meijer (2010) recommend that those leading educational institutions need to be leaders with a clear vision for inclusion and inclusive practice. Niesche and Keddle (2011) highlight three main leadership practices which help strive towards an inclusive school. These are sharing a common vision about the

significance of equity and how it might be achieved, supportive relations between staff and dispersed leadership practices. Through proactive leadership practices schools can strive towards eliminating student marginality.

To build inclusive learning environments, the continuous nature of the process needs to be addressed. It involves building the capacity of the school leaders and staff so they are enabled to respond to the challenging needs of all the learners within their school community (Shevlin & Flynn, 2011) .

The importance of a vision that is created by a school leader and shared with staff can build motivation and enthusiasm to enable work to be carried out collaboratively in building inclusive learning cultures (Ainscow, 2016). This type of leadership consists of leaders providing direction and exercising influence (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). They galvanise “effort around ambitious goals and create conditions that support teachers and help students succeed” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 2).

School culture, which is largely determined by the role a principal plays, is a central determinant of the inclusive nature of a school (Hattie, 2005). Furthermore, Rose and Shevlin (2020, p. 174) highlight the integral role of the school principal, stating that “establishing a set of values that acknowledges learning and outcomes in more holistic terms is a critical factor in determining the inclusivity of the

school.” School policy can also be a strong indicator of the inclusiveness of a school (Shevlin & Flynn, 2011). This is echoed by Ainscow et al. (2019), who assert that leaders who value differences, believe in collaboration, and are committed to offering educational opportunities to all students help to build a culture of inclusion within their schools. Open and transparent communication provides a strong foundation from which differentiated teaching approaches can be developed.

2.24.2 A Willingness to be Inclusive

A willingness and an openness to the responsibility of liaising with professionals from different agencies and non-governmental organisations is often dependent on the principal. Evidence has shown that this liaison has been effective in ensuring that students with AEN are viewed holistically. However, access to services remains a significant challenge (Rose & Shevlin, 2020). Recent major initiatives include the establishment of the School Inclusion Model (SIM) and the introduction of a demonstration project involving specialised therapeutic support from speech and language and occupational therapists (Shevlin & Banks, 2021). These supports encompass in-school access to a range of educational, psychological and health-based supports, including Occupational Therapy (OT), Speech and Language Therapy (SLT), and support from Behaviour Practitioners (National Council for Special Education, 2025b).

However, these remain at a developmental and pilot stage in a very small minority of schools.

As mentioned above, the belief that the best school for a child is their local school, making them a part of their own community, is an essential step towards inclusive education (Shevlin & Flynn, 2011). It is imperative that the leadership in such a school supports this belief (Ainscow, 2020). If principals are enabled to nurture practice that encourages “richer forms of inclusion, collaboration and engagement, these democratic-oriented values will enrich not merely those directly involved in special education but the entire school community” (Cobb, 2015, p. 231).

All of this has major implications for leadership practice within schools and education systems. It calls for efforts to encourage co-ordinated and sustained efforts around the idea that changing outcomes for vulnerable groups of students is unlikely to be achieved unless there are changes in the behaviours of adults. Consequently, the starting point must be with policymakers and practitioners: in effect, enlarging their capacity to imagine what might be achieved, and increasing their sense of accountability for bringing this about. Furthermore, a culture of inclusive education requires a shared set of assumptions and beliefs among policymakers and school leaders — beliefs that value difference, promote collaboration, and reflect a commitment to providing equitable educational opportunities for all

students (Ainscow et al., 2019). This may also involve tackling “taken-for-granted assumptions, most often relating to expectations about certain groups of students, their capabilities and behaviours” (Ainscow, 2020, p. 15).

2.24.3 Leading as Part of a Wider Team

There is also a need to explore how leadership can help to enable student voice in an inclusive school. The relationship between the school leader and teachers is critical in enabling student voice. Specifically, when it comes to fostering student voice, it is essential to focus on the following concepts: establishing a clear vision of the school that is deeply ingrained in practice as “the way we do things here”; implementing opt-in strategies for teachers where possible; and acknowledging that implementation across classrooms and personnel will vary due to individual contexts, beliefs, and experiences (Mitra et al., 2012).

The principal oversees policies and practices within the whole school and sets out to make the school more inclusive and accessible for students with additional needs. They are also responsible for the special education team within the school, including how they deliver more supports to students. They have overall responsibility for the compilation of a Student Support File for each student who needs more support at school. It provides details regarding what supports they need, how the school should address these support needs and

which settings would best meet these needs. They also support the special education team to identify, plan, review, monitor and co-ordinate supports, and ensure that these supports are delivered with as little disruption to class time as possible (Department of Education, 2024a). To support the principal in this task, there is no officially designated SENCo (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) role within Irish schools, although usually one teacher within the support team takes responsibility for developing the support infrastructure (Rose & Shevlin, 2020), often as part of the In-School Management (ISM) team. As the SENCo role is not an officially recognised one in policy and practice, it is important to note that, despite the huge responsibility that goes with the role, the time required to carry it out is not catered for in policy and it is at the school's discretion how much time should be allocated (Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023)

In an Irish context, the Board of Management (BoM) is required to play an integral role in the leadership of a school. They are required to develop, implement and oversee policies that support the education of children with additional needs in their school, including admission and participation, the wider curriculum, and how any supports they need should be provided. They are also required to inform the wider school community about these policies and oversee how reasonable accommodations are allocated to support students (Department of Education, 2024a). For student voice to be a part of inclusive schools there is a huge importance on leadership within

school, “particularly leadership from the top” (Flynn et al., 2011, p. 69).

It is the principal who co-ordinates these disparate activities and ensures that student voice is central to the school (Leithwood et al., 2004). Thus, effective leadership is not only about guiding teachers, staff, students and parents but also about creating a cohesive and inclusive school environment where students feel valued, listened to, supported and empowered.

2.25 Conclusion

In conclusion, inclusive education requires an emphasis on policies based on clear and widely understood definitions of what the terms “inclusion” and “equity” mean, as outlined in Ainscow (2020). It is important that strategies are informed by evidence regarding the impact of current practices on the presence, participation and achievement of all students. An emphasis on whole-school approaches, in which teachers are supported in developing inclusive practices, is vital. Approaches that draw on the experience and expertise of everybody who has an involvement in the lives of students, including the children themselves, should be supported. This includes leadership at both national and local education levels in promoting inclusion and equity as guiding principles for teachers’ work in all schools.

Ireland is still in a phase of development regarding inclusive learning environments “against the backdrop of rapidly changing educational and societal landscapes” and is “at a critical transition point in relation to establishing educational provision within mainstream school” (Rose et al., 2015, p. 20). This perspective is echoed by Shevlin and Banks (2021), who also highlight the current evolving nature of inclusive education in the Irish context. It is an exciting phase and one that brings with it many challenges.

In relation to the voice of the child, the literature presents a compelling case for its integral role in education. Student voice initiatives have gained significant attention, particularly through frameworks such as the *UNCRC*, which upholds the right of children to be heard (United Nations General Assembly, 1989)

Empowering student voices within an inclusive listening framework can cultivate a collaborative learning environment where school leaders, teachers and students engage in meaningful dialogue. The key challenge in fostering a culture of student listening in education lies in maintaining and evolving structures that ensure genuine responses to their perspectives. By embedding these structures in routine practice, schools can establish a sustainable and credible foundation for intergenerational dialogue, promoting a democratic, shared process of listening, learning and leadership (Flynn, 2019). However, tokenistic approaches continue to undermine its potential,

pointing to the need for authentic and committed implementation (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Achieving real change requires a transformation in how students and teachers perceive their roles, fostering interdependence and collaboration (Fielding, 2004b).

Ultimately, while student voice remains a critical component of education, its effectiveness depends on how it is enacted. A commitment to genuine respect, creativity and inclusivity will determine the extent to which it enhances student learning experiences and contributes to meaningful educational reform.

In this chapter, the Irish educational context has been explored, especially from the perspective of primary education. Policy and legislation, both internationally and nationally, have been examined regarding inclusion and the voice of the child. The definition of inclusion has been discussed, as has the emergence of inclusion in primary education and approaches to inclusive education. The literature pertaining to the attitudes of children, parents, teachers, and principals to inclusive education was reviewed. The literature surrounding the voice of the child in an inclusive environment was explored, as was the meaning of student voice. Finally, too, was the role of leadership in enabling inclusive practice and the voice of the child.

Building on the review of relevant literature, the following chapter sets out the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings that guide

this study. It outlines the conceptual frameworks and paradigmatic assumptions employed to examine the opportunities and challenges of inclusive education, and to explore their implications for the voice of the child within a sample of Irish primary schools.

Chapter 3: Theoretical and Philosophical Underpinnings

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of this study. It establishes the worldview, conceptual anchors, and guiding frameworks that shape the research questions, methodology, and interpretation of findings.

The study is situated within a social constructivist worldview, which recognises that knowledge and meaning are co-constructed through human interaction, discourse, and cultural context. Within this orientation, three interrelated theoretical anchors, namely student voice, inclusive education, and educational leadership, provide the conceptual foundation for the study. While student voice is positioned as the primary analytic lens, inclusive education and leadership are viewed as essential enablers that create the conditions and structures through which children's voices can be authentically heard and acted upon.

The chapter also explores the paradigmatic and philosophical assumptions underpinning the research, including its ontological and epistemological stance, and argues for a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm as the most appropriate for exploring perspectives and experiences within real-life school contexts.

Finally, it presents Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation as the central conceptual and evaluative framework for the study, ensuring that children's right to be heard is meaningfully embedded throughout the research process.

3.2 Social Constructivism as a Worldview

Social constructivism can be defined as a worldview wherein individuals seek an understanding of their known world in a manner that is of their own experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Mertens, 2010). This research is positioned within social constructivism, acknowledging that knowledge and meaning are actively constructed through social interactions, discourse, and cultural influences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Vygotsky, 1978). Constructivists often "contribute to the project of authorising student perspectives the notion that students need to be authors of their own understanding and assessors of their own learning" (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 7) with many constructivists focusing on student learning processes and feedback with the goal of adapting pedagogical practices to better support that learning (Cook-Sather, 2002).

This orientation aligns with this study's aim and subsequent research design to explore how inclusion, student voice and leadership are conceptualised and experienced within educational settings, as this research acknowledges knowledge as being socially constructed,

positioning children in an active role as meaning-makers. It also allows for an emphasis on dialogue and interpretation. The focus on student voice, inclusion, and leadership in this study is considered relational and socially situated.

3.3 Theoretical Anchors

As mentioned above, this study is shaped by three interrelated theoretical anchors which together provide a coherent lens for exploring the central focus on children's voices within inclusive education. Whilst student voice is positioned as the primary analytic lens, the concepts of inclusive education and educational leadership are recognised as essential enablers, creating the conditions and structures through which voice can be facilitated, sustained, or constrained.

3.3.1 Student Voice

Student voice is understood in this study as a rights-based entitlement rather than an optional or discretionary practice. Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) establishes children's right to express their views on matters that affect them, and this principle provides the foundation for how student voice is conceptualised here.

Central to this understanding is Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation, which translates Article 12 into a practical framework

for schools and researchers. Lundy's model provides both a conceptual and evaluative tool, ensuring that opportunities for voice are not reduced to symbolic gestures but instead reflect children's right to be heard and to influence decisions. While the detailed discussion of this model is presented in Section 3.5, it is important to note here that it serves as the primary analytic lens for this study.

By positioning student voice at the centre, this research foregrounds children's perspectives and experiences as integral to inclusive education. This orientation informs the framing of the research questions, the design of child-friendly data collection methods, and the evaluation of findings, allowing the study to distinguish between tokenistic consultation and authentic participation that recognises children as active contributors to their education.

3.3.2 Inclusive Education

Drawing on rights-based, relational, and participatory models of inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2016; Slee, 2019), this study conceptualises inclusive education as a dynamic and ongoing process rather than a fixed endpoint. It is not defined merely by the physical placement of all children in mainstream classrooms, but by the active creation of environments in which diversity is valued, meaningful participation is enabled, and belonging is fostered. Booth and Ainscow (2016) underscore the importance of developing inclusive cultures, policies, and practices, while Slee (2019) challenges deficit

and medicalised views of difference, arguing for a shift towards approaches that are relational, participatory, and grounded in social justice. These perspectives align closely with international rights frameworks, including the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD)* (United Nations, 2006), which positions inclusive education as a legal and ethical obligation rather than an aspirational goal.

Within this study, inclusion is therefore understood as the necessary condition for authentic student voice. Without environments that are equitable, accessible, and responsive to the needs of all learners, opportunities for participation risk being superficial or tokenistic. An inclusive approach ensures that children with additional educational needs (AEN) are not marginalised in processes of consultation, but are instead afforded the supports, recognition, and respect required for their voices to be genuinely heard. In this way, inclusive education provides the essential foundation upon which children's rights to participation, as articulated by Lundy's model, can be meaningfully enacted.

3.3.3 Educational Leadership

Informed primarily by theories of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2014; Spillane, 2005), educational leadership in this study is conceptualised as a collective practice that extends well

beyond the formal authority of the principal. Distributed leadership recognises that leadership is enacted through interactions among teachers, staff, students, and the wider school community, emphasising collaboration, shared responsibility, and the mobilisation of expertise across the school. This perspective shifts the focus away from leadership as the role of a single individual and more towards leadership as a practice embedded in the everyday life of the school.

Such an approach is particularly significant in relation to inclusive education and student voice. Leadership is central to establishing and sustaining cultures of inclusion, embedding values of equity, and ensuring that structures and processes support meaningful participation. Decisions about how consultation with students is organised, whose voices are prioritised, and how those voices are acted upon are all shaped by leadership practices. Leadership, therefore, functions as both a potential enabler and constraint. It can foster conditions where children's perspectives are respected and influence decision-making in schools, or it can limit opportunities for authentic participation if consultation is reduced to tokenistic exercises.

Within this study, educational leadership is examined not only as a theoretical construct but also as a practical and cultural force that directly affects how inclusion and student voice are experienced in

schools. By adopting a distributed lens, the research recognises that the responsibility for enabling authentic student participation does not rest solely with principals but requires the engagement of teachers, staff, and indeed students themselves. Therefore, leadership plays a pivotal role in determining whether inclusive values are embedded meaningfully and whether student voice is positioned at the heart of educational decision-making.

3.3.4 Interaction of Anchors

Taken together, these three theoretical anchors of student voice, inclusive education, and educational leadership provide a coherent and interconnected framework for this study. Student voice is positioned at the centre as the primary analytic lens, reflecting the research aim of foregrounding children's perspectives and experiences. Inclusive education offers the conditions through which participation can be authentically enacted, ensuring that difference is valued and that all children have equitable opportunities to contribute. Educational leadership, conceptualised through distributed, inclusive, and transformational perspectives, provides the structures and practices that embed or inhibit student voice and sustain inclusive cultures. The interaction of these anchors is not linear but dynamic. Leadership decisions shape the inclusivity of school environments, inclusion provides the foundation for equitable

participation, and both together determine the extent to which student voice is respected and influential.

This relationship is depicted in Figure 3.1 below, which illustrates student voice at the centre of the framework, supported and enabled through the overlapping influences of inclusion and leadership, creating the conditions and structures through which voice can be meaningfully realised, and guided conceptually by Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation.

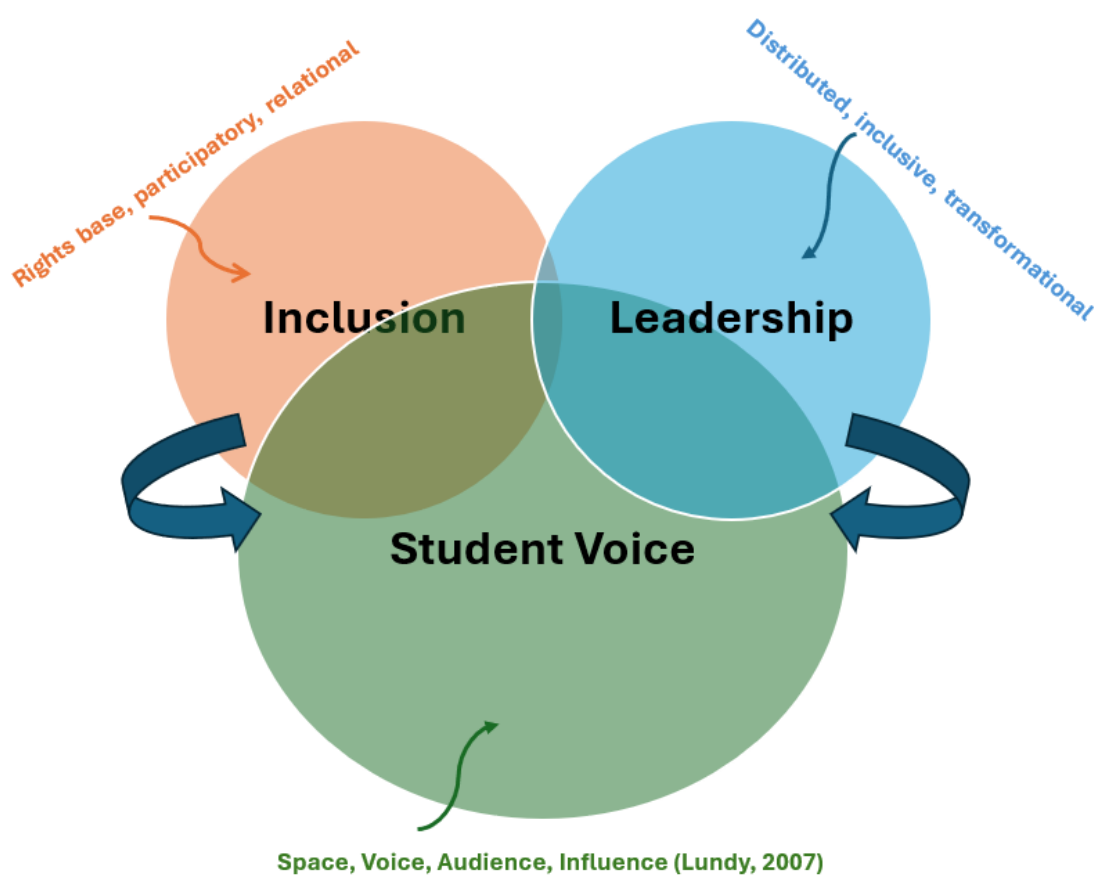


Figure 3.1 - Guiding Theoretical Framework

Together, the three dimensions form a dynamic and interconnected framework that underpins the research design, methodology, and analysis, while foregrounding the centrality of children's rights and perspectives.

3.4 Paradigm and Philosophical Underpinnings

A researcher's values are inseparable from their work, influencing the themes they explore and the questions they ask. Their worldview shapes how they seek and interpret answers, and their ontological and epistemological assumptions guide research decisions (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.4.1 *Ontology*

Ontology, the study of being, concerns the nature of social reality (Blaikie & Priest, 2019; Crotty, 1998). Essentially, it examines what exists and what can be known. This study adopts a constructivist ontological stance, which asserts that reality is not a singular, objective truth but rather a social construct shaped by human experiences and interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

3.4.2 *Epistemology*

Epistemology, which explores the nature, origin, and limitations of knowledge, addresses how things come to be known (Cohen et al., 2018). Rather than seeking an objective truth, research within this framework aims to examine inclusion, student voice and leadership from the perspectives of those within the chosen research settings.

This study aligns with a social constructivist tradition, which suggests that knowledge and reality are constructed through discourse, dialogue, and social interaction (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1999). This approach acknowledges the existence of multiple, sometimes contradictory yet equally valid, interpretations of the world. By examining inclusion, student voice and leadership within different school contexts, this research aims to uncover the meanings attributed to them and explore how these meanings are shaped by interactions between stakeholders such as principals, teachers, parents, children, Boards of Management and policies.

Through this approach, it is possible to consider how children are influenced by their educational environments and how these environments, in turn, shape their development, experiences, and perspectives. The objective is to understand what is happening and why, rather than simply determining “whether” or “to what extent” something occurs (Maxwell, 2010, p. 3). From a constructionist standpoint, student voice is not regarded as a fixed construct that exists independently of context. Instead, research questions and objectives reflect the assumption that adults and children construct their understanding of inclusion and student voice based on their unique experiences, perspectives, and interpretations. A mixed methods exploration of these experiences provides rich, in-depth data. While individual perspectives vary, shared themes emerge and can be analysed. This approach facilitates the identification and

interpretation of collective experiences within and across case study settings.

This research is interpretive in nature, in that it emphasises knowledge based on subjective beliefs, values, reasons, and understandings. It involves interpreting how inclusion and student voice are perceived and experienced, examining the meanings embedded within associated practices, and exploring how participants construct these meanings. Furthermore, this study acknowledges that theory is shaped by social and cultural contexts and is built upon the multiple realities being explored (Neuman, 2020).

3.4.3 Paradigm

A constructivist-interpretivist paradigm was adopted to gather rich, detailed data that addresses the research questions. The mixed methods design used is particularly relevant to this educational research as this approach “not only provides but actually creates spaces for a full engagement with the challenges of understanding teaching and learning as complex processes. These are spaces of inclusion and respect for different ways of knowing and valuing” (Greene, 2005, p. 211). The focus is on understanding how and why inclusion and student voice are conceptualised and experienced in real-life school contexts, as well as organising and interpreting these insights to derive meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Given that social

constructions are inherently personal, they are best understood through direct interaction between the researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within this framework, knowledge is co-constructed through collaboration between the researcher and participants.

3.5 The Lundy Model of Participation

As noted in Section 3.3.1, student voice in this study is grounded in Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation, which provides the central conceptual and evaluative framework. While first introduced as the analytic lens guiding the study, it is here explored in greater depth, highlighting how it informs both the design and interpretation of the research.

While the opportunities presented by the voice of the child are wide-ranging and well-evidenced, their realisation in practice requires a clear framework to ensure that children's participation is meaningful, ethical, and impactful. Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation, offers a structured interpretation of Article 12 of the *UNCRC* (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) emphasising children's right to express their views on matters affecting them. It provides both a conceptual and evaluative lens in my methodology, influencing the Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG), the design of child-friendly focus groups, and the analysis of whose voices were included or excluded. It also provides the evaluative lens through which

findings were interpreted, allowing for a critical examination of how far schools create genuine opportunities for participation. Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation is the central guiding theory for my research.

Flynn (2014) highlights that student voice engagement must involve a commitment to authentic listening realised through acknowledgement and response to suggestions that student participants make. This view is integral to Lundy's (2007) children's rights-based framework for participation, which is based on four interconnected elements: space, voice, audience and influence, each of which is essential for meaningful student voice practices.

3.5.1 Space

For engagement to be meaningful, children must have access to a safe, inclusive environment where they can freely express their views. This includes respecting their choice to participate or opt out, ensuring that diverse perspectives are included, and protecting children from harm or repercussions as a result of their opinions (Lundy, 2007).

3.5.2 Voice

Children have a fundamental right to express their views, regardless of the maturity of those views. This right requires schools to provide support, such as interpreters and assistive technologies, to ensure

that all children, including those with disabilities, can participate effectively (Lundy, 2007).

3.5.3 Audience

Children's views must not only be heard, but also taken seriously, by decision-makers. Lundy (2007) highlights the need to train educators and policymakers to ensure that children's input is respected and integrated into decision-making processes. A "right of audience" guarantees that children can communicate their views to those who are responsible for listening.

3.5.4 Influence

Lundy (2007) initially criticises superficial consultations in which children's views are sought but not acted upon, highlighting how it is very easy for adults to "comply with outward signs of consultation and yet ultimately ignore children's views" (Flynn & Hayes, 2021, p. 45). Genuine participation requires schools to demonstrate how children's contributions have informed decisions, thereby fostering transparency and respect. Without a cultural shift that embeds participation as a core practice, student voice risks being tokenistic rather than transformative (Sinclair, 2004). Without condoning tokenism, however, Lundy (2018) later concedes that rather than using "tokenism" as an excuse not to engage with student voice at all, let it be a valid start from which lessons can be learned, putting in

some checks and balances that foster and develop a conducive environment for meaningful engagement with children's views.

This framework has direct implications for this study. Firstly, it shapes the research questions. For example, "Is the voice of the child heard as part of inclusive practice in these schools, and if so, how?". Secondly, it informs the design of data collection, ensuring child-friendly data collection such as the CRAG, the children's focus groups and visual depictions which sought to embed children's perspectives in data collection but also in the research design and implementation. I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 4. Thirdly, it provides an evaluative lens for the findings of the research by examining which aspects of participation are supported, constrained or even absent in schools.

Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation frames the positioning of student voice within the research. Student voice is not a "bolt-on" but instead is intrinsically central to authentic inclusion and participatory education.

While frameworks like Lundy's offer valuable guidance for supporting student participation, their implementation in schools depends a lot on the realities of power in schools. To ensure that student voice is truly meaningful and not merely a symbolic gesture, it is necessary to critically consider who holds the power, how it is shared, and whether all students are genuinely being heard.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has set out the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the study. Drawing on a social constructivist worldview, it has positioned knowledge as socially situated and co-constructed through interaction. Within this orientation, three interrelated theoretical anchors were identified as central to understanding how inclusion and participation are experienced in schools: student voice, inclusive education, and educational leadership.

Of these, student voice is placed at the centre as the primary analytic lens, reflecting this study's commitment to foregrounding children's perspectives and experiences. Inclusive education provides the necessary conditions through which voice can be authentically enacted, ensuring that difference is valued and belonging is fostered. Educational leadership provides the structures and practices that can either enable or constrain participation, influencing whether voice is embedded meaningfully or reduced to tokenistic gestures.

This chapter also discussed the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the study, justifying the adoption of a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm. This stance, coupled with a mixed-methods design, provides a means of accessing multiple perspectives and generating rich, contextualised insights.

Finally, Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation was introduced as the central guiding framework, ensuring that the voices of children are foregrounded not only in the research questions and methodology but also in the analysis and interpretation of findings.

Taken together, these theoretical and philosophical underpinnings provide the foundation on which this study is built. The next chapter turns to the research design and methodology, showing how these underpinning assumptions directly informed the selection of methods, data collection processes, and analytical approaches used throughout the study.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present an account of the research design developed to examine inclusive education, the voice of the child and leadership within a context of inclusion, from initial wider ontological and epistemological puzzles to the specifics of the method (Mason, 2018).

This chapter begins by identifying the research questions and giving a context of the schools participating in the research. It then outlines the theoretical framework that underpins the study, grounded in social constructivism, followed by an examination of the ontological and epistemological assumptions that guide the research. As a leader in education, reflexivity is considered to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and influence on the study. The research design and case study approach are explained, detailing the rationale for selecting a multiple case study. Data collection methods, including interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, document analysis, and visual representations, are discussed along with data analysis techniques such as thematic and cross-case analysis. The ethical considerations adhered to throughout the study are outlined, followed by a discussion on the limitations of the research design.

Finally, the chapter concludes by summarising and reflecting on the methodological choices made and preparing the reader for the presentation of findings in the next chapter.

In choosing which approaches to use for the purpose of this study, many different methods were explored to consider how they could be incorporated into this field of research.

The research questions in this study were examined to find the most suitable methodology which would provide the most extensive data.

The research questions are:

1. What are the perspectives of inclusive education reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools?
2. Is the voice of the child heard as part of inclusive practice in these schools and if so, how?
3. What effect does leadership have on inclusive education and the enabling of student voice in these schools?

4.2 Context of the Research

The research was carried out using a mixed methods, multiple case study design incorporating methodological triangulation and a participatory research element. This triangulation of methods added increased validity to the research by providing more data to work with and, ultimately, a more accurate evaluation (Clark et al., 2021).

By using a mixed methods research design, a much richer understanding of the data was obtained.

To implement this research design, data was collected from three primary schools, each representing distinct educational settings.

As outlined in Chapter 1, the first school, School A, is a small, urban school with multi-grade classes. The second school, School B, is a medium-sized, rural, single-stream school. The third school, School C, is a large, urban, triple-stream school with two special classes for children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). (See Table 4.1 – Details of Participating Schools.)

Table 4.1 - Details of Participating Schools

	Size	Location	Type	Classes	ASD Special classes	Patronage	No. of pupils
School A	Small	Urban	Co-education	Multi-grade	N/A	Church of Ireland	<100
School B	Medium	Rural	Co-education	Single-stream	N/A	Catholic Church	<300
School C	Large	Urban	Co-education	Triple-stream	Two autism classes	Educate Together	>600

Before the data collection commenced in each school, a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) was formed with 10 children from the Student Council in the school of which the researcher is principal. A CRAG is a participatory research methodology designed to involve children actively in the research process (Horgan & Martin, 2021; Lundy et al., 2011). These children helped design the questions used in the focus groups with the children in the three case study schools. The children helped choose the language of the questions to ensure they were understood and set at an appropriate level. The CRAG also helped interpret and analyse the data garnered from the children's focus groups and visual depictions at a later stage.

In each school, and in this order generally, questionnaires were issued to all teachers and the Board of Management (BoM). A focus group interview was held with a group of four to five children from 1st – 3rd Class and a group of four to five children from 4th – 6th Class. Some children had AEN, while others did not. Artwork was gathered from the children participating in the focus groups, portraying their image of a school they would like to attend and a school they would not like to attend. A focus group interview was held in each school with approximately four parents of children with additional educational needs (AEN). A semi-structured interview was held with the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) and the principal separately. Finally, a document analysis was carried out on relevant documents, where available, pertaining to each school, such as the

Special Educational Needs (SEN) policy, the Code of Behaviour policy, the English as an Additional Language (EAL) policy, and a selection of School Support Plans (SSPs). (See Table 4.2 – Data Collection Methods in Each Participating School.)

Table 4.2 - Data Collection Methods in Each Participating School

Data Collection Methods	Participants	Total No. of Participants	Details
Questionnaires	Teachers	N=58	Issued to all
Questionnaires	BoM members	N=24	Issued to all
Focus group interview	Children (1 st – 3rd Class)	N=14	4-5 children, some with AEN
Focus group interview	Children (4 th – 6th Class)	N=14	4-5 children, some with AEN
Artwork	Children in focus groups	N=28	Portraying desired and undesired schools
Focus group interview	Parents	N=12	Parents of children with AEN
Semi-structured interview	SENCo	N=3	N/A

Data Collection Methods	Participants	Total No. of Participants	Details
Semi-structured interview	Principal	N=3	N/A
Document analysis	Relevant documents	N/A	SEN policy, Behaviour policy, EAL policy, SSPs

4.3 Application of Theoretical Framework

As outlined in Chapter 3, this research is situated within a social constructivist stance, which aligns closely with the study's aim and subsequent research design to explore how inclusion, student voice and leadership are conceptualised and experienced within educational settings. Social constructivism emphasises meaning-making through interaction, dialogue, and shared experience, and these principles underpin the methodological choices made in this study. The table below illustrates how each research design element links with the principles of social constructivism, fostering a comprehensive and participatory exploration of educational practices. (See Table 4.3 - Alignment of Research Design with Social Constructivist Principles.)

Table 4.3 - Alignment of Research Design with Social Constructivist

Principles

Social Constructivist Principle	Corresponding Research Design Element	Description
Collaborative learning and interaction	Focus group discussions	Engaging parents and children in group discussions facilitates the sharing of diverse perspectives, leading to a richer, co-constructed understanding of educational experiences.
	Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG)	Involving students in designing research instruments and analysing data empowers them and ensures that the research process is a collaborative endeavour.
Contextual and cultural relevance	Diverse school settings	Selecting schools of varying sizes, locations, and educational structures (multi-grade, single-stream, triple-stream) allows for exploration of how different contexts influence educational practices and experiences.
	Document analysis	Reviewing school-specific policies and support plans provides insight into the cultural and contextual factors that shape

Social Constructivist Principle	Corresponding Research Design Element	Description
		each school's approach to education.
Active participation and agency	Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG)	Empowering students to contribute to the research design and data interpretation processes acknowledges their agency and positions them as co-constructors of knowledge.
	Artwork Collection	Allowing children to express their perceptions of ideal and non-ideal schools through art provides them with an active role in conveying their experiences and insights.
Emphasis on Social Interaction	Focus group discussions	Facilitating conversations among both children and parents encourages the exchange of ideas and collaborative meaning-making.
	Semi-Structured Interviews	Providing opportunities for principals and SENCos to engage in open-ended discussion with the researcher, fostering deeper insight into educational practices and social interactions.

Social Constructivist Principle	Corresponding Research Design Element	Description
Shared Meaning-Making Through Collective Reflection	Questionnaires	Enabling the collection of responses from a wider range of stakeholders (teachers and BoM) allows participants to contribute their perspectives, fostering collective knowledge-building and shared reflection on educational practices.

4.4 Reflexivity

Pillow (2003, p. 175) discusses reflexivity as a research method used to “legitimize, validate, and question research practices and representations”.

Lather (1986) writes about reflexivity of the researcher from the stance that just as there is no neutral education (Freire, 1973), no research is also neutral (Hall, 1975; Reason & Rowan, 1981)—it is influenced by one’s own position and experiences. Bourdieu (1993) is concerned with the role of the academic not as an autonomous agent but as a position within a field surrounded by institutional culture, norms and practices. Bourdieu (1993, p. 369) sees the point of reflexive sociology as a way to “lay bare the impersonal behind the personal, to discover the social in the heart of the individual person”.

A researcher's philosophical stance is inherently connected to their own research methods and research questions. This philosophical perspective plays a crucial role in shaping the design and execution of a research study. One's perspective on reality and knowledge directly shapes the formulation of research inquiries (Kim & Merriam, 2011). Reflexivity, the recognition that our observations are shaped by prior understandings, is crucial regardless of the theoretical framework, methodology, or research question. It is essential to acknowledge the researcher's values throughout the research process. The positionality of the researcher will influence the research approach, and we must acknowledge that everything about the researcher will affect the work including age, gender, belief, views, personal and professional experience and politics. There is no "position-less" place in the work of the researcher and that must be acknowledged.

Opie (2004, p. 17) emphasises the importance of researcher positionality and suggests that "where the researcher is coming from is the most significant factor influencing the choice of methodologies and procedures". Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 16) refer to the value-laden aspects of inquiry and point out that "values affect what we choose to investigate, what we see, and how we interpret what we see". Hammersley (1992) also argues that researchers cannot entirely separate themselves from their assumptions about the subject being studied. The conceptual framework through which

research is conducted is shaped by these beliefs, experiences, and prior knowledge, ultimately influencing the contextual lens of the study.

Reflexivity, and the researcher's view of reflexivity forms part of the dance of the "methodological layer cake" (Loxley, 2016). It informs and influences our research. It contributes to the research design and is an integral part of the process.

My position as a school leader influences my interactions with participants and my interpretation of findings. It is vital that I consider my own personal beliefs and prior experiences in education, both in the classroom and as a school leader, working with children with AEN and working with vulnerable families and how they may impact how I frame questions and analyse responses. To enhance reflexivity, I engaged in critical self-reflection through the maintenance of a journal, debriefing, and member checking to ensure that participants' perspectives were accurately represented rather than inadvertently filtered through my own biases. By incorporating reflexivity into the research process, my aim was to maintain awareness of my subjectivity while valuing the co-construction of knowledge that aligns with the principles of social constructivism.

4.5 The Role of the Researcher

The pilot study took place in the school of which the researcher is principal. This pilot study informed the design of the three case

studies. I am very aware that there was the possibility of an issue of bias and power imbalance here. However, I felt that I had a very good relationship with the staff, and they were used to participating in research such as this, both with staff internally and with educators and researchers externally. I also had established good relationships with the parents and BoM members. I discussed with all involved the appreciation and necessity of their honest feedback. I offered to cease the pilot if I felt anyone was under pressure or feeling uncomfortable at any point. There was the possibility that if at any stage, and for any reason my position as interviewer was not working, I would ask another member of staff to carry out the pilot interviews and focus groups for me. This was not necessary.

As mentioned above, the CRAG also took place in the researcher's school. I ensured that the children were fully informed about their role in the CRAG, and they were comfortable with that role. The children from the Student Council formed the CRAG. However, Ackermann (2021, p. 5) details the challenge of developing and maintaining "positive reciprocal non-hierarchical relationships with the young co-researchers and to keep a good balance between closeness and good rapport and distance". This was difficult in the role of principal. I overcame this as much as I could by explaining our roles very clearly before starting the research, and as I co-ordinated the Student Council in the school, the children were used to working

with me frequently in a role outside of the classroom, which was certainly beneficial.

The researcher does not have a role in the three case study schools. However, the researcher is known to the principals of each of the schools through an informal network. All participants were made aware that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason and without prejudice, up to the point where the data had been fully anonymised. After this point, the data could no longer be withdrawn from the study as it was no longer identifiable.

Participants were made aware that they could speak with the researcher or an independent party about the project if they wished.

4.6 Case Study

Case studies have become increasingly popular as a research method, particularly in education (Yazan, 2015). Case study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases as a single bounded entity, bounded by times and activities, studied in detail, with a variety of methods, over an extended period of time (Creswell, 1994).

For this study, a mixed methods, multiple case study design was used, which “is a type of mixed methods study in which the quantitative and qualitative data collection, results, and integration are used to

provide in-depth evidence for a case(s) or develop cases for comparative analysis” (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2018, p.116).

There is some debate over the status of case studies with Stake (1995) stating that case study research is not a methodology but rather a choice of what is to be studied. This contrasts with its presentation as a strategy of inquiry, a methodology or a comprehensive research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018). Creswell (2007) views case studies as a methodology, a type of design, an object of study and a product of the inquiry.

Hammersley (1992) describes case studies as being highly inclusive as they allow the researcher to traverse across a wide range of social phenomena. They allow for events and occurrences such as policy construction and implementation and consider necessities such as school break times, staff meetings, teacher-parent meetings, etc. Using case studies, social relations can be examined, such as management cultures. Gomm et al. (2000) detail that case studies can allow for the application of a wide range of research tools in conjunction with a variety and richness of empirical material, both primary and secondary. Case studies also lend themselves to be used in single or multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks.

Creswell and Poth (2018) identify the collective case study or multiple case study, where one issue or concern is identified, but the

researcher selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue. In this study, to allow comparability across each school context, the researcher opted to use a multiple case study. This enabled the researcher to draw greater conclusions about inclusion in a primary school context.

Case studies lend themselves to examining a phenomenon using multiple perspectives, which is true of the research here. The case study type used in this research is identified by Eckstein (1975) as the heuristic case. It is designed to stimulate theoretical development using induction through a single or array of cases. This provides an arena in which to facilitate an imaginative and creative engagement with general issues and possible theoretical solutions. Therefore, a case, or multiple cases as is the case here, are studied to arrive at a preliminary theoretical construct. This study is speculative, as the research explores inclusion and student voice from the perspectives of students, teachers, and leaders, without imposing a fixed theoretical structure. Instead of testing an existing model, the lived experiences of participants shape the research findings.

4.6.1 Why Use a Case Study?

Like all research methods, there are advantages and limitations associated with case studies. Some of these advantages and limitations will now be explored in the context of this research.

4.6.1.1 Advantages of Using a Case Study

Data collection in case study research is typically extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information such as interviews, documents and audio-visual material (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One of the main advantages of case studies is that they are capable of being designed around naturalistic methods of enquiry, allowing the observation and analysis of phenomena in their natural, real-world settings (Yin, 2018). Case studies are open to using both structured and non-structured forms of data collection and a range of sampling activities. The units of the case study can range from the micro to the macro—in this case from the individual stakeholders in a school all the way up the educational system. Case studies are capable of presenting and examining complex relationships in a descriptive or explanatory manner. They can contextualise and “bring to life” meanings and issues which are being investigated.

4.6.1.2 Limitations of Using a Case Study

Despite its increasing popularity as a research method (Yazan, 2015), case studies have faced some criticisms for lacking transferability and generalisation, meaning it is not possible to make assumptions that findings apply in wider settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denscombe, 2017). Yin (2018) argues that limitations can be overcome by the design and rigour of the research. One way to do this is through collecting data from more than one source and gaining multiple perspectives, allowing for the “triangulation” of findings and

a fuller, more robust and richer picture (Hamilton, 2011). This is what the researcher has aimed to do here.

A rationale must be established for a purposeful sampling strategy for selecting the case and for gathering information regarding it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To do this, the research was aligned with the theoretical framework, and the research questions were examined in detail.

If non-naturalistic methods are used, it can be seen as intrusive and disruptive. Case studies are context and time-bound. They are also highly time-consuming. The incorporation of different methods can make data analysis problematic, whilst the construction of appropriate boundaries between case and non-case phenomena is problematic.

Furthermore, to conduct case study research, the case itself must be identified. There is a fear that in studying multiple cases, the data itself might be diluted, and the depth might not be equivalent to a single case study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). However, the motivation to consider many cases is the idea of generalisability. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) argue that this does not hold much weight with qualitative research studies. Nevertheless, for this study, it was felt that multiple cases enabled the exploration of multiple realities and allowed for contextual meaning-making. It also allows for comparative and interpretive analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) .

4.7 Research Methods

The specific tools employed to carry out the case study will be identified below.

4.7.1 Literature Review

Literature reviews play an important role as a foundation for all types of research (Snyder, 2019, p. 339). By carrying out a literature review an initial understanding of what was already known in the research areas of inclusion, the voice of the child and leadership in an inclusive context was ascertained.

A literature search was carried out using online search engines such as Google, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, EBSCO, Scopus, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and searches of the Trinity College Dublin (TCD) Library database. These were used to locate recent relevant journal articles, books, reports, government publications and websites. The terms which were searched were, in various combinations: “inclusion”, “definition of inclusion”, “inclusive education”, “UNCRPD in education”, “teachers’ perception of inclusion”, “parents’ perception of inclusion”, “special educational needs”, “additional educational needs”, “student voice”, “learner voice”, “student participation in schools”, “student consultation”, “student leadership”, “student empowerment”, “children’s rights”, “UNCRC in schools”, “teachers consulting/responding to student views”, “inclusive leadership”, “inclusive school governance”, “school

ethos” and “school culture”. In all instances the word “student” and “pupil” were used interchangeably and combined with the keywords “primary school” and “Ireland”. In addition, the reference sections of relevant research papers and books were used to identify additional useful literature resources and articles of interest.

Singularly, these terms returned many results, but when put in specific combinations, for example, “inclusive education”, “student voice”, and “leadership”, the results were much more scant.

By reviewing the literature, the research questions, around which the research was based, were refined. Different theoretical and methodological approaches to the research area were explored. Finally, an analytic framework was created which in turn helped with the interpretation of the research results.

4.7.2 Children’s Research Advisory Group (CRAG)

Giannakaki et al. (2018, p. 5) argue that “it would not make sense to study children’s voice in schools without involving children themselves (at least to some degree) as partners in the design and conduct of such research”. CRAGs offer us a way into rights-informed research which is meaningful for children and achievable for most research projects. CRAGs are well situated and equipped to provide ongoing advice and oversight to research projects (Horgan & Martin, 2021). In this way, children are both informants and researchers (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015). They are not the research subjects

(Bird et al., 2013), instead they are being asked to reflect on the experiences of children in general (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). Involving children as research partners has the potential to raise awareness of their rights and entitlements, empowering and mobilising them to discuss, collectively imagine, and take action towards a more democratic and just education in the future (Kleine et al., 2016).

The establishment of the CRAG in this study was informed by the principles of Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation. It aimed to provide children with a dedicated space, support to express their views, a responsive audience, and a genuine opportunity to influence the research process.

To conduct this research, a group consisting of 10 children, from the school of which the researcher is principal, formed the CRAG. These children ranged in age from 9 – 12 years old and were representatives from 3rd – 6th Class. At the time, they were the current Student Council in the school. This was representative of children across the senior end of the school and consisted of children both with and without AEN, which reflected the children who would later be involved in the focus groups.

The CRAG was set up to help the researcher find the best way to interview other children in focus groups about how they understood “inclusion” and “children’s voice” and how they had experienced it through various school activities. Flynn (2013) iterates that an

attempt to understand or interpret children's views needs to be carried out with their support and approval as without this, it would be too easy to transpose "adult" rationality and inference. Therefore, the CRAG worked alongside the researcher to interpret data generated through these focus groups and to identify salient themes (see Appendix A: Schedule of CRAG activities – Background and Focus Group Input).

4.7.2.1 Limitations of the CRAG

Horgan and Martin (2021, p. 181) echo Lundy (2018) and McCarry (2012), who question models of participation which assume that "the greater the level of involvement the more inclusive and empowering it is for young people, and the stronger the resulting research". There are obvious benefits to working with a CRAG. However, it may often be more practical and respectful of young people's time and other commitments at the different periods in their lives, to negotiate "pockets of participation" (Franks, 2011) or "to offer differentiated levels of involvement at the various stages of the research" (Horgan & Martin, 2021, p. 181).

4.7.3 Questionnaires

Denscombe (2017, p. 183) explains that questionnaires are "designed to collect information which can be used subsequently as data for analysis".

Questionnaires were administered to all teachers and BoM members in each of the schools to gain a greater general understanding of the school's attitude to inclusive practice.

The questionnaires were issued to each teacher and BoM member in the school via an email link. In total, the questionnaire was issued to approximately 52 teachers and 24 BoM members. The questionnaire consisted of questions based on their understanding of inclusion, their attitudes to inclusion and their daily practices and behaviours in the school. It aimed to ascertain challenges and opportunities they perceived through inclusive education. Their perspectives on student voice and their opinion on if or how it is heard were also questioned (see Appendix B and C for a copy of the Teacher and BoM Questionnaires, respectively).

4.7.3.1 Reliability and Validity

Before administering the final questionnaires, a pilot version was trialled with two teachers and two members of the Board of Management respectively, from the researcher's school. This enabled the researcher to adjust the questionnaire based on the observations made within the pilot group. For example, the number of questions was reduced from the pilot questionnaire for teachers from 30 to 22 questions, some of the phrasing of the questions was adjusted for greater clarity, and more opportunity was afforded for

respondents to provide extra information in the open-ended questions if they so wished.

4.7.3.2 Advantages

The use of a questionnaire was the most appropriate and productive method for this aspect of the research as it was economical in terms of researcher time, researcher effort and financial resources (Dornyei, 2003; Seale & Barnard, 1998). It enabled access to be gained to a large number of respondents (McKernan, 1996; Seale & Barnard, 1998) and was more effective than interviewing each teacher and BoM member individually considering time and access limitations.

Questionnaires are extremely versatile, allowing them to be used successfully with a “variety of people in a variety of situations targeting a variety of topics” (Dornyei, 2003, p. 8). The versatility and flexibility of questionnaires make them an attractive methodology, as each questionnaire can be designed specifically to suit the sample group for which it is intended. Although questionnaires are versatile and each one is unique, they also hold a sense of familiarity. They are also quite obviously less intrusive than telephone or face-to-face surveys and interviews.

Questionnaires are most productive when the information that is required is fairly straightforward, brief and uncontroversial (Denscombe, 2017). They are useful when there is a “need for

standardised data from identical questions” (Denscombe, 2017, p. 184). A mix of Likert-Scale (McKernan, 1996) and open ended questions were used in this research which required the participant to justify their judgement or opinion, giving the research a greater understanding (Black, 1999).

Dornyei (2003, p. 8) also explains that if the questionnaires are well constructed, then the analysis of the data can be a straightforward and relatively fast process (Dornyei, 2003; Seale & Barnard, 1998). However, even though questionnaires are an efficient form of research, it is vital that adequate time and effort are invested into the construction, administration and subsequent analysis of the questionnaire to allow the most accurate answers to be gathered and the most concise conclusions to be drawn (Denscombe, 2017).

Research has shown that the use of questionnaires can reduce bias. Walonick (2004, p. 5) claims that the uniform presentation of questions in a questionnaire means that there is “no middle-man bias” as “the researcher's own opinions will not influence the respondent to answer questions in a certain manner”. The respondents will not be influenced by any verbal or visual clues. This means that in the context of this research, the questions, if designed correctly, had the ability to evoke the truth from the respondents without them feeling threatened, pressurised or influenced to

provide a particular answer. It was felt this was of particular importance when carrying out research with the teachers.

4.7.3.3 Limitations

While questionnaires have numerous advantages, it is necessary to address the possible limitations associated with this methodology. These limitations will now be explored, and suggestions will be given on how these issues were addressed so that they were overcome or dealt with most effectively.

Questionnaires lack the provision for probing further into answers that are provided with Seale and Barnard (1998, p. 52) explaining that questionnaires “may elicit superficial information that requires further probing before the data can be fully understood”. Similarly, Moser and Kalton (1971) also claim that questionnaires are unsuitable for probing deeply. To combat this, the provision of open questions was used.

Walonick (2004) determines that questionnaires are structured instruments that do not allow for flexibility in response format. In this study, it was felt that it was important for respondents to be given every opportunity to express as full an answer as possible. Therefore, sufficient space was provided for additional information in most questions. By providing frequent space for comments, the researcher partially overcame this problem (Walonick, 2004).

Another limitation encountered with questionnaires is that they offer little opportunity for the researcher to check the honesty of the answers given by the respondents (Denscombe, 2017; McKernan, 1996). To mitigate against this, it was felt that if the respondents were assured that the highest levels of confidentiality were to be maintained at all times, they may be more forthcoming with information. If the respondents understood that there is no “correct” answer and that the answers which they provided would be anonymous and would not be judged, then they would be more willing to be more honest and truthful in their responses. It is fundamental to the success of a questionnaire that it is emphasised to the participants that their responses will be anonymous and that they should answer each question truthfully and with integrity. Furthermore, Denscombe (2017, p. 158) argues that the participants should be informed that the information which they provide “will not be made publicly available”; as Walonick (2004, p. 17) reports that some studies “reported that responses became more distorted when subjects felt threatened that their identities would become known” while “others have found that anonymity and confidentiality issues do not affect response rates or responses.”

Walonick (2004, p. 6) claims that the language used should be “simple and direct” and that “the wording of a question should be brief and to the point”. Dornyei (2003, p. 9) claims that “careful and creative

questionnaire construction can result in an instrument that motivates people to give relatively truthful and thoughtful answers”.

Questionnaires can sometimes yield a low response rate (Black, 1999; Denscombe, 2017; McKernan, 1996; Walonick, 2004). Seale and Barnard (1998, p. 52) also refer to questionnaires as having a “traditional low response rate” which they mark as 40 percent. Similarly, Dornyei (2003, p. 9) claims that “if returning the questionnaire to the survey administrator is left to the respondents...they often fail to do so, even if they have completed it”. It was hoped that the researcher’s presence in the school might help mitigate against this. Also, principals were asked, if possible, to offer a small amount of time at the next relevant staff meeting to allow completion of the questionnaire. Regardless of this, the return rate was relatively low, despite reminders from the researcher. There was a return rate of 30 percent from the teachers and 25 percent from the BoM members. Other than email reminders, it was difficult to access the BoM members in an effort to prompt them.

Literature on the use of questionnaires highlights the fact that even where there may be a high response rate, there is still the possibility that the questionnaires may be returned with incomplete or poorly completed answers (Denscombe, 2017). The researcher aimed to mitigate this by providing clear and understandable instructions.

Despite this, on a handful of questionnaires, some open-ended questions were left incomplete.

Chesson (1993, p. 713) claims that “questionnaire construction is a complex and time-consuming process and one which should not be entered into lightly”. There are several issues which need to be considered in relation to questionnaire construction, including the instructions that are provided, the size of a questionnaire, the most effective method of compiling the list of questions, providing assurances of confidentiality, seeking permission to carry out the questionnaire and expressing thanks to the respondents.

As Dornyei (2003) and Walonick (2004) suggest, the length of the questionnaire was given much consideration, especially after the pilot study. Denscombe (2017, p. 188) maintains there is “no more effective deterrent to answering a questionnaire than its sheer size”.

Finally, the participants must be thanked for their responses. Denscombe (2017, p. 190) argues that “courtesy suggests that some word of thanks from the researcher should appear”. This was included at the end of the questionnaire, and also, in the context of the research, it was possible to convey thanks to some of the sample groups in person. All of the above shows that the research was carried out “according to the normal code of ethics for social researchers”, as outlined by Denscombe (2017, p. 339).

4.7.4 Focus Groups

A number of focus groups were used for this research. Focus groups were used with parents and children in each of the participating schools. The focus group method is a form of group interview in which there are several participants, in addition to the facilitator or moderator, and where “there is an emphasis on a particular fairly tightly defined topic, and the researcher focuses on interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning” (Clark et al., 2021, p. 1987).

The use of focus groups was chosen because, firstly, it gave the researcher the opportunity to direct the flow of the discussion whilst allowing for interaction among the participants. The success of a focus group relies on the interaction of the group (Morgan, 1997) so it is vital that the participants communicate well with each other and the researcher. It is from this interaction that the data emerges (Cohen et al., 2018). Therefore, it is essential that the personalities of the people involved in the groups and the dynamics they would yield are kept in mind. As the researcher is there only to facilitate the discussion (Denscombe, 2017) it is important that a relationship is garnered with the participants if possible. As time was of the essence, some ice breakers were carried out with all groups to relax all participants before the discussions began.

Focus groups yield a collective rather than an individual viewpoint (Cohen et al., 2018). Although it is wise to be wary of convenience sampling, that is, using a particular sample because one has relatively easy access to them (Clark et al., 2021).

4.7.4.1 Parents' Focus Groups

When choosing a sample for the focus groups, the researcher ensured that each participant had the criteria required for the research (Cohen et al., 2018). For the parent focus group, each participant was a parent of a child in the respective school and each had a child with AEN, including some with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) and EAL.

Each focus group interview had three to four parents of children with AEN. In total, there were three parents' focus groups, one from each of the three participating schools, with 11 participants taking part altogether (see Appendix D: Focus Group Questions – Parents).

4.7.4.2 Children's Focus Groups

Two focus groups with a group of between four to five children, aged between 7–9 years old, from 1st – 3rd Class and four to five children, aged between 10–12 years old, from 4th – 6th Class, from each of the three participating schools took part in the research. In total, there were six children's focus groups with a total of 25 children taking part altogether.

It was decided to separate the children into two groups according to age to ascertain if there were similarities or differences encountered according to the child's developmental stage. Also, it is advisable not to have a greater age range than two years when holding a focus group with children (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Some of the groups were at the very cusp of that recommendation. Again, bearing in mind the criteria required to take part in the focus group, for the children's focus groups, a balance was needed of those with AEN, including some with SEBD and those who had also gained proficiency in EAL, and those who had none of these attributes (see Appendix E: Focus Group Questions – Children).

4.7.4.3 Reliability and Validity

A pilot focus group was conducted with three parents from the researcher's school who were not involved in the main study, to test the clarity and relevance of the focus group questions.

A pilot focus group was also conducted in advance with five children from the CRAG to assess the clarity, accessibility, and appropriateness of the questions from the children's perspective. The approach which was used to carry out the children's focus group was a children's rights-based approach with a particular emphasis on the participation rights of the children involved. To do this, a CRAG was formed, which enabled the children to work alongside adult researchers, advising on the research process, assisting with the

analysis and interpretation of the findings and providing insight on the main issues under investigation. Central to this work was the requirement for the children's capacity as co-researchers to be developed in understanding the issues being researched (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012).

When it came to the actual groups, as the children were not used to partaking in a discussion structured in this fashion, a "practice" focus group was facilitated with the children beforehand, where an unrelated topic was discussed. In this way the children knew what to expect and aimed to increase the level of their participation. An ice-breaker game was played first before the focus group began in earnest so that the children were comfortably engaged with each other before the research topic was explored.

The focus groups were held in a quiet, comfortable location where the children were undisturbed. Where practical, a round table was used so that all the children were able to see each other and interact accordingly.

All focus groups were conducted, audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The children from the CRAG were invited to help analyse the data garnered from the children's focus groups as CRAGs can help to further ensure the quality and credibility of the research (Mercieca & Jones, 2018). Each CRAG member was given a print-out of selected excerpts of children's responses. The CRAG members

were then asked reflective questions to instigate discussion and validate the responses (see Appendix F: CRAG Analysis of Data).

There are a few advantages and limitations associated with the use of focus groups.

4.7.4.4 Advantages

The nature of a focus group brings about insights that otherwise might remain hidden if a straightforward interview was carried out. This interaction allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the reasoning behind the views and opinions of the participants and gave the researcher an opportunity to explore further the underlying factors behind them (Denscombe, 2017) as each of the participants were known to share a common experience (Clark et al., 2021). Focus groups allow the researcher to study the ways in which individuals “make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it” (Clark et al., 2021, p. 1476). As a result, a good moderator steps back and lets the group talk among themselves (Denscombe, 2017).

A focus group is also economical on time while also allowing the generation of data quickly at a low cost (Cohen et al., 2018).

A focus group allows participants to speak out in their own words. However, one has to be aware, as the moderator of the focus group, of the necessity of ensuring a balance is struck so that less articulate participants are given the chance to speak also (Cohen et al., 2018).

It is equally as important to ensure a balance is kept between being “too directive and veering off the point” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 533).

The versatility of focus groups is another advantage as questions can be adapted to suit all participants’ levels and needs. For example, when holding a focus group with children it is important to avoid dichotomous questions which can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” as they will not elaborate as easily as adults (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

4.7.4.5 Limitations

There are some limitations associated with focus groups. Focus groups may not produce as much data as individual interviews. However, they still manage to produce a sufficient amount of data to work with (Cohen et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, the results of such a group are not easily quantifiable or generalisable and the data can also be difficult to analyse (Cohen et al., 2018; Denscombe, 2017). This type of qualitative research is not just about asking questions and applying techniques. It also involves listening and observing as much of what is communicated is communicated via tone of voice and body language. It is important that one listens not only to what is said but to how it is said. For example noting “the words used, the pauses, the style of speech and the tone of voice used” (McGivern, 2006, p. 205). Similarly, when transcribing the discussion, the potential for massive data loss arises

through a distortion of sorts or the reduction of complexity. The researcher needs to be aware that the audio-recording can filter out important contextual factors by neglecting the visual and non-verbal aspects of the interview (Mishler, 1986). Sometimes, these non-verbal and visual clues can provide more information than verbal means of communication (Cohen et al., 2018). To mitigate in both instances, field notes were taken in conjunction with the recordings. These notes proved invaluable during the transcription and analysis stages of this research, providing essential context to the recordings. Notably, these notes were particularly beneficial when communicating with parents, as the significant challenges they faced in their advocacy efforts were clearly conveyed. For example, the participants' body language as they offered insights into how everything is a “fight”, portrayed their weariness, especially among those parents of children with more complex needs. Their dedication and determination to advocate for their child relentlessly, regardless of the situation, were also clearly conveyed through their body language. These aide-mémoires were invaluable when it came to data analysis (see Appendix G: Sample Focus Group Field Notes).

It has been noted that the group dynamic of a focus group has the potential to be strained, leading to non-participation of some members of the group. Intragroup differences and conflict may arise (Cohen et al., 2018). Again, it is important to be vigilant when issues arising and to use one's moderation skills to ease this as much as

possible. In conjunction with this, for the data collection in this study, advice was sought from the principal in each school to help the researcher choose participants who complemented each other in the group situation and enabled the discussion to be facilitated effectively.

Finally, one needs to be aware of the size of the group as larger numbers can make the scheduling of the focus groups considerably harder. Larger groups can also be difficult to control. This is particularly relevant when carrying out a focus group with young participants (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Group size can also be a factor in inhibiting some participants from talking, and discussion among larger groups can be harder to record and gather data from (Denscombe, 2017). This was kept in mind when designing the research tools.

4.7.5 Visual Depictions

Towards the end of the focus group sessions, the children were engaged in another form of data collection. In this study, students' visual images were used as a means of data collection and as stimuli to understand their personal meanings, experiences, and interpretations of their school's culture. The images were created by students in the form of impromptu drawings after being asked "What kind of school would you like?" which was inspired by the suggested theme but without specific subject matter. This tool, used to further

gather children's perspectives, was inspired by the novel approach: *Drawing the Ideal Self* technique (Moran, 2001, 2021) and further developed by Williams and Hanke (2007).

The *Drawing the Ideal School* technique provided a structure for the children that enabled them to express their views using a mixture of drawing, talking and writing. Although the technique is essentially "content free", the pupils generated many elements of commonality. Since the children's responses, on the whole, were coherent and unequivocal, it was possible to draw out key themes with minimal adult interpretation, similar to Williams and Hanke (2007). The visuals revealed insights that might not have been elicited by more traditional verbal-oriented research methods, providing a deeper understanding of the children's experiences and perceptions.

The CRAG was also invited to examine the drawings which were collected, and their opinions were also gathered. The pupils were able to describe in some detail key environmental features of their ideal school.

The technique was a practical, time-efficient and popular tool with the children (see Appendix H: Sample Visual Depictions).

4.7.6 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used with the principal and the SENCo of each of the three schools. These interviews took place towards the end of the year as the interview design considered

previous data collected, setting each interview in greater context. Each interview began by asking the participants to consider, in their opinion, the traits of an inclusive school (see Appendices I & J for Semi-Structured Interview Prompts for Principal and SENCo, respectively).

Interviews are consistent with generating data for interpretivist methodologies (Mason, 2018). Principals were interviewed as school leaders, as they play a vital part in setting the vision for the school and building school culture and ethos. The research wanted to explore their ability to enable inclusion, student participation and voice. In-depth individual interviews were conducted face to face with the principal in order to capture participant perspectives and frames of meaning (Briggs et al., 2012) around the concept of inclusion and student voice.

SENcos play an important role in organising and leading the special education team and have the opportunity to build up a rapport with the most vulnerable children.

4.7.6.1 Reliability and Validity

The interview questions were piloted with two principals not involved in the study, as well as the SENCo from the researcher's school, to ensure clarity and relevance. The pilot interviews helped refine thoughts around some of the issues which the researcher

wished to raise in the semi-structured interviews. They also provided insights for possible prompts and follow-up questions.

4.7.6.2 Advantages

The interview schedule was developed to allow flexibility and the opportunity of exploring participants' views and experiences whilst also ensuring that the content of the interview would address the research questions. Throughout the interviews, the researcher sought to create a respondent-driven interaction by asking open questions, thus providing opportunities for description, explanation, and reflection. Using semi-structured interviews in this manner allowed the researcher to explore areas appropriate to the study, provide prompts, and open dialogue. This method allowed for flexibility and for dialogue to flow, thus giving participants space to think, speak and be heard. While conducting the interviews, it was important for the researcher to gain trust and establish rapport (Fontana & Frey, 1994), showing interest while also listening, enquiring with curiosity (Ritchie et al., 2013) and also allowing silence and time to answer (Denscombe, 2017). Research suggests that taking notes interferes with the flow of the conversation (Ritchie et al., 2013) so the interviews were recorded and transcribed later. These factors allowed purposeful conversation (Mason, 2018). From the researcher's point of view, this allowed rich, purposeful dialogue, between the researcher and the interviewees.

4.7.6.3 Limitations

Semi-structured interviews are a valuable qualitative research method, but they have certain limitations. Designing, conducting, and analysing semi-structured interviews can be time-consuming and require significant time and resources. The open-ended nature of the questions can lead to lengthy responses, making transcription and analysis labour-intensive. Analysis can be complex as they can produce data that is not pre-coded and has a relatively open format (Denscombe, 2017). The researcher did all this manually as it was felt that they would be fully immersed in the data by doing so.

The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows interviewers to explore topics in-depth, but it also opens the possibility for interviewer bias. It was vital to keep in mind that the interviewer's phrasing, tone, or follow-up questions may inadvertently influence participants' responses (Denscombe, 2017), so a concerted effort was made to maintain as neutral position.

Since semi-structured interviews do not strictly adhere to a set list of questions, different participants may be asked slightly different questions. This variability can make it challenging to compare responses across interviews (Patton, 2014).

Finally, the interpersonal nature of interviews can introduce ethical concerns, especially if there is a power imbalance between the interviewer and interviewee. Participants may feel pressured to

respond in certain ways, affecting the authenticity of the data. In this research, there was more a sense of collegiality rather than a power imbalance.

4.7.7 Document Analysis

A document analysis was carried out using a checklist first to identify whether certain policies and documents were in place in each school (see Appendix K). Then, a rubric was used to identify key elements such as clarity of purpose, inclusion of the child's voice and alignment with Department of Education and Youth (DEY) requirements (see Appendix L).

The documents are not included in the data for analysis, but they enabled the researcher to gain a clearer contextual understanding of each school's policies and procedures.

4.8 Ethics

This section aims to highlight the importance of ethics in conducting research and to adopt ethical principles for this research. The research was conducted observing the highest standards of ethical conduct and in accordance with principles and guidelines from the School of Education, TCD Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix M: TCD Ethical Approval).

4.8.1 Ethical Foundations

As the research involved close, open communication with the people involved, it was essential to pay close attention to ethical considerations in the conduct of the work. Winter (1996) outlines several ethical principles that must be upheld in research, including informed consent, confidentiality, and awareness of the consequences of the research. These principles, supported by Cohen et al. (2018), were central to the conduct of this study.

Winter (1996) advises the researcher to ensure that the relevant persons, committees and authorities have been consulted and that the principles guiding the work are accepted in advance by all. In alignment with this, permission was sought from the Chairperson of the Board of Management (BoM) at the researcher's own school where the CRAG was implemented (see Appendix N). All participants provided informed consent to take part in the study.

4.8.2 Informed Consent and Assent

Diener and Crandall (1978) define informed consent as a process involving competence, voluntarism, full information, and comprehension. Participants must be capable of making informed decisions, free from coercion, and fully aware of the research purpose, procedures, and time commitments (British Educational Research Association, 2024; Cohen et al., 2018).

Dornyei (2003) and Winter (1996) further stress the importance of transparency regarding the nature of the research. Participants must be fully informed about the process, including any personal biases or interests held by the researcher. Winter (1996, p. 17) outlines that “the wishes of those who do not wish to participate must be respected”. Similarly, Dornyei (2003, p. 70) outlines that “no undue pressure should be brought to bear...respondents are perfectly within their rights to refuse to answer questions without offering any explanation.” This was all ensured through written information shared in advance and reinforced verbally during interviews, focus groups, and CRAG meetings. The prospective participants signed a statement to give their consent (see Appendices O, P, Q, and R seeking Principal, SENCo, Parent and Teacher/BoM consent, respectively).

As children under 18 were involved in the study, obtaining consent from their parents/guardians was essential. A letter was sent to the parents/guardians of the children partaking in the CRAG and focus groups explaining what the research entailed and asking for permission for the involvement of their children (see Appendices S & T). While an information meeting was offered to parents/guardians, it was not necessary.

Assent was also sought from each child in a manner they could relate to with child-friendly language and images, appropriate to their age

and understanding (see Appendices U & V). The researcher spoke to the children and explained the context of the research and the implications of their involvement in a child-friendly manner. For example, the researcher explained that:

I will ask you some questions about your school. I will also ask you questions about how you learn best and how you think children can feel part of school. All the questions will be asked to the group and if you do not want to answer you do not have to. It is not scary and will be just like having a little chat.

In the case of the children, their parent/guardian signed a statement to give their consent. The children's informed assent was also sought in writing. This was presented in a simple, clear, child-friendly manner. The researcher went through the document with the children prior to their signing, ensuring clarity regarding contributions to the research, and management of realistic expectations both before and during the research (Ackermann, 2021). The children were aware that they could withdraw at any time without having to give an explanation, up to the point where the data was fully anonymised. After that stage, withdrawal was no longer possible, as the data was no longer identifiable.

When working with the children, icebreaker games were used prior to data collection, where the researcher practised chatting with the

children about their favourite TV programmes to get them used to conversing together and aid their comfort with the researcher.

All participants, including children and their parents/guardians, were given the opportunity to speak to the researcher on a one-to-one basis if they had any further questions or issues.

4.8.3 Anonymity and confidentiality

Anonymity and confidentiality must be taken into account when carrying out research such as this. Regarding anonymity, the identity of those taking part was unknown to those outside of the research team. Where a social picture of a particular individual was provided, a pseudonym was given. At the beginning of the focus groups, the researcher spoke to the participants about the importance of confidentiality and how each other's confidentiality was to be respected and upheld. When transcribing the interviews and focus groups, the researcher ensured that a coding system was put in place so as to protect participants' identities, as "people have the right to privacy and the researcher must keep collected data confidential" (Goddard & Melville, 2004, p. 49). Winter (1996) similarly emphasises this obligation. However, confidentiality was not fully guaranteed as the information elicited through data collection is outlined in the findings.

4.8.4 Data Protection

Regarding data protection, the researcher ensured that permission was granted to store and file data for a certain period as specified in the TCD Data Protection Policy. The purpose of this was clearly explained and written permission was acquired as it is essential that “descriptions of others’ work and points of view” are “negotiated with those concerned before being published” ensuring “equal access to information generated by the process for all participants” (Winter, 1996, p. 17).

4.9 Recruitment of Participants

There was a meet-and-greet set up in each participating school between the researcher and the principal. Following consultation with the principal in each school, participants were invited to take part in the research. Emails with a link to the questionnaire were distributed to all teachers and members of the BoM. Children were identified through the principal of each of the schools. Care was taken so it was not obvious that some children were chosen because they had an AEN. Principals approached parents they considered likely to be both willing and comfortable to participate in the research, with sensitivity to the potential vulnerability of those whose children have additional needs.

4.10 Analysis of Data

Regarding analysis of the data, a data collection matrix was developed to specify and track the volume and type of information collected from each source. Data analysis proceeded in two stages. Stage one comprised within-case analysis, which entailed describing each case in detail and identifying key themes, while stage two consisted of cross-case analysis, identifying themes and patterns across all cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Thematic analysis was conducted in line with the Braun and Clarke six-stage approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2021) which involved:

1. **Familiarisation with the data** – All CRAG notes, questionnaire open-text responses, focus group and interview transcripts, were read and re-read, with early impressions noted in a reflexive research journal.
2. **Generating initial codes** – Segments of data relevant to the research questions were systematically coded by hand, using both descriptive and interpretive codes.
3. **Searching for themes** – Related codes were grouped together into potential themes, guided by the conceptual lens of inclusion, student voice, and leadership.

4. **Reviewing themes** – Themes were checked against the coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. Some themes were merged or refined at this stage.
5. **Defining and naming themes** – Each theme was clearly defined, capturing its scope, focus, and relationship to the overall research questions.
6. **Producing the report** – Final themes were illustrated with data extracts, linking the analysis to the literature and highlighting the voices of children, teachers, leaders, and parents.

This six-phase framework was adapted for the multiple-case study design of this research. Figure 4.1 - Stages of Thematic Analysis Incorporating Within-Case and Cross-Case Analysis below illustrates the sequential stages from raw data through coding, theme development, and within-case analysis, to the final cross-case synthesis and reporting which guided the qualitative analysis.

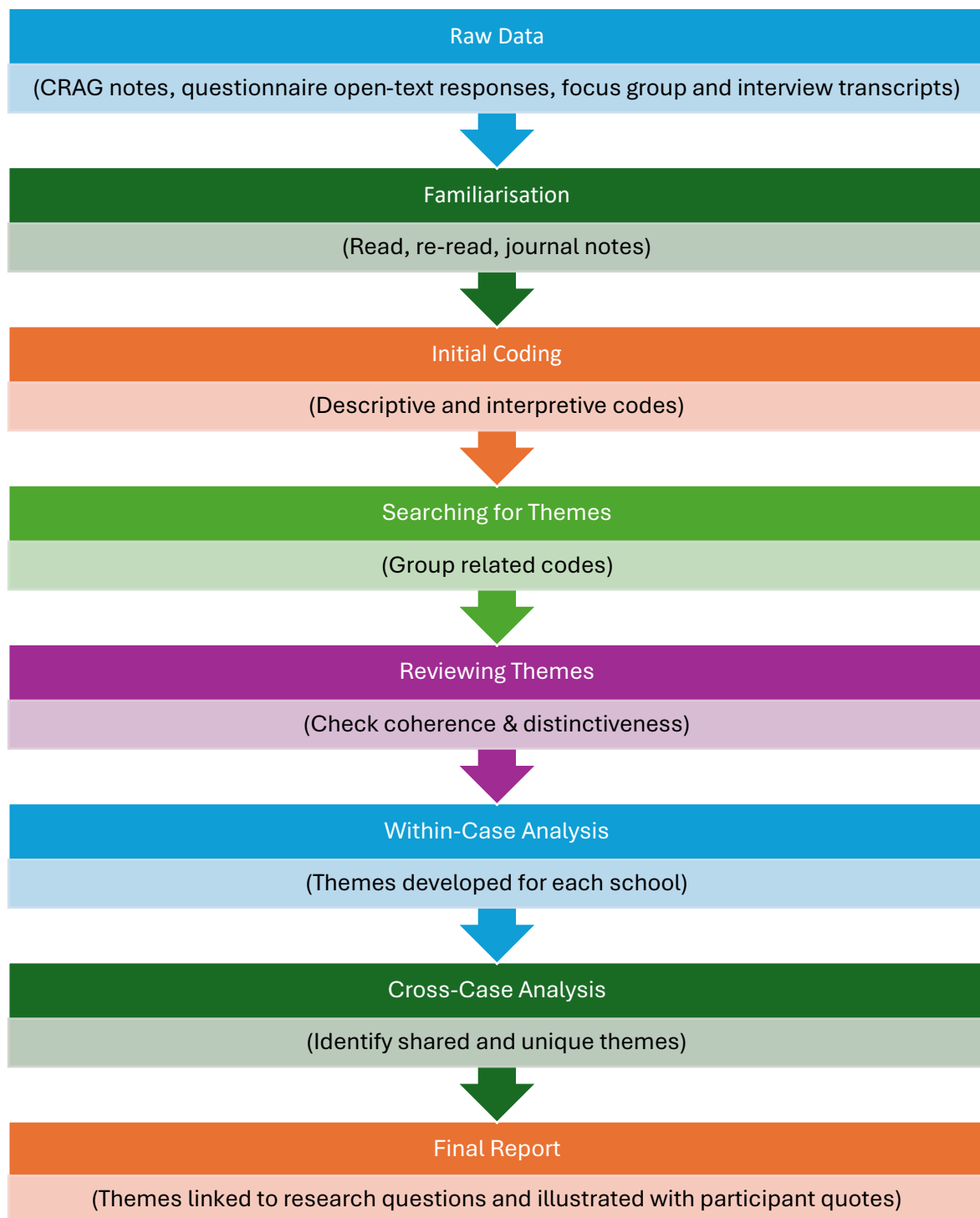


Figure 4.1 - Stages of Thematic Analysis Incorporating Within-Case and Cross-Case Analysis

This approach to thematic analysis was used as it has clear, explicit procedures, making the analysis approachable, systematic, and rigorous for this study.

4.10.1 Quantitative Data

Closed-question data from the teacher and Board of Management questionnaires were analysed using the online survey software Survey Monkey, which generated descriptive statistics. Open-text responses within these questionnaires underwent thematic analysis utilising the Braun and Clarke approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2021), allowing integration of quantitative and qualitative insights.

4.10.2 Qualitative Data

Each focus group discussion and interview were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The decision was made to transcribe the recordings manually to ensure an authentic representation of the participants, in particular the children's voices and to engage deeply with their perspectives. This process required multiple revisions to verify accuracy, with specific sections revisited to confirm participants' exact words. Through full immersion in the recordings, the participants' voices were transcribed in a manner that remained as true as possible to their original expressions.

Computer software was not used for the qualitative data analysis. It was felt that full personal immersion was more aligned with the

nature of the study. This decision reflected the relational and participatory nature of the study, enabling closer attention to the nuances of speech, tone, and emphasis. Thematic analysis began with broad, literature-informed categories and evolved inductively through constant comparison, with themes refined through multiple iterations.

4.11 Conclusion

This research presented many challenges and successes. One of the most prominent challenges was managing the logistics of a multiple-case study across three schools. It was important to bear in mind the consistency of the data collection in each school, despite the varying school cultures, contexts and time constraints. Maintaining consistency in data collection while remaining sensitive to context was essential.

It was vital to have an open, honest dialogue with each principal in the first instance, addressing any issues or concerns. It was crucial to earn the trust of each of the participants, in particular the children, parents and teachers with whom I had in-depth personal contact. This was achieved by being very transparent with the participants.

Careful ethical consideration had to be given to the involvement of the children, and care taken to ensure each child knew they had an important, equal role in the focus groups regardless of their ability.

It was essential to consider the privilege I held in being allowed to participate in the dialogue with parents sharing the story of their journey with their children, many of whom had experienced challenging paths.

Balancing my dual role as a leader in education and as a researcher was crucial, yet sometimes challenging, particularly regarding the conflicting aspects of both roles and the challenge of maintaining objectivity. I had to be very mindful of potential biases. I found myself continually negotiating my positionality, managing ethical considerations and critically reflecting on how my role as a leader influenced interactions and interpretations during the research process. These dynamics required deliberate strategies and continuous reflexivity to ensure integrity, credibility, and trustworthiness in my study. I found maintaining my research journal to be a very useful tool in this regard.

Analysing large quantities of data was challenging and required extensive organisation and diligence. It was a complex and time-intensive process. Thematic analysis provided a transparent, replicable method for progressing from raw data to meaningful themes, ensuring that the findings remained grounded in participants' lived experiences while addressing the research questions.

The use of methodological triangulation significantly strengthened the study's validity by providing multiple perspectives on inclusive education, student voice and leadership.

Using the CRAG proved highly successful in ensuring that children actively shaped the research process and analysed the data, leading to richer, more authentic insights. The engagement of the children in the research was a real success.

The engagement and willingness of all participants to share their experiences contributed to the depth and quality of the data collected.

Furthermore, the study's alignment with social constructivism provided a strong theoretical foundation for understanding how inclusion, student voice and leadership are conceptualised and enacted in each of these primary school settings.

With the methodological approaches of this research now addressed, attention will turn to the statement of the results.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the themes and subsequent findings that arose from the research. This research investigates the perspectives of inclusive education reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools. It investigates if the voice of the child is heard as part of inclusive practice and, if so, how. It also examines the effect of leadership on inclusive education.

As detailed in previous chapters, the research for this study was carried out in three primary schools of varying contexts. The first school, School A, is a small, urban school with multi-grade classes. The second school, School B, is a medium-sized, rural, single-stream school. The third school, School C, is a large, urban, triple-stream school with two special classes for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Firstly, a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) was formed with 10 children from the Student Council in the school of which the researcher is principal. These children helped design the questions used in the focus groups with the children in the three case study schools. The children helped choose the language of the questions to ensure they were understood and set at an appropriate level. The

CRAG also helped interpret and analyse the data garnered from the children's focus groups and visual depictions at a later stage.

In each school, questionnaires were issued to all teachers and the Board of Management (BoM). A focus group interview was held with a group of four to five children from 1st – 3rd Class and a group of four to five children from 4th – 6th Class. Some of the children had additional educational needs (AEN). Artwork was gathered from the children participating in the focus groups, portraying their image of a school they would like to attend and a school they would not like to attend. A focus group interview was held in each school with four parents of children with AEN. A semi-structured interview was held with the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) and the principal separately. Finally, a document analysis was carried out on relevant documents, where available, pertaining to each school, such as the Special Educational Needs (SEN) policy, the Code of Behaviour policy, the English as an Additional Language (EAL) policy, and a selection of School Support Plans (SSPs).

Four key themes emerged when analysing the research. These were:

1. The voice of the child.
2. The importance of leadership in facilitating inclusion and the voice of the child.
3. The importance of relationships and advocacy.
4. Opportunities for and barriers to inclusion.

These four themes and subsequent subthemes presented in this chapter were generated through the process outlined in Figure 4.1 - Stages of Thematic Analysis Incorporating Within-Case and Cross-Case Analysis (see Chapter 4). Each school was analysed individually in the within-case stage to capture its unique context and perspectives, followed by a cross-case synthesis that identified both commonalities and distinct elements across the three cases. This process ensured that the findings are grounded in a systematic, transparent analysis that reflects the voices of all participants, including children, teachers, leaders, and parents.

To illustrate the process of thematic analysis, the following table provides some worked examples.

Table 5.1 - *Sample of Process of Thematic Analysis*

Data Extract (Raw Quote)	Initial Codes	Category / Sub-theme	Theme
“Sometimes we get to say what games we want to play in P.E., but we never get asked about what we learn in class.” (Senior Child 3, School C)	• Student voice limited to minor decisions • Lack of input into learning	Power Dynamics	Voice of the Child
“We want to help every child, but with over 30 in the class and no extra support, you can’t	• Large class sizes • Lack of resources	Structural barriers to inclusion	Barriers to Inclusion

Data Extract (Raw Quote)	Initial Codes	Category / Sub-theme	Theme
meet everyone's needs properly." (Teacher 4, Questionnaire)	• Struggle with differentiation		
"The SENCo is the first person I go to when I'm worried about my child. She really listens." (Parent 4, School A)	• SENCo as first point of contact • Trusting relationships • Parental partnership	SENCo role	Relationships & Advocacy/ Leadership

Figure 5.1 below provides a visual representation of the mixed-methods design used in this research. Both qualitative (CRAIG, focus groups, interviews, open questions in questionnaires, document analysis, artwork) and quantitative (Likert-scale questionnaires, demographic data) strands informed the study. These were analysed through thematic analysis, as outlined above, and descriptive statistics, then mapped and triangulated across cases, with CRAIG input refining themes. The integration of both strands, guided by social constructivism, produced the final findings.

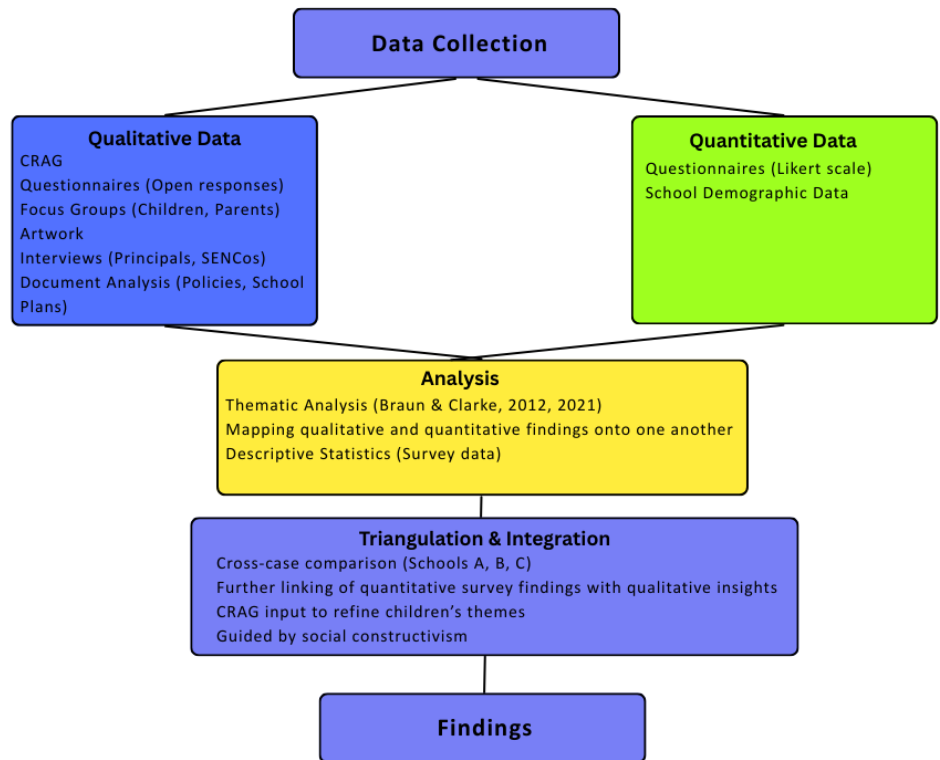


Figure 5.1 - *Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Data in a Mixed-Methods Design*

Each of the sessions with the CRAG and the focus groups held with both the children and parents were transcribed by hand as it was felt that a better sense of the diverse perspectives of the participants could be garnered. It was also felt that transcribing the children's focus groups, in particular, enabled a significant connection to their visual representations. As a result, having their pictures available during transcription allowed for more accurate identification of the key elements in their drawings.

Each of the semi-structured interviews with the principals and

SENCos was also transcribed by hand. The surveys completed by teachers and BoM were collected and analysed with the help of the online survey software program Survey Monkey.

Finally, a document analysis was carried out using a checklist to identify whether certain policies and documents were in place. Then, a rubric was used to identify key elements such as clarity of purpose, inclusion of the child's voice and alignment with Department of Education and Youth (DEY) requirements. It is important to note that the documents are not included in the data for analysis, but they enabled the researcher to gain a clearer contextual understanding of each school's policies and procedures.

I will now discuss each theme and subsequent subthemes in more detail.

5.2 The Voice of the Child

This section will explore how the voice of the child is heard and manifested throughout the findings.

5.2.1 Insight from the Children's Advisory Research Group (CRAG)

The purpose of forming the Children's Advisory Research Group (CRAG) was to elicit the reality and value of student voice in each school involved in the research (see Appendix W: Sample CRAG Feedback). The children in the CRAG raised the topic of student voice and being heard immediately. They identified avenues such as the

Student Council, Active Committee, Green Schools Committee and other usual agents of democracy throughout the school as ways for student voice to be heard. All three case study schools in the research typically used these methods to gather student feedback and provide a pathway for the voice of the child to be heard. Answers were somewhat more limited when pressed more on other ways in which student voice is heard.

The CRAG acknowledged that the voice of the child can sometimes be conveyed through non-verbal means. This prompted the children to reflect on what being heard means, with the children advocating for a more inclusive understanding of participation and representation. One of the suggestions for the focus groups was to allow children to draw or write as their form of input. This built on the endorsement from the CRAG to provide a visual element in the research to include children who are more quietly spoken or reluctant to input verbally.

From the CRAG, the children identified the following two statements as being rarely true: *Children have a say about what they learn in school*, and *children are given enough information to understand why teachers make certain decisions in school*.

The CRAG provided a rich dialogue and gave insight into how the children viewed authority, respect, decision-making, and interaction

within a school environment. This insight further honed the questions asked in the children's focus groups. At its core, the conversation with the children identified a significant source of disparity in power dynamics between the children and adults and the children's perspectives on the roles and influence of various school staff. The children expressed concerns about feeling unheard in decision-making processes and the effectiveness of specific school policies such as the Behaviour policy. Additionally, the children believed mutual respect and understanding were important in fostering a more harmonious school community. The children pointed out that they are rarely told how decisions that affect them are made. The children both in the CRAG and the focus groups indicated that children are frequently invited to express opinions on school matters but that teachers have the final say. This was often a source of frustration and disappointment for them.

The CRAG presented a rich dialogue focused on how the children would like to see the creation of an inclusive, supportive, and communicative environment within schools. Some of the suggestions from the children were strategic considerations for easing new individuals into educational settings, such as being asked if they would like to sit beside someone they knew. The children identified the need to frame questions to yield genuine student feedback. The children also highlighted a need to emphasise how inclusivity and equality could be fostered among students. The children spoke about

how genuine inclusivity and equality are fostered in some of their schools through end-of-week reward programmes and regular assemblies.

5.2.2 Power Dynamics

The discussions from the CRAG were indicative of the results from the focus groups with the children across the three schools. The children interviewed in the focus groups were challenged to think of ways in which their voice was heard meaningfully in the classroom outside of the usual democratic means. The children questioned why they could not have more input into decisions around their learning content. These answers came primarily from children with no typical additional needs. However, for those children with additional needs, it was apparent through their answers and the answers of their parents and school personnel that their input was limited even further. There was an even more significant challenge for their voice to be heard and for their feedback to be further implemented in teaching and learning for them. Often, plans for learning or for behaviour were drawn up with a combined effort of the teacher, special needs assistant (SNA) and parental involvement. For the student support plans in two schools, the document *My Thoughts about School Checklist* (National Educational Psychological Service, 2007, p. 11) formed part of the review at the beginning of each school year (see Appendix X). This document is one of the support

documents that should be completed as part of creating a Student Support File. However, children were not always involved directly in the process, nor was feedback sought from them once the plan was implemented. There is a challenge for their voice to be heard meaningfully in these plans. It was apparent that children in all three schools were eager to play a more prominent role in collaborative decision-making across the curriculum and the teaching methodologies employed to engage them in their learning.

The children felt an imbalance of power in the school environment when it came to decision-making. The children indicated that the principal, teachers, and other authority figures often felt the need to command respect because of their role in the school. The children did feel they were respected in their schools, but they did not have the same ability to communicate their needs. One child commented on the lack of opportunity to ask for help, saying, “The class teacher is all go, go, go...I find Irish really difficult. I don’t know how to write a sentence. I can’t keep asking the teacher questions, so I ask my friends” (Senior Child 4, School A).

The children indicated that they felt the decision-making lay with those in authority. They spoke about the importance of mutual respect and understanding between staff and children and also between different age groups of children throughout the school. In one school, the system of buddying between pairs of classes, where,

for example, 6th Class children help with physical education (PE) in Junior Infant classes, was very much valued and felt to be one way of improving relationships with children of different ages. The children felt it also enabled older children to advocate for the needs of younger children. It allowed their voice to be regarded as important.

The children involved in this research wished to encourage more student involvement in school governance and decision-making processes, not only for children with additional needs throughout the school but also for children who do not require the same support for their learning and engagement.

In each focus group, the conversation came back repeatedly to the children feeling they were not being heard and understood by figures of authority within their school. The children queried whether their teachers could include a more inclusive communication approach for ascertaining their opinions. Some of the suggestions for this were secret ballots, one-to-one conversations and student planning groups within the classroom.

The CRAG aimed to assess the perspectives of the children involved regarding whose voices are acknowledged and valued, with particular attention to the experiences of quieter individuals or those who do not follow typical communication patterns. The fact was highlighted that children who struggle to engage in a school setting are often the children who do not have a say in decisions made for them. However,

the children in some of the focus groups were very clear about how the SNA often advocates for these children, with one child conveying, “She says everything I can’t say or don’t want to” (Senior Child 4, School B).

The children identified a mostly top-down structure where teacher authority often predominates, with limited student input in educational activities and school policies. For example, the children in the CRAG expressed that children are rarely asked for their opinions about the quality of education teachers offer.

While students have avenues to express opinions, these are often deemed superficial—a sentiment echoed in the discussions on student-led projects and the communication of rationales for decisions. Additionally, issues regarding equality and inclusion highlight perceived inequities in treatment and opportunities amongst the children, with one child saying, “Those with the loudest voice are being heard and listened to the most” (Child 1, CRAG).

The children were aware that some of their classmates with additional needs could not partake in an activity for whatever reason, including behaviour. One of the children questioned if a classmate’s behaviour might alter if they felt their needs and desires were being listened to, rather than them perhaps feeling a need to act out. The children spoke about ways to empower children to contribute meaningfully to their learning experiences and school community,

such as weekly or even daily class meetings, ensuring both their emotional and physical needs are met.

5.2.3 The Hardest to Hear Voices

It is apparent from the findings that the voice of the child with AEN is more difficult to hear. It is vital that the child with AEN is heard just as clearly as others, with one child stating, “Teachers sometimes forget even if you don’t get as much work done we are trying our best. I sometimes feel like I’m sitting there and everyone else is getting praised” (Senior Child 2, School A).

The voice of the child with AEN, when listened to, is powerful and well respected by the other children, with another child observing, “Yes, it would be good if there was less comparison and favouritism. There is praise for those who get lots of work done. But there should be praise for everyone who does their best” (Senior Child 3, School A).

It also draws attention to the fact that what benefits the learning of children with AEN, in practice, can be to the benefit of all children, with one child conveying some ideas of how to make the subjects she finds a bit more difficult fun, “It would be great to make maths and Irish more fun. Maybe with drama or games. It helps better when it’s put in a way you already know. Like the Times Table song or a game” (Senior Child 4, School A).

One of the parents spoke about her child's experience after moving to this new school. She feels that she is being listened to, and this has had a very positive impact on her, "She's much more relaxed.... [she] sleeps better, less tummy aches, less not wanting to go to school in the morning" (Parent 1, School A).

This child's parents saw a marked difference in her attitude to learning, and her confidence in herself.

5.2.4 The Voice of the Child in Policy

Each school had a Special Educational Needs (SEN) Policy, Code of Behaviour Policy and English as an Additional Language (EAL) Policy. It is worth noting that none of the three schools involved in the research had a specific inclusion policy.

There appeared to be disparity, especially in the view of the children, with how these documents are enacted in the day-to-day running of the school and "lived" in practice. Throughout the documents, there was minimal reference to the children's input. There were few marked references or step-by-step guidelines on how children's opinions could be garnered or how their voices could be heard in any of these policies. The children were not consulted in any review of these policies within the school.

5.2.5 Children's Depictions of Their Ideal School

As the children illustrated and articulated their visions of their ideal school environments, themes of inclusivity, creativity, friendship and flexible learning came to the forefront.

From a visual perspective, the children's artistic depictions of their "ideal school" were mostly bright and colourful. Many of these depictions prominently featured multi-coloured buildings. The children articulated visions of idyllic educational environments that were colourful, supportive, and nurturing. Teachers had smiles on their faces and were seen to be actively engaged with the children. It was not uncommon for there to be imaginative ideas expressed about highly impressive playgrounds in the yards. Some children also envisioned scenarios where homework was non-existent. This is not yet an active policy in any of the schools included in this research. However, in one school, the SENCo mooted that a review of the Homework policy in its entirety is overdue, and a discussion around the merits of homework would be scheduled as part of this review.

Many children imagined their perfect school as a place where kindness and learning through fun is prioritised. The children examined the difference between their actual school experiences and their imaginative ideals. The senior focus group children in School B detailed their ideal schools as nurturing places that were engaging

and well-equipped. Many of the children acknowledged that they believed their school lived up to this reality, in part at least, already.

In the focus groups, particularly with children from 4th – 6th Class, discussions around their ideal school tended to focus on social aspects, including friendships, peer interactions, and teacher-child dynamics. The children emphasised harmonious relationships and supportive adult presence as central to their positive school experience.

Poor infrastructure and strict punitive measures were far from the ideal portrayed by the children. For their visual depictions of their non-ideal school, there was a noticeable lack of colour. The children in the junior focus groups used unappealing images, for example, including illustrations of spiders which evoked feelings of being scared in their non-ideal school. One child described her non-ideal school as a place where “children say mean things to each other” (Junior Child 1, School A).

Illustrations from the senior focus groups depicted images of children being left out and isolated. Teachers were cross and unhelpful. The classroom décor was very stark.

Throughout the focus groups, each child was very decisive about what they enjoyed about school, ranging from art, PE, and drama to using concrete materials in maths and sometimes creative writing. On the flip side, these activities incited dread in some of the other

children. For example, a child with a physical disability in School A hated the idea of writing and lamented how he doesn't get to use information technology (IT) in as productive a way and as often as he would like. This notion was also reiterated by his parent and other parents in the parent focus groups. It prompted the children in his group to speak about the merits of technology. They questioned why teachers seemed to be hesitant about its use in the classroom, instead often insisting on handwriting as the primary way of note-taking or completing work. The children acknowledged how technology could be useful if children who have dyspraxia and find handwriting difficult, for example, could dictate. This topic was later reiterated by the children in the senior focus group in School C. They expressed dissatisfaction with the usage and access to technological resources such as computer tablets, mentioning that their potential is underutilised. They suggested that technology could play a much more integral part in their learning.

In general, activity-led subjects seemed to hold the most favourable position for the majority of the children. They really enjoyed moving around, giving examples like, "Games help me remember best" (Junior Child 3, School B) and "GoNoodle is one of my favourite parts of the day" (Junior Child 2, School B). GoNoodle is a free online tool for educators designed to help keep students moving and active while at school.

Break time was also a firm favourite for some children. However, it is worth noting that this opinion was not held as strongly for some of the children with additional needs, particularly those who struggled socially. One child, in particular, expressed the loneliness he often feels at break time. He expressed his inability to run as fast as his peers and so didn't want to join those games, "Everyone runs so fast, and I can't keep up. It's not fun when I'm always last" (Senior Child 3, School A).

Whilst PE is a common favourite subject with the senior focus group of children in School A, the challenges of this subject for other children were discussed and noted without any prompting from the researcher. The children discussed how another adult is so necessary for a particular child to partake:

Senior Child 2, School A: Molly really needs Fiona to be able to join in.

Senior Child 4, School A: Yeah, without her, it's kinda hard for her to really be part of the game.

Senior Child 2, School A: But sometimes Fiona isn't there, so she just watches or does something else.

Senior Child 5, School A: Or she ends up being the referee instead of actually playing with us.

Senior Child 2, School A: Yeah, it's not really fair. She should be able to play too.

(Senior Children, School A)

The children questioned why there couldn't be more assistance from adults to help navigate these very obvious challenges.

Two of the children in School A expressed concern about children being so obviously excluded from certain activities due to the fear of being physically hurt. They were very conscious of the fact that not all children can participate equally, whilst also clarifying that this doesn't mean everyone doing exactly the same thing. The lack of personnel to deliver appropriate support for a particular child to partake meaningfully was at the forefront of their minds. One of these children does not have a physical disability but does have a learning difficulty and felt excluded in other ways, in other subjects.

The children in the senior focus group in School B expressed appreciation for having some say in their educational activities, like choosing reading methods or art projects, with one child conveying, "I love project work as we normally get to choose the topic to base it on. Sometimes we also get to choose our partner if we do it in pairs or in a group" (Senior Child 3, School B).

However, there was an acknowledgement of the need for some structure, as total autonomy could lead to chaos, "Yeah, but like

some kids would just choose ... 900 pizza parties!" (Senior Child 2, School C)

The children also articulated their desire for more pleasing structures physically within the school environment so that everyone feels comfortable and welcome.

In School A, the children gave a multifaceted glimpse into their school experiences, focusing on what they found enjoyable or challenging. They captured the essence of school life as shaped by educational activities, personal interests, social dynamics, and areas for potential improvement. The children's narratives suggested a desire for a balanced and supportive environment reinforced by inclusive practices and sufficient facilities to promote a positive educational journey. More broadly, they revealed insights into their perspectives on creating ideal learning spaces that cater adequately to both educational and leisure needs.

Some of the children expressed how they loved interactive games, especially in the morning. For some of the children, the familiarity of their routine in the morning was so important and set them up for the day. One of the children expressed that if they have a bad start in the morning, their day is ruined.

The children were enabled to work autonomously on art and writing, with one child mentioning how doing this work at home and then bringing it in for the teacher to see after the holidays was really

important to him. The other children praised this work, with one child gushing, “It was like an artist’s drawing” (Senior Child 2, School B).

The conversation with the junior focus group in School C captured a vivid picture of the children’s educational experience, highlighting a balance of enjoyment, challenges, and aspirations within their school environment. A strong theme of inclusivity and support was underlying in the discussion, evidenced by the roles of SNAs or “helpers” as the children referred to them in their classrooms and the integration of children with diverse needs.

The children referenced children coming in from the autism classes and how they looked forward to these children joining for certain lessons.

Additionally, there was a lively discussion about ideal schools valuing children’s creativity.

5.2.6 Relationships and Social Interaction

The value of friends and social relationships was identified as a very important aspect of a positive experience for the children in school. These social connections were very much missed outside of school time and are highly valued by the children. The opportunities for these friendships and connections to form in school were acknowledged. Some of the children admitted that they have often found this difficult for themselves. Structures have been put in place sometimes to help them. The children talked about interventions

that can help, such as yard buddies and being taught how to make friends by their teachers. They also spoke about other children asking them to join in games. The need to keep anti-bullying awareness education at the forefront emerged. Some of the children acknowledged how some children can be seen as an “easy target”. However, it is evident that they are also protective of some children in their class who could be identified as being “an easy target” (Senior Child 2, School B).

The children discussed interactions with teachers, including feelings of injustice and not being heard. They mentioned instances where they felt wrongly accused or misunderstood by teachers, implying a need for better communication and improved channels of communication.

Across all three schools, when asked who makes all the important decisions, there was no mention of student voice. It was entirely the principal, vice principal and other members of staff.

For the children with additional needs, the role of their support teacher was very significant. That relationship was vital to them: “Miss Simpson [the SET teacher] just kind of gets kids more ... She likes to take her time with things which I think is better. It’s less stress” (Senior Child 1, School A). The essential role of the advocacy of the SET teacher for the children was apparent in the discussions, with another child stating, “[My SET] teacher plans all the work. I

don't really get any say in what I learn, but she knows where to help me" (Senior Child 3, School B).

The SENCo in School B speaks of helping the children with skills which build up "an armour" for when they are in their mainstream classroom. This is recognised by the children: "The SET teacher takes anyone who needs help. She explains things in a different way.... she sometimes does stories with me too" (Junior Child 2, School B).

In School B, the children discussed how they perceived making and maintaining friendships. Some children found it much easier than others to make friends, while others experienced difficulty due to social barriers. The importance of supportive relationships both from teachers and their peers was highlighted again. It was apparent that the majority of the children expressed a strong desire for social connection.

However, it is clear from the conversation that certain children do play on their own and may be left out. The children did not hide this in their discussions. In the junior focus group in School A, it was acknowledged explicitly that the SNA played a vital role in inviting children into the game, with both the child and his peers aware of this.

Some of the children's reliance on the SNA is reiterated numerous times by both children with and without additional needs. The children's relationship with the SNA is relevant in the classroom and

outside. For one child who is physically impaired, it appears that the SNA is the person who plays with him in the yard. She enables the other children to access a game with him. When asked who helps the children, SNAs were the first to be mentioned.

The children suggested buddy benches as a way for improving the yard and making a positive change in the school.

5.2.7 Integration of Autism Classes

Only one of the schools involved in the research has autism classes. The perspective of the children around this was interesting. Not all the children involved in the focus groups in this school had any interactions with children from the autism classes, as only some classes had children from the autism classes joining their mainstream classes. As one child said, “We do see them at lunch sometimes” (Junior Child 3, School C). One of the children’s opinions was that the children in the autism class “do most stuff with us guys” (Junior Child 2, School C). However, other children had the exact opposite opinion and viewed the children from the autism classes as an entirely separate entity.

The importance of an SNA for these children was reiterated. In the yard, children from the autism classes wear a “green bib” (Junior Child 2, School C). This is explained from one child’s perspective, saying, “We are gentle with them” (Junior Child 2, School C), which in

part is validated by the SENCo in the school saying, “For us we can see them and make sure everything is ok” (SENCo, School C).

Another child said, “The children in the special class don’t really do work—they go outside, and they have a trampoline” (Junior Child 5, School C). The language “special class” was used even though the autism classes have specific names. Whilst there was a robust debate around this child’s statement, it does appear that there is a substantial piece of work to be done with the children around the perspectives of the autism classes in the school.

Another child said they “go once or twice [to the autism classes play centre] if we do good work. One of the boys goes there when he has five stars” (Junior Child 4, School C). Another said, “On Blue Day, we went into the building.” (Junior Child 3, School C). One of the children observed that the children in the autism classes “seem very happy in school” (Junior Child 1, School C). Teasing this out, the child seemed to think because they have special equipment in their centre, they have a better time in school.

Overall, the children felt that all the children should have interactions together. One child articulated that they feel that it is important that “everyone gets on well together” (Junior Child 2, School C).

5.2.8 Positive Effects of Student Voice in Schools

Student voice has many benefits for the culture of the school. A sense of belonging, agency and togetherness is sensed with one child exclaiming:

I like it here! My teacher always listens to me, and I have lots of friends to play with... when I don't understand something, my friends help me, and when I can, I help them too ... it makes me very happy.

(Junior Child 1, School C)

Furthermore, the children provided invaluable insights and solutions to problems from their own perspective, with some of their suggestions being incredibly insightful and unprompted. For example, the senior focus group children in School C started chatting about how to help make a new child who spoke English as an additional language feel welcome. One child suggested, "It would help if a new child sits beside someone with the same language to help them feel more welcome at the start" (Senior Child 3, School C).

5.2.9 Challenges to Inclusion from the Perspective of the Children

This section explores some of the challenges to inclusion as experienced and articulated by the children involved in this study.

5.2.9.1 Homework

The challenge of homework arose again and again, with the older children questioning its purpose, adding that it often provides a source of stress and exhaustion, impeding their ability to relax and, perhaps most importantly, play. The children also felt it was an unnecessary burden on children who struggled in school already. A lively debate ensued with the senior focus group in School A over how some children get much less homework and the reasons behind this.

5.2.9.2 Physical Environment

Across the three schools there appeared to be an institutional effort indicated to support academic and social development. However, there appears to be differing levels of execution throughout due to varying challenges of time and personnel.

The senior focus group in School B expressed a clear preference for inclusive, supportive, and engaging educational settings catering to both their academic and social needs. They said that if asked, they would make physical changes to the classroom regarding furniture arrangements and general classroom environment, indicating preferences for classroom environments that, in their opinion, enhance learning. Two of the children said they would like more room to work in groups.

The environment in the classroom is mentioned a few times across the children's focus groups when it comes to difficulties in accessing

the curriculum and producing their own work. The children in the senior focus group in School A spoke about how busy the classroom can get and how noisy it can become. This is exacerbated as it is a multi-grade classroom, so it is extremely busy and often relies on one class to work independently by times. One child spoke about her inability to both think and hear the teacher, “Sometimes, it’s just *too* noisy. I try to listen, but I can’t hear the teacher properly” (Senior Child 2, School A). Another child expressed a similar frustration, “Yeah, when everyone’s talking or when another group is doing something different, it’s so hard to concentrate” (Senior Child 1, School A).

Most of the children have a choice of activities at break time, which they are delighted about.

5.2.9.3 Bullying and Exclusion

The children mentioned experiencing bullying and exclusion, with some instances involving negative remarks about academic abilities. The children felt that schools should have better systems in place to handle bullying and ensure inclusion. When prompted by the researcher that there are specific procedures in place in school, they stated that these procedures are not always made known to them, yet they are the individuals who are often at the face of nasty behaviour.

Overall, the conversations reflected the children's nuanced perspectives on their educational experience, marked by both positive elements such as friendships and areas for improvement in teaching methods, particularly regarding personalised instruction which helped them feel included. The importance of creating supportive, inclusive, and flexible educational settings that accommodate the diverse needs and backgrounds of the children was essential.

5.2.9.4 Differentiation and Differing Learning Styles

When speaking about their favourite and least favourite subjects in school, the importance of varying the teaching style to cater to their interests arose repeatedly. One example given by the senior focus group in School B was incorporating more games into Irish to make it more engaging. One child, finding Irish difficult, said it was really helpful to “watch it on the board” (Senior Child, School B). This relates to the scheme of work used, which focuses a lot on oral language and exposure of the language aurally to the children.

Again, this senior focus group in School B highlighted the multifaceted nature of learning and the importance of adapting educational approaches to meet diverse needs and preferences.

One child in the senior focus group in School C highlighted the school's efforts to ensure accessibility for children with physical disabilities,” Our school tries really hard to make sure everyone can

get around. Like, we have ramps and wide doors so that Amelia can get around in her wheelchair” (Senior Child 5, School C).

However, the opposite is also true. One parent spoke of his frustration for his son who,

due to his physical disability, can be left out of certain activities, saying “His whole class

will empty and go swimming, and he would be left here in his wheelchair, brought to

the junior class” (Parent 3, School A). This parent acknowledged that there are a lot of logistical challenges to overcome in order for his son to be able to go swimming with his peers, an example being a lack of school personnel and suitable transport for a wheelchair user.

The discussion with the senior focus group in School C revealed a deep appreciation amongst the children for inclusivity and the opportunity to participate in a supportive learning environment, which contrasted with some of their past experiences in other schools. While valuing the voice they have in educational decisions, there was an acknowledgement that balance is necessary to maintain order. Significant discussions around technological access suggested the untapped potential that could improve learning experiences. The children also expressed a need for an even more welcoming and physically engaging learning environment, hinting at the relationship

between physical spaces and student wellbeing. Overall, the children articulated a nuanced understanding of both the advantages and areas for improvement in their educational experiences. They displayed maturity in their discussion and a clear ability to think critically.

There was a strong desire for personalised learning and teaching methods, with children expressing a wish for more individualised attention and preferring hands-on learning activities, such as projects and interactive assignments. They suggested that personalised attention could help address individual learning gaps and improve understanding. This, again, relates to a lack of personnel on the ground. The children in the senior focus group in School B also addressed the importance of having support systems in place for learning, referencing the help they get from the class teacher and, when they can access it, help from the SET teacher. They also talked about getting occasional assistance from their peers when required.

The senior focus group in School B spoke about how some children received tailored help from teachers, such as help breaking down complex maths problems. Two of the children discussed together how they learn differently and how they found this one-to-one time with the teacher so important. They wished more support mechanisms were in place as one child felt she was always playing “catch up” (Senior Child 1, School B). Another child commented on

how the teacher does her very best to see her every day, “even just for five minutes” (Senior Child 2, School B). The child valued this time so much, even if they didn’t get concrete work done.

The children felt it was important for their teachers to have an understanding of them, to know what they were like, and to have the ability to see things from their perspective. One child said it would be very hard “if the teacher didn’t help you when you asked for help.” (Senior Child 3, School A).

5.2.9.5 Behavioural Consequences

When asked if all children were able to participate in all activities, the discussion took an interesting turn towards behaviour and the consequences of poor behaviour in particular. One child spoke about not being fully able to control his behaviour but divulged that he was on a star chart and that “the whole point was to make me behave” (Senior Child 3, School A). It was apparent that all the children in the group were aware of these behaviour charts for individual children and the consequences of certain children’s behaviours, meaning they couldn’t partake in some activities. One child mentioned a specific school tour, while another child spoke about another school activity and said, “If [you are] naughty, you don’t get to take part” (Senior Child 2, School A).

The children in School C also discussed how different children are treated differently, even when their behaviours are similar. One child

attempted to interject, explaining that a particular child “doesn’t understand as easily,” (Senior Child 1, School C) but was quickly cut off by another who insisted, “It’s still not fair!” (Senior Child 2, School C).

5.3 The Importance of Leadership in Facilitating Inclusion and the Voice of the Child

This section will detail the significance of leadership in promoting inclusion and amplifying the voice of the child, as reflected throughout the findings.

5.3.1 The Role of the Principal

This study found there is a sense that principals are aware of their vital role in achieving an inclusive school. However, some challenges are encountered on that path towards inclusion. There is a sense that their actions and leadership need to be proactive rather than reactive. There appears to be an awareness amongst school leaders of the important role of the principal to help cultivate the culture of a school, and in the case of this study, a culture of inclusivity with Principal B saying, “Core values of dignity and respect are at the heart of all we do. It needs to be woven into the fabric of the school rather than it being all ‘bells and whistles’”. The two other principals also referenced this.

A clear understanding of the role of the principal in leading an inclusive school appears to be evident in general, with Principal B

acknowledging that “something like this people nearly look to you for guidance on it, so I think you have to set the tone of it, you have to lead an inclusive school. But and then by leading an inclusive school then you can involve all those other voices”.

When considering a child enrolling in the school for the first time, Principal A emphasised that, “you’ll put everything you can in place for the child”.

All three principals interviewed expressed the importance of leading by example and, in essence, recognised their role in enabling the idea of education for all. Principal B summed this up with the idea that “if you work on the notion that every child deserves the same level of consideration and the same level of dignity and the same level of respect, then I don’t think you’ll go too far wrong”.

Parents in School A spoke about feeling the culture of inclusivity in general in their school. One parent, in particular, spoke about efforts to make the yard more inclusive. He talks about how, despite challenges along the way, things are “improving dramatically. I mean, we were lucky to get in here, and I know that” (Parent 3, School A). Another parent in the same school referred to how this environment had a positive effect on her child compared to the previous school she transferred from, saying, “She’s not afraid of them knowing she is different.” (Parent 1, School A).

It is apparent from speaking to these parents that a damaging culture can leave lasting repercussions. One parent gave the example of her child choosing “to be invisible.... she always felt dumb.” (Parent 1, School A). The same child referred to feeling more relaxed in this school, than her previous school, in her focus group also.

When each of the principals was asked how or if they could measure their success, each principal spoke about seeing children happy and witnessing them achieve targets that were set collaboratively for them. Principal B spoke about how “it’s very rewarding for me to see them progress, to see them happy in school, to see them feeling valued, to see them getting on socially.... we’ve done enough [so] the kids can continue to access their education when they leave here.”

Principal A talks about the success of children achieving more than they ever thought possible, and she watches “them grow and move up through the school and build confidence. Every child can access the curriculum in their way with [appropriate] differentiation.”

Principal C also refers to a child making progress as being the most rewarding aspect of his job, saying “that you’ve identified what way you can help. You’ve put a plan in place. The plan is working.... you’ve done your best, and you can see small little things.”

5.3.2 The Role of the Board of Management (BoM)

Principals identified the need for a good relationship with their respective Boards of Management.

The members of the BoMs of each of the three schools indicated a strong willingness to ensure a culture of inclusivity within the schools, with all respondents indicating a familiarity with the ethos of their school. Furthermore, all BoM members, when asked, indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that their school meets both the educational and social needs of children with AEN. However, while the members of the BoMs felt that they took into account that each child is included, interestingly, one-third of respondents said that they did not take children's opinions into account when making important decisions or developing school policies. Half of the respondents of the BoMs agreed that the views of children are taken on board before making important decisions or

developing important policies, while one-sixth didn't know. (See Figure 5.2 below.)

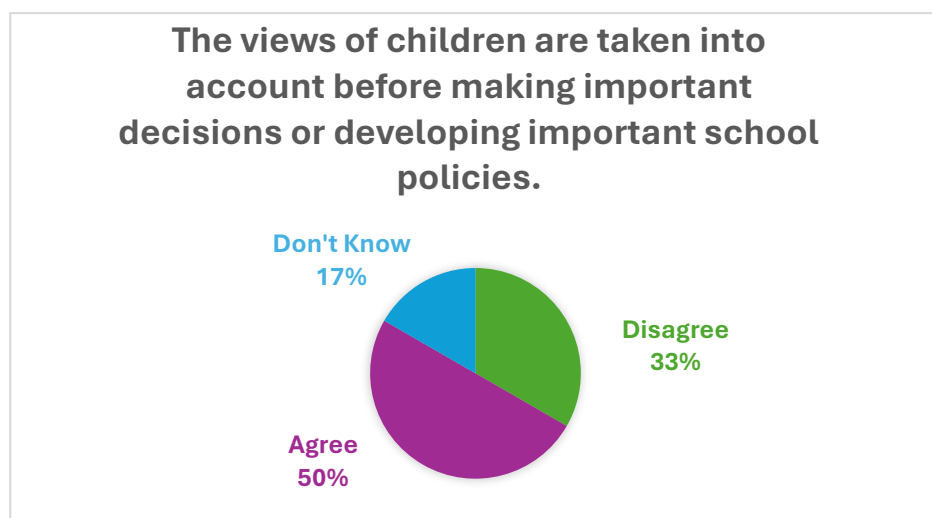


Figure 5.2 – *The views of children are taken into account before making important decisions or developing important school policies.*

It was felt by the majority, however, that the views of parents and staff were taken into account when making these decisions. (See Figures 5.3 & 5.4 respectively below.)

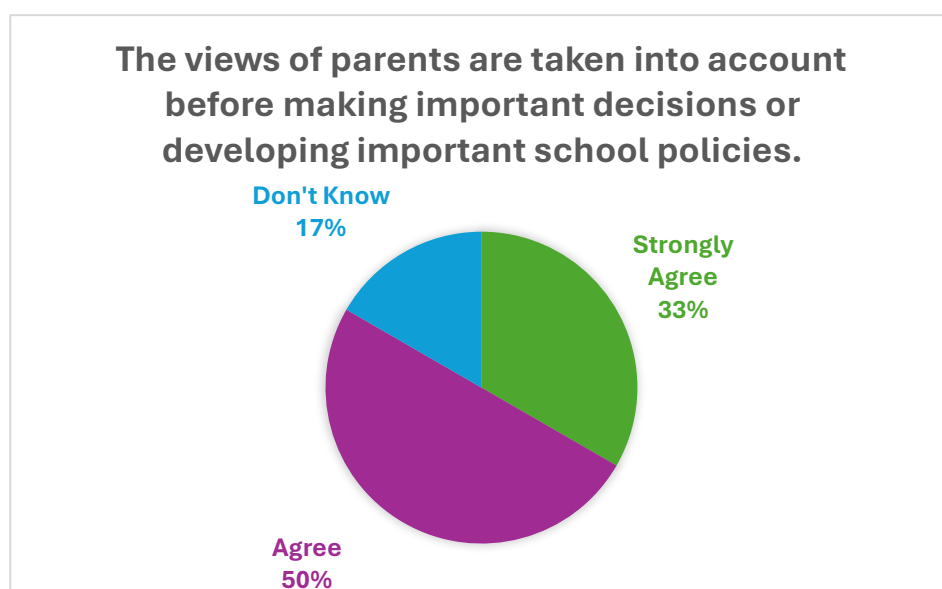


Figure 5.3 – *The views of parents are taken into account before making important decisions or developing important school policies.*

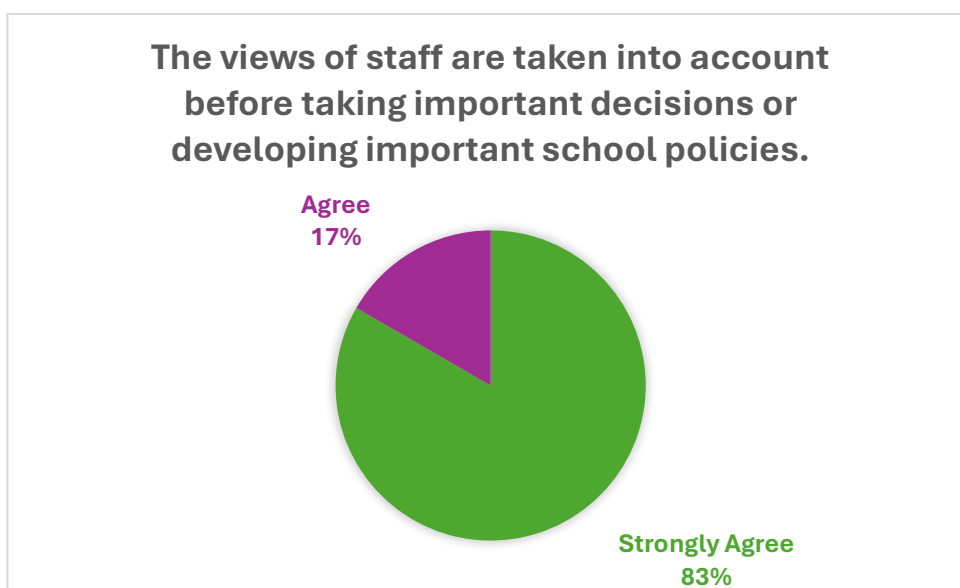


Figure 5.4 – *The views of staff are taken into account before making important decisions or developing important school policies.*

In one school, a member of the BoM noted that behaviour and, in particular, challenging behaviour can be difficult to address in an inclusive manner, “In general, we try to take everybody, but there are limits as to what the teachers and other pupils can be expected to put up with” (BoM Member 2). Principal A touched on this also when she commented that:

The board need advice on this too. There needs to be a clear policy, and with inclusion, there needs to be a clear policy. When it works, it’s great. But when a child’s needs... when a school doesn’t have the manpower or the space to meet a child’s needs, that’s when we’re getting into difficulty.

(Principal A)

This evidential lack of personnel resources is reiterated by children, parents, and staff.

5.3.3 Leading through Policy Development

All three principals made reference to policy development in their schools. All three principals also spoke of the need for policies to be living documents. Principal B spoke about the importance of this in relation to her school's Code of Behaviour policy and the need for it not just to be a piece of paper but for it to be relevant to the life of the school, saying that the criticisms of their Code of Behaviour in the past was that "it just was a policy document that didn't really—it didn't seem relevant...so last year we looked at, 'How would we make the Code of Behaviour very visible?'".

It is recognised by all three principals that the principal holds the responsibility of bringing in the voices throughout the school and ensuring that people have the opportunity to be heard:

Inclusion is more of a whole school approach. It's more of a sense of the feeling in the school and what people do and the way they speak to people and the way they treat everybody equally and that sense of mutual respect in the school, that's what's coming to my mind.

(Principal B)

Due to the standardisation of the Admissions Policy in accordance with the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, all schools are legally obliged to engage with the enrolment of children regardless of need. All three principals refer to the huge effort made on their behalf to recognise any needs in children before they enrol in the school so that they can have the best and most accurate supports in place. However, reference is made to the decision of some families to move their child to another setting regardless as perhaps they couldn't put a guarantee on supports such as "one-to-one full SNA support, which is what the child needed with care needs, so they didn't go to our school" (Principal C). There is an acknowledgement that in terms of the policy, it is inclusive because places are offered without bias and without knowing if the child has additional needs or not. Principal C looked at one case where "it might have been a case that the child thrived, it might have been a case that we couldn't support the child in that setting, I don't know." However, he felt that the school would have done their best with the child in question.

In reality, principals do have concerns about meeting the needs of children with additional needs sufficiently with the resources at their disposal. This is a concern that is often brought to the attention of the BoM. They question the suitability of the setting of their school to meet all needs:

I'm all for it, and we can prove it in our school we're all for it, but there does come to a point where you have to say 'Is this correct placement for the child?' and you're thinking of the child—Can we meet this child's needs? Are we meeting this child's needs in their current environment? Are they accessing their curriculum? Or is the small school, is the classroom, is the area, is it conducive to their learning?

(Principal A)

This principal's main concern was the busyness of a multi-grade classroom, combined with one full-time SET teacher for the school and a child with great needs saying:

If they have sensory needs, sometimes it is not, because when you're in a mixed streamed class with say 28 pupils, and you've sensory needs. Children make noise, children will learn, and the teacher has to teach the whole class, and if you have a SET Teacher in as well, that SET teacher has to be able to teach with the whole school, not just with one class, not just with one child, because our timetable is full of children with needs. So, I suppose you're boiling down to the point there, you know, can we sustain it? And when you look at the figures – how long is the child in class? Is the child out of the class more? Would this child be better served in a unit attached to a school? You know, is it working out?

(Principal A)

Principal B spoke in a similar vein, saying that they have had the experience of:

having a child here where the mainstream placement just wasn't suitable at all, but they were enrolled, so we had an obligation to try and meet the needs of the child, and that was very, very hard and in the end, she's home-schooled now so it just didn't work"

(Principal B)

She blamed the lack of resources, such as access to an SNA, amongst the reasons why they were unable to cater appropriately for the child.

Principal A went on to talk about health and safety within her school and a feeling that there is a lack of support when the school struggles to meet the needs of some children. There was a strong sense that there is a duty of care to all the children, and without appropriate support in personnel, that can be difficult:

When the child in question could have serious issues with harming themselves or harming others, that is a serious situation, and your duty of care is to that child and to everybody else and to your staff, and if something happens

that's detrimental you're in the firing line, and there isn't support there.

(Principal A)

The Code of Behaviours across the three schools reflected the intention of the policy to work with children with additional needs. Principal B, when explaining her rationale when questioned by children who don't agree with the "fairness" of the behaviour policy reasons, said, "Fairness isn't treating everyone equally. It's treating people the way they need to be treated". In response to children who question why one child might believe the rules are applied more leniently on some rather than others, her reasoning was:

Sometimes people are still just learning the rules, you learned the rules really quickly, and some other people need a little bit of help. It takes some people a little bit longer to learn the rules, but you can help them with doing that.

(Principal B)

There appeared to be an understanding of how the needs of each child need to be met individually, with Principal C giving an example of two children with hearing impairments in his school, saying they "are not the same two children, and they don't have the same needs."

Principal C spoke about the difficulties of having the same Code of Behaviour for both the mainstream school and the autism classes. After some reflection, they recently adapted their policy for the autism classes:

We had the same Code of Behaviour for all the children in the school, and it can't cover all the kids in the school because as soon as somebody does something out of the way, we notice ourselves that we react differently, 'Oh sure, that's Jack, sure you know Jack'. So, Jack doesn't go to time out or Jack doesn't do whatever.... we seem to have kind of interpreted appropriately for the person involved so like that Jack should actually be expelled at this stage but actually, his behaviour is being managed nicely and he doesn't seem to follow that structure. But there is no set structure at the same time for him. But the behaviour is being managed. So, we have another one ready now for [the autism classes].

The difficulty arises again though, according to Principal C for "kids with special needs or kids with emotional and behavioural difficulties in mainstream.... there needs to be a fine tuning of the code for that as well".

The introduction of Restorative Practice (RP) in two of the schools is helping to shape and contextualise their Code of Behaviour, with Principal B saying that it has changed her relationship with one

particular child who was having severe difficulties. RP is an approach focused on building and maintaining positive relationships, resolving conflicts, and repairing harm in a way that promotes accountability and healing. RP empowers children to express their perspectives and promotes equity in behavioural support. It can help schools manage conflict, student engagement, and leadership approaches in supporting diverse learners. She acknowledges that it may not be the perfect answer for all children, but it was an initiative she felt was most definitely worth leading and investing in as it was making a difference, saying “I have one little fella who has on-going behavioural difficulties who has arrived up to my door saying, ‘Is there any chance you’ll do a bit of restorative practice with me?’” (Principal B).

Principals spoke about the importance of meeting people where they are at in their individual situation and working on their development from there. For example, Principal B spoke about asking a child to draw as a medium to give their opinion on something as due to their ability, they were not able to convey the same message through writing, then “saying to them okay can you explain to me what your picture meant. So that they’re all included, everybody has that same, equal opportunity” (Principal B). An example of this was when there was a child who required intimate care; Principal B ensured the child

was involved in the drawing up of their intimate care policy, along with his parents, teachers and SNAs:

We wanted to make sure that he was comfortable with what we were agreeing about his own intimate care. So, in that sense like there's a lot of people involved in it but I do see my role as having to lead that and I do feel that people look to me to coordinate it.

(Principal B)

It is interesting to note that an Inclusion policy was requested in each school, and while all schools had elements of inclusion in their policies, none of the schools had a stand-alone Inclusion policy.

5.3.4 Staff Support

Each of the three school leaders spoke about the importance of staff feeling supported in their roles so as to ensure inclusion can happen. On the whole, they recognised the importance of being there for their staff so as to be as conducive as possible to an inclusive classroom environment. Principal A feels that “for meaningful inclusion to take place, collaboration is needed among staff with a whole team approach, coming from the top down”. Principal C concurs with this view, saying, “There is a culture of inclusivity within the school and an awareness that everyone belongs”. The principals were very aware that this could not happen without effort and conscious intervention.

5.3.5 Modelling and Coaching

Each of the three principals interviewed referred to the need for modelling or coaching in their settings. Principal B acknowledged how effective differentiation is key for meaningful inclusion, saying, “Differentiation needs to be practical, not just notional.” Similarly, Principal A remarked, “Everybody learns in different ways, and we’re trying. Well, every school endeavours to try and meet their needs”.

However, principals acknowledged how difficult it was to ensure this was carried out in each classroom:

What I've noticed is the people who have lived through it and have been guided through it get it but those who have yet to really encounter that level of differentiation mightn't understand what it takes to be fully inclusive within the room.

(Principal B)

It was acknowledged that teachers often need to be scaffolded and guided through this process in order to “get it” (Principal B).

Principal B referred to coaching some of the teachers through preparing Classroom Support Plans. Paperwork often appears to encumber teachers, and she felt that taking an inexperienced teacher through the process step by step is the most effective way of bringing everyone up to the same standard:

I mean, I've ended up drafting them really, kind of having a coaching session with a classroom teacher where I can elicit the information out of the classroom teacher and from there help to identify strategies that might work and then putting it down on paper together. The most effective classroom support plans that we've put together so far have been done in that kind of a process.

(Principal B)

The importance of this kind of coaching was emphasised again by the SENCo in School B, indicating that there is a culture of this coaching in the school where:

We kind of put our heads together and see what resources we have that we can use to help out with that child. It is a team effort, really. Some of us might have dealt with a similar situation before, and we can say this worked for that child, but it didn't work for that child. You would have to try all different things.

(SENCo B)

She also spoke about how she is, "always trying to share best practice and bring others on Board" (SENCo B).

The principal in School B actively gets involved with team teaching, in particular Power Hour, when she can, modelling and leading best practice on the ground. This practice of being involved in the teaching and learning process was duly noted by the parents. They commented on how they felt the principal, and by extension, the staff, went above and beyond to know their children and to cater for their individual needs with one parent in School B saying, “The staff have been fantastic and have gone over and above what I would have expected for inclusion for him” (Parent 1, School B). Another concurred saying her son “never feels insecure, and that’s down to the staff and whatever happens with the walls [of the school]” (Parent 2, School B).

This modelling also extended to the modelling of interactions and effective behaviour strategies with children and their parents with Principal B saying, “ It is vital for the principal to model interactions with children and families for all staff, encouraging staff to act in a similar vein.” This indicates that Principal B has a particular vision for inclusion within her school, and she is modelling that from the top down.

Similarly, Principal C feels that staff need to feel supported for inclusion to be able to take place, as “they’re the people in the situation”.

Principal A speaks about the importance of having support available for a child immediately, gathering as much knowledge about the children's needs in advance as:

From the get-go [if we know] what is entailed, how did the child get on in playschool, what's needed, we know if we have the manpower to cope for that child and then there isn't this... there isn't a feeling of failure between, for the staff, for the SET staff.

(Principal A)

Her argument is that if staff are supported and the correct resources are in place, then there is a higher chance of success for the staff and, in turn, most importantly, for the child.

5.3.6 Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

All three principals acknowledged the importance of continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers in the area of inclusion within the classroom. This is particularly pertinent as results from the survey on teachers found there was a 50:50 split when teachers were asked if they were confident teaching children with AEN in their class.

When asked whether they felt supported in providing an inclusive education in their class, less than half of the teachers felt supported to some extent. The most common response was simply "disagree", indicating a widespread sense of insufficient support, even if not

strongly felt in all cases. The low level of strong agreement reflects a significant gap in confidence and/or support structures surrounding inclusive education. (See Figure 5.5 below.)

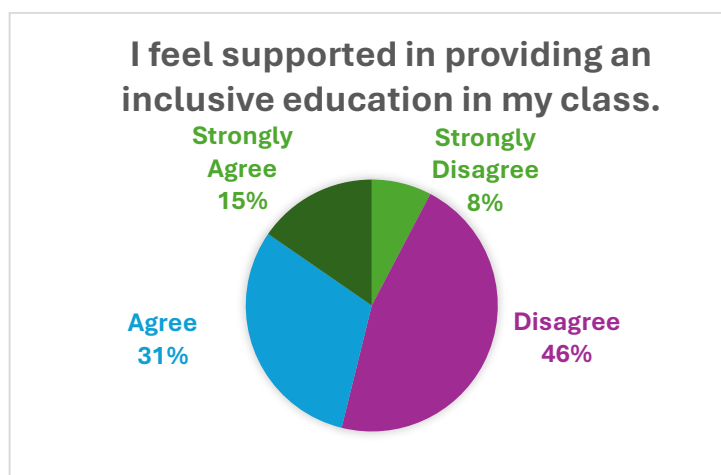


Figure 5.5 - *I feel supported in providing an inclusive education in my class.*

There is evidence of the sharing of expertise and training too, which is encouraged by all principals and made compulsory by Principal C, saying, “the only condition [of CPD] is that they’ve got to feedback. So, they know they’ve got to do a report back to staff”.

Principal B has a similar system in place:

Teachers know and they're aware that if they want to do professional development, they can do that. If there's something specific to the kids in their class or something that would be specific to the school as a whole but they do understand that they've got to first of all feedback so that everyone can learn.

(Principal B)

The BoM in each of the schools is supportive of providing financial support for CPD in so far as resources can allow. This is very important in School C where the principal said, “there are a lot of staff who are very young so there’s possibly a lack of experience” (Principal C). He also goes on to say, “if there was a child coming in in September with some sort of a disability or need that we weren’t accustomed to, we would look to provide training prior to them starting.

5.3.7 Outside Agencies

Principals spoke about the importance of collaboration and a willingness to work with outside agencies to support the children with additional needs in their care. However, access to this intervention is becoming increasingly scarce, with one principal lamenting that “it’s not easy to have that level of support” (Principal A).

They also discussed some of the challenges it presented. Principal A spoke about, from the perspective of a small school with only one full-time SET, how valuable teaching time is taken from children who really need their time with the SET if they are meeting with other outside agencies during the school day:

With all the school-age team and with NCSE coming in, all the different types of people coming in, as a Teaching Principal or even a Principal, you’re meeting with all of these people, and

that's taking time out of teaching and if you've one SET teacher and you've a child with significant needs.

(Principal A)

Principal B spoke about the challenges of often accessing outside support, as does Principal C who comments that support can often look like a specialist "handing over photocopies and they'll say here's what you could be doing with that child. But sure, if that was the case, we'd all be OTs [Occupational Therapists]" (Principal C). He feels that more intense and frequent support than this is required.

Each principal, while there may be administrative difficulties with outside agencies coming to the school, would welcome more support, especially in the instance of children with more pronounced needs, with Principal A saying, "If we had a play therapist or OT between a cluster of schools so, we knew when they were coming and you could plan for it".

The importance of transitions, both into and out of primary school, is highlighted. Principal B is aware of the importance of these transitions and ensures there is a good transition from primary to secondary for the children who are most at risk:

I'm very happy to get good feedback from the secondary schools where we've managed to do a really good transition

of children with special ed. That to hear then from the secondary school that they're doing really well because they went in with the supports. They went in with the education, and you know they went in with a plan.

(Principal B)

Principal C refers to the importance of a holistic transition from preschool to primary, "It's on the [enrolment] form, 'Have I permission to call the previous school or creche?', and sure, almost all of [the parents] say yes".

Principal B has an acute awareness of the challenges faced by children in September of each year. This is when SETs often run diagnostic tests and set up timetables, but indeed, with the change in routine, children need the actual teaching time most. She is working with staff to address this issue year on year:

Having that regular contact with a SET teacher for half an hour every day, just getting that break from the big room and then they go into a new room, new teacher, new curriculum, new books, new everything in September and they can be very overwhelmed.

(Principal B)

This is also a key time to have outside supports on board.

5.3.8 Networking

Principals are looking for support for themselves in their leadership roles to ensure inclusion. Principal B spoke about how there are Literacy Clusters and Maths Clusters with local schools set up. Often, when they attend one of their local cluster meetings with other principals, it can become quite negative, and they leave feeling there is so much more to do than they have already done. She suggested that there should be an “Inclusion Cluster” for principals interested in leading through inclusion. She felt there was an opportunity for schools to network around inclusion, just as they do for maths or literacy matters.

5.3.9 Critical Evaluation

Principals displayed the ability to critically identify areas where their schools fell short in terms of inclusive practice. School B had just taken on the development of a Student Council. They hadn’t had the opportunity prior to this, but it was in response to the development of a healthy eating policy. They wanted children to be involved and for their voices to be heard.

For children’s voices to be heard and for them to be included in decisions being made on their behalf, there needed to be a willingness to engage on the part of school leaders. Feedback from the parents in School C suggests that inclusion in their school is very much led from the top down, with one parent commenting “I don’t

necessarily think all schools are like that—no offence. But I just think that this school, I think it's led from [the principal]." (Parent 1, School C).

A willingness to listen is evident amongst the three school leaders. If children have an idea, all principals agreed that they are invited to bring it forward. This can only happen where the principal invites this notion of inclusion:

I think it's a unique school in that sense that it starts with your welcome in the morning and it's followed through to the end of the day. And even siblings waiting at collection, [the principal] knows their names and he'll go and chat to them. And [the secretaries] know them. And I don't think all schools are like that.

(Parent 3, School C)

However, school leaders acknowledge that there is always more to do.

5.4 The importance of relationships and advocacy

This section will examine the significance of relationships and advocacy in fostering inclusion, as reflected throughout the findings.

5.4.1 Building relationships with the children

From the research findings, it is evident that a good relationship between home and school for children with additional needs, and indeed for all children, is most productive when striving to reach their full potential.

The importance of building key relationships with children who have additional needs, as well as their parents, is highlighted as key by all three principals. Principal A expressed the concern that “there is a feeling you can't do enough. There is always a need to do more”. This intimation that she feels there is always room for more improvement is something which resonated with all three school leaders.

The nurturing of these relationships was achieved in differing ways. Principal B feels she is actively conscious of making a connection with every child in her school and feels rather lucky to be leading a school of its size:

I get a chance to speak to those children most days. I'm on yard every morning, so that's my chance to greet kids and have a quick word or have a quick chat, and I'd know particularly the ones who have—who struggle because I'd be in contact with their parents so I'd have an idea of what their strengths are and what their interests are... it gives me an opportunity then to say something and to have a connection.

(Principal B)

As it is a single-stream, medium-sized school, she feels this is a feasible task for her. She remarked how difficult it must be for a principal of a much larger school, in the case of this study, for example, School C, to do this meaningfully. Principal B appears to be very grounded in the reality of her school. She is very much aware of the children for whom the education system doesn't work. She is very mindful of the children who do not find school easy and those who need the most support:

I'm very mindful of the kids that are in our school who face issues every day, and I want to make sure that those kids—because they're the ones who have the hard road where school is not easy, where some of them don't like school, some of them find school very, very challenging. So, they're on my mind a lot because I know they're the ones who need the most support.

(Principal B)

It is vital for her that they maintain and, indeed, cultivate “their sense of self-worth and confidence” (Principal B).

In an effort to build this relationship, Principal C meets with every child and their parents individually prior to the child's starting

school. This equates to an individual meeting with over 90 children and their parents each year. He feels that it helps him to identify any issues the child may have early on and ensure that supports are in place as early as possible:

When the child is being enrolled I do that personally, with every one of them. I meet the parents, I meet the child, and I have a few questions for the child. We give them a little puzzle to do or something like that or have a chat with them, and you pick up pretty quickly if there is an issue.

(Principal C)

This is in an effort to have the opportunity to touch base with previous educational settings to gain knowledge on what works best for the child if they are experiencing difficulties and to ensure as many supports as possible are in place from the “get-go”. For example, “[We get a sense] if there's any SNA support required or maybe which SNA would be best suited to the child and the preschools are pretty good. Like they might already have something put in place that works” (Principal C).

The role of the SENCo, and its role in advocacy for the child is also evident here. SENCo A realises her vital role in these children’s experience of school, “I think I have a huge pastoral role... you’re

seeing them in a smaller environment, or one-to-one. You get to build up a relationship with them”.

Another SENCo highlights how she sees her role as building the children up to be resilient in the world, “It’s more than the academics. How to get on socially and to be able to work in the community and get on in the community, and to be an independent person. We give these children an armour” (SEnCo B).

As the only full-time SET in her school, SENCo A realises the impact her absence can have, saying, “Just little things, like if I’m out sick, that throws a curveball massively”.

The vital role of the SENCo is realised by the parents also. In this instance, a parent acknowledged the imperative role the SENCo played in securing a much-needed assessment for his child. They had met brick walls elsewhere, but “she drove for it. She demanded it” (Parent 4, School A).

5.4.2 The Importance of a Child’s Special Needs Assistant (SNA)

The relationship between SNA and both the child and their family is vital. As previously mentioned, the SNA is often the voice for children with additional needs. They advocate for them with their peers and in class. Parents need to be able to trust the SNA and to have a rapport with them. The challenge for the principal sometimes can be ensuring this relationship is kept as professional as possible despite the child

and SNA often being so close. It is also important that the role of the SNA works to make the child as independent as possible in the future.

The parents involved in the parent focus group in School C spoke about the efforts of their school to foster an inclusive educational environment and the various factors that influenced its success. Through initiatives like buddy programs, their children were able to build up their confidence with their peers, often with the guidance and support of their child's SNA, especially on yard.

There was very strong SNA and teacher collaboration as evidenced through the teacher questionnaire. The parents of children with access to SNA support spoke about how vital this was to their child's successful integration and inclusion in the mainstream classroom. For example, the parents in School C highlighted how the school has made observable strides in integrating children with diverse needs and backgrounds. Children from the school's autism classes are included in the mainstream classes. This would not be possible without adequate SNA support and collaboration.

5.4.3 The Need to Fight

The frustration of parents feeling that they need to fight for any resources they possibly can for their child can be felt throughout the discussion with parents of children with additional needs. There is a distinct sense of weariness:

I'm just constantly worried for her, like, and I'm constantly kind of thinking, what is the next challenge for her, and you do have sleepless nights kind of thinking about, like, what is it because you've to fight for everything.

(Parent 3, School A)

However, some parents spoke about how it is so worth it when they have a “breakthrough”, or they can see their child making progress. Often, this is relative to the positive relationship which builds up with a particular teacher. SENCo A speaks about how “a lot of trust needs to be built, where people are free and open to honestly discussing where they are coming from”. There is the recognition that everyone might not always agree, but the opportunity for dialogue is essential. It is, however, a constant struggle for parents of children with additional needs. As some of the parents communicated, they find themselves in a continuous battle, navigating a complex and often frustrating system to secure the resources and support that their children badly require:

You actually become very upset, and I think all those people don't—some people don't realise that it is actually quite upsetting. That's why you hold back a bit sometimes because you don't want to open up the emotions, you know.

(Parent 3, School B)

The advocacy of these parents is vital for the success and wellbeing of their children. Some of the parents expressed the exhaustion they feel as they face numerous barriers, including limited school resources, long waiting lists for assessments, and sometimes, what they perceive as a lack of understanding or cooperation from some school staff. However, on the other hand, SENCo B relays that, “Sometimes the parents just don’t get it, and they don’t realise the importance of the work we do. That is in the minority though ... Once parents are on board it is a game changer”.

In general, the parents involved in this research were so appreciative of the support of their respective schools, with one parent speaking of the intense work that went into her son over a period of five years so that he could participate in a regular part of school life, “He’s in full assembly, but that took years of work and that was with the SNAs and teachers slowly but surely building him up” (Parent 3, School C).

Despite these obstacles, the dedication of parents often leads to significant breakthroughs. When they succeed in advocating for necessary support, it can result in transformative progress for their children, as many of the parents communicate in their own circumstances. They feel they advocate for their own child and pave the way for better support systems for all children with additional needs, highlighting the critical need for a collaborative approach between parents, teachers, and school management.

5.5 Opportunities for and Barriers to Inclusion

This section will explore the opportunities and challenges that impact inclusion, as highlighted in the findings.

5.5.1 A Lack of Staff to Support Classroom Inclusion

Overall, a willingness to want to have meaningful inclusion in the classroom was evident amongst staff respondents. However, there was a sense of frustration with the lack of resources available to support this. Almost two-thirds of the teachers questioned disagreed that all children should be educated in a mainstream classroom.

They expressed reservations about whether it was appropriate for all students:

It is not fair to put a child in mainstream settings and expect them to achieve the same as their peers. As the child progresses up the school, the educational gap widens. It's at this point that behavioural issues become a problem simply because the child can't process the pace of change and difficulty of work.

(Teacher 3)

Teachers also suggested that changes to the resourcing of schools and the learning environment and focused training opportunities were also important considerations if an expansion of inclusive practice was to be achieved.

Yet, when further questioned, there was strong agreement that children with and without additional education needs can gain academic improvement because of inclusive education. There was also strong agreement that inclusive education provides children with opportunities for mutual communication, thus promoting students' understanding and acceptance of individual diversity.

Some teachers feel that the level of severity of AEN must be considered to best meet the needs of the child, with one teacher saying:

My answers may differ depending on the level of additional need of the child... I strongly agree that inclusion is a positive practice for teachers and children in mainstream and autism classes alike.

(Teacher 2)

However, she questions whether the severity of needs in a child may warrant a particular special placement where resources are plentiful to best meet the needs of the child.

Another teacher questions the motives of inclusion:

After 15 years of teaching, I've always included and delivered lessons of the highest standards. However, children who can't access the curriculum seem to not gain much in the end.

Inclusion for all seems like a great way to save money for the state.

(Teacher 8)

In School C, seven teachers work with a child with severe emotional needs. The SENCo admits that is a huge draw on resources for one child.

Staff were strong in their request for more in-class support from the SET team. This was not necessarily the fault of the SET team; rather, adequate resources were not there to provide for the level of need felt in the school. Another teacher spoke about SET hours “not being fit for purpose” (Teacher 1) as the allocation doesn’t cater for any additional complex needs when they arrive. She indicated that this is also relevant in the context of SNA access.

Staff across the three schools felt that the level of SNA access was poor. Teachers were very frustrated with this and felt that children were struggling to access the curriculum, even at a differentiated level, without that level of one-to-one or even small-group support. The stringent terms of how care needs are defined are not conducive to this work in the role of an SNA.

One staff member spoke about the need for adequate planning time for the team to help support the child most effectively. She expressed frustration not with the quality but the quantity of SET support. In

this case, there is only one SET teacher for the entire school. That SET teacher's entire day could consist of liaising with staff before she ever sits with the children. Teachers felt that planning time is essential for inclusive education to take place as it allows all members of the team working with the child to set shared goals. However, with such limited resources, there is limited time for planning in many schools, especially in schools with only one SET teacher. There is very little reference from the teachers about the involvement or input of the children themselves in this planning.

Two teachers spoke about having no support whatsoever regarding the provision of inclusive education in their classrooms.

The SENCo in School C details how he views his role as supporting the mainstream and SET teachers, liaising with them and being "a buffer as necessary" (SENCo C).

5.5.2 A Certain Discomfort in What Children May Say

The views and opinions that children express may seem uncomfortable for schools and school leaders to hear as illustrated in the examples below:

"Teacher plans for us. We don't really get a say" (Senior Child 4, School A).

"If kids are not putting up their hands, they probably don't know what they are doing... Teachers could talk slower. Maybe find a way to help them understand" (Senior Child 2, School A).

“If I was the teacher, I would probably talk to the children individually a bit more” (Senior Child 1, School B).

“Sometimes when I ask a question the teacher says I am silly, but I’m not. I just forgot” (Senior Child 3, School C).

The children appeared to be mostly uninhibited in their views.

5.5.3 Understanding of Parents

Some of the staff expressed a need for parents of children who don’t have specific additional needs to understand the complexities of a classroom where there might be a child who has severe needs present. One teacher spoke of how there can be 30 children in a class with “a completely overloaded curriculum” (Teacher 4). Another teacher spoke about teachers not doing Aistear as they were completely overwhelmed by the level of need in their class, which they were trying to cater for alone, and in doing so, “it seems we try to include, but we end up excluding” (Teacher 6). Aistear is the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years in Ireland. The framework uses four interconnected themes to describe children’s learning and development: Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; and Exploring and Thinking (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2025).

Some teachers felt that more opportunities for parents to gain knowledge about additional needs in school would be helpful.

Teachers felt that the importance of relationships with parents is key,

but the reality of the situation of short staffing and resource shortages sometimes caused conflict with parents. Teachers felt that these difficulties should be conveyed more clearly to them:

The reality is that short staffing and resource shortages create challenges, sometimes leading to conflict. I wish there was a clearer way to communicate these difficulties so that we could work together a bit more effectively.

(Teacher 1)

One teacher spoke about the importance of a shared understanding between teachers, parents and management of the child's strengths and weaknesses. She spoke about how it can be garnered through effective communication. Yet again, however, it was recognised how difficult this can be due to time constraints.

Sometimes, it can be difficult for parents to accept that their child may have additional needs, and parents can go into denial, as referenced by the SENCo in School B. However, she indicates that once parents and teachers work together, huge strides can be made with the child.

It is evident from the parents' discussion in the parents' focus groups that inclusion extends beyond the school's immediate environment, necessitating parental support and broader societal acceptance. They would like to see inclusion seep past the school gate, ensuring all

children are invited to play dates, for example. One parent spoke about the importance of ensuring birthday parties are suitable and accessible for all the children invited. Discussions around cultural and religious dynamics suggested an evolving understanding among younger generations while highlighting areas that require further progress, particularly in engaging parents from diverse backgrounds. Some of the parents suggested that other parents are more concerned about their own child's academic progress if there is a child with additional needs in their class. The parents painted a comprehensive picture of an educational community striving towards inclusivity, underpinned by collaborative efforts between school authorities and parents overall.

5.5.4 A Need for Training

There is a sense portrayed that teachers are learning about inclusion and inclusive teaching methodologies "on the job" (Teacher 12), as their training was minimal in initial teacher training college:

I received an hour-long class in special education every week for a while in college. In addition to this, I took part in a six-week course in my local education centre when I was first appointed to the SET team. It's not enough with everything that's coming through the door.

(Teacher 4)

This is a source of major frustration for staff, and principals also. Accessing training and funding for training can be very difficult. There is the added complexity of finding substitute teachers to fill the vacancy for the duration of the training.

Again, the issue of training is raised with a teacher expressing concern about their perceived incapability if they were to be placed to teach in the autism class even though, in her opinion, the teachers and SNAs “are fantastic and give so much energy to the children in their care” (Teacher 7). She feels there is a huge gap between mainstream and special class training that is not allowed for in teacher education and that this is “detrimental to both teacher wellbeing and development and adequate pupil education” (Teacher 7).

Teacher 1 perceived that principals are “tied in a legal agenda” and “cannot be seen to be turning pupils away” even if they know the resources or professional expertise on the ground is not there. The blame game is mentioned—who is to blame “when a placement is failing ... the school and principal get the blame,” (Teacher 1), even though some staff feel that the placement in the initial instance was the issue.

Another teacher agreed that “focusing on the learner is where the collective conversation is at the moment” (Teacher 2).

Some teachers express difficulty with differentiation, with one teacher saying that as the child moves up the school and the work

gathers difficulty and pace, the educational gap widens, resulting in behavioural difficulties also, with another saying inclusion seems to be a “buzz word” (Teacher 11). Some teachers question why we are trying to treat children all in the same manner as “some children just need life skills, why do we not support that?” (Teacher 9).

The topic of needing more training was mentioned numerous times by both principals and teachers. One teacher spoke about using her experience, which she garnered from working previously in a special school. However, she never really had any formal training in special education apart from a very brief module in her undergraduate programme. There was a desire from teachers for training on how to include children with very complex needs and training for them to gain an in-depth understanding of those needs.

One teacher suggested that they would find it very helpful to have more opportunities for communication and networking with teachers who have experience working with children with similar needs.

Another teacher spoke about the sharing of knowledge which the SET team have with mainstream teachers as being one of the greatest supports in her school. This sense of collegiality works well for supporting teachers who are struggling.

This necessity of staff training was a constant throughout the research with principals, SENCos and teachers who were enthusiastic

for inclusive practice to take place. They felt it was important to have this support for staff for them to have the skills and expertise to be able to include the child meaningfully in the class.

SENCo B felt that “confidence will come in time. There’s a need to build the culture in the school.... there’s one or two who are not on board. That is difficult.” She felt that honing in on what they are doing well, even if perhaps it may be done reluctantly, could help bring them along on the journey.

There appears to be an understanding and recognition in general of the importance of inclusive practice. However, the practicalities to ensure that it is happening are inhibited somewhat.

5.5.5 Resources

One of the most challenging aspects of inclusive education for teachers was time. This, combined with a lack of staffing, finances to support inclusive education, a lack of further training and large class sizes, is not conducive to quality inclusive practice and does not serve the needs of the children who need support most.

5.5.6 Meaningful Differentiation

Children's views on curriculum differentiation sometimes differ from those of the teachers. Some of the children mentioned that cartwheels are difficult to do during PE, and it was apparent that some children are not physically able to perform them. However,

when questioned if they did another activity, the children relayed that they often were just onlookers. The children themselves did not like this and felt that their classmates were missing out.

Meaningful differentiation was something that arose among teachers, children, and parents. One teacher spoke about support teachers assigning work while the rest of the class worked on the main topic. Some teachers conveyed their desire to provide more meaningful differentiation in the classroom but expressed that they find it very challenging. It is apparent that more training would be appreciated by teachers in this area. However, a willingness is also required for this to happen, and some of the teachers felt they couldn't stretch to do any more than they were doing, saying, "Sometimes we try to include but we end up excluding. There are 30 children in the class. The curriculum is completely overloaded, and it is next to impossible to cater to all the educational needs in the room" (Teacher 15). Another teacher concurred, saying, "It is just impossible to do everything. We have big classes and multiple demands with limited resources. The basics are just about sometimes covered on some days" (Teacher 7).

Teachers are very aware of the importance of differentiation. However, in practical terms they are struggling:

Inclusion seems to be a "buzz" word. Why are we accepting that all children are the same? We are all different and we

learn differently. The challenge centres around meaningful differentiation in the classroom and how best to support teachers to achieve this.

(Teacher 5)

Two of the principals spoke about the support required for them as leaders, in enabling them to support teachers best to achieve this, especially when it came to difficult attitudes.

For example, one teacher, when asked what they found rewarding about inclusion, just said, “I do not find it rewarding” (Teacher 8).

5.5.7 Staff Wellbeing

There is a sense from staff that there is a serious need for cognisance of staff wellbeing. There are many feelings of frustration and a sense of being overwhelmed because staff feel they are not being supported. Some teachers felt that principals and BoM were under undue pressure to “accept children of all abilities” regardless of having adequate resources. Again, they feel undertrained.

If staff wellbeing is supported, they indicated it would help lead to more competent, capable staff looking for meaningful inclusion in their classrooms. If staff were feeling depleted, they would not have the energy or enthusiasm to inject as much meaning into what is needed for all children to be fully included in the classroom. Both

principals and SENCos were aware of this in their discussions with the researcher:

A teacher who feels motivated and empowered will bring that energy into the classroom. They'll work to ensure every child feels seen. But if the staff are exhausted, overwhelmed, and unsupported, how can I expect them to fully engage with inclusive practices? It's not a lack of willingness—it's depletion. Burnout... And I'm sorry to say that happens. At the end of the day, the success of inclusion depends not just on intent but on the ability of those who implement it.

(Principal C)

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter presents the findings of the study as expressed through the research carried out across the three schools and the CRAG.

In conclusion, the children's voices reflect the complexity of schools and classrooms and their experience of school life. They give an insight into what school is like for them, and how they experience it day-to-day. They convey their challenges with homework, perceived unfairness from teachers, and difficulties with certain subjects, which were often compounded by feelings of exclusion and bullying. Collectively, these insights highlight the importance of considering student voices in educational planning and advocating for a learning

environment that emphasises personalised support, inclusive practices, and strong social connections, aiming to ultimately enhance the child's experience in the classroom and their performance.

Leadership appears to play a major role in how inclusive a school is and how supported staff, children, and parents feel when working with a child with additional needs. For inclusive practice to take place, it is apparent that there is an awareness that leadership in this area has to come from the BoM and the principal of each school. However, as each of the school leaders indicated in their own way, perhaps there needs to be more focus on the support available to the school leaders, as much responsibility lies on their shoulders:

We do everything we can to support our students, but some days, it feels like we're being pulled in a hundred different directions. We have children with different needs, and while we're proud of the environment we're building, it's a constant challenge to make sure we have enough staff, resources, and time to give each child what they truly deserve.

(Principal C)

Relationships appear to be key to enabling inclusion, and maintaining these relationships requires ongoing effort and dedication. These relationships often support the advocacy work necessary on the part

of parents and schools to access supports of any means for the most vulnerable of children. Ultimately, this advocacy is a powerful force in the push towards a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. The voices of these parents and schools bring attention to the gaps in the system and can hopefully inspire changes that benefit all children.

While there are considerable obstacles to inclusion in schools, an open positive attitude amongst all stakeholders appears to be vital to making progress.

The next chapter examines these findings in light of existing research on student voice, leadership, relationships, and inclusivity in schools.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Analysis

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings and insights from the study in light of existing research. This research was carried out with the objective of exploring inclusive education in a small cross-section of primary schools. From the research findings, the perspectives of inclusive education reflected through this cross-section of three Irish primary schools will be explored and examined. The discussion begins by examining the voice of the child, exploring how student voice is facilitated in inclusive practice and the challenges associated with ensuring meaningful engagement. Next, the role of leadership is analysed, focusing on how school leaders, particularly principals and Boards of Management, influence the implementation of inclusive practices. The chapter considers the importance of relationships and advocacy, emphasising the role of teachers, parents, and the wider community involvement in fostering inclusive school environments. Lastly, the discussion looks at what supports a policy of inclusion, assessing the factors that support or hinder the realisation of inclusive education in the case study schools involved in this research.

Four key themes emerged from the research. As with existing research, they are interwoven. They can be identified as the voice of the child, the importance of leadership in facilitating inclusion and

the voice of the child, the importance of relationships and advocacy, and opportunities for and barriers to inclusion.

It is important to note that this research took place with a small sample of schools. The three schools involved in the research, without generalising, are indicative of current Irish primary school contexts as the research sample comprised of one small, multi-grade, urban school operating under the patronage of the Church of Ireland, one medium-sized, single-stream, rural school operating under the patronage of the Catholic Church, and one large, triple-stream, urban school operating under the patronage of Educate Together with special classes for children with ASD attached. These schools reflect the diversity of the Irish primary education system, representing a range of school sizes, urban and rural settings and different patronage models.

The findings, resulted from a triangulation of methods which involved three case studies consisting of a literature review, two focus groups in each school with four to five children each from 1st – 3rd Class and 4th – 6th Class, artwork gathered from the children in these focus groups portraying their image of a school they would like to attend, and a school they would not like to attend, questionnaires with all teachers and members of the BoM, semi-structured interviews carried out with Principals and Special Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) in each school, a focus group interview in each school with four parents of children with additional educational needs (AEN), and

finally, a document analysis of relevant documents pertaining to each school were completed. In addition to this, a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) was formed with 10 children from the Student Council in the school of which the researcher is the principal. These children helped design the questions which were used in the focus groups with the children in each of the three case study schools. The children helped choose the language of the questions to ensure they were understood and set at an appropriate level. The CRAG also helped with the interpretation of the data garnered from the children's focus groups.

The results from this data collection will now be discussed and analysed in further detail.

6.2 The Voice of the Child in Inclusive Practice

Enabling student voice as part of inclusive practice is essential for ensuring that children's perspectives and priorities are genuinely recognised in decision-making processes.

This study revealed that across all three schools, commonly utilised channels for student voice, such as the Student Council, Active Committee, Green Schools Committee and other standard agents of democracy throughout the school were used to gather student feedback and provide a pathway for the voice of the child to be heard. This concurs with Fleming (2015) who acknowledges the Student Council construct as the main vehicle for student voice. However, it

is clear that even this avenue is “circumscribed by the perceived pressures of curriculum delivery, by internal and external assessments of students and by school evaluation” (Fleming, 2015, p. 237) as displayed within schools. Feedback from the children suggested that their input is not necessarily transformative within their schools. Their voices are used to elicit perspectives and insights, but it hasn’t moved the next step towards a more democratic process of shared collective responsibility in developing solutions to education matters (Fielding, 2015).

For example, the children were less forthcoming when questioned about other ways in which student voice is heard in their schools. In many ways, they did not feel that their voice was being heard and utilised in an impactful way. This feature of tokenistic and “limited democratic engagement in decision-making” is seen in Fleming’s (2015, p. 233) work.

Bragg (2001) highlights the fact that teachers’ use of adult language and accepted school cultural norms to interpret student voice dialogue that occurs can question the validity and integrity of that dialogue. Therefore, the use of the CRAG in this research to help interpret the dialogue arising from the CRAG itself, and the children’s focus groups throughout this research was essential. It empowered the children in the CRAG and validated the voice of the child coming

through the research. It ensured that the research process truly was a collaborative endeavour.

When speaking to the children about policy and practice in their school, the dialogue throughout was rather iterative, signifying a need for a dynamic process of assessing and enhancing school policies and strategies to improve educational and social outcomes for children.

6.2.1 Meaningful Inclusion

As mentioned in Chapter 5, from the CRAG, the children identified the following statement as being rarely true—*Children have a say about what they learn in school*. When it comes to planning for their learning, it was found that while teachers and parents were consulted, children were not always involved directly in the process, nor was feedback sought from them once a plan for their learning was implemented. There is a challenge for their voice to be heard meaningfully in these plans. It was apparent from data garnered from the children's focus groups that children in all three schools were eager to play a more prominent role in collaborative decision-making across the curriculum and the teaching methodologies employed to engage them in their learning. The children were forthcoming about ways in which they learn best and were articulate about these methods, such as suggesting games and active learning as most conducive to their engagement.

Flynn (2014) speaks of how Irish research has shown the positive impact shared understanding and discourse can make for these students when their opinions are heard, and they encounter an authentic response to their views and research input. Some of these benefits include a marked enhancement in the quality of students' relationships with teachers, along with a stronger sense of belonging and connection to their school community (Shevlin et al., 2013; Tiburcio & Finch, 2005). Another benefit reported was an increase in students' confidence and overall wellbeing (Anderson & Ronson, 2005). This was also witnessed in children in this research who were allowed to be a part of the decisions around their learning. For example, one parent spoke of how their child, after moving school to this new school, feels that they are being listened to and the positive impact this has had on her. The child's parent saw a marked positive difference in her attitude to learning and a significant increase in her self-confidence.

This authentic approach to student voice also gives a deepened perception of being valued and supported, contributing to a greater sense of comfort for children in their educational environment (Noddings, 2005). Again, this was acknowledged by both the children and their parents in this research. Parents also spoke about the opposite being true and how difficult it is for their children when there is a battle and a fight to be heard. There appears to be a lot more work to do in this area.

Involving students in self-assessment and decision-making regarding their learning can promote the development of higher-order thinking skills, such as metacognition (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Through the discussion of their learning with teachers and their peers, they are enabled to “take a more informed understanding of their learning, take a more serious attitude to their education and potentially enhance their self-confidence” (Beaton, 2021). This is evidenced in this research by the children. For example, two of the senior focus group children in School B referenced project work that they enjoy doing. They are given criteria by their teacher which they can assess their work by. It gave them a sense of ownership over their learning and a sense of pride in their work.

However, it was noted that some children with additional education needs (AEN) were not as involved or perhaps given the same opportunities to be heard. Differentiation often meant for them, undertaking another completely different task from the rest of the class resulting in what is referred to as the “repetition of exclusion” (Allan, 2006; Slee, 2010) whereby children are included in the classroom but “excluded from opportunities to participate in collaborative or group activities because the work they are given is differentiated to such an extent that they end up isolated from the classroom community even though they may be physically present” (Florian & Beaton, 2018, p. 870). The children in the focus groups made particular reference to this in subjects such as PE where

children were unable to get involved to the same extent as their peers. One parent spoke of his frustration for his son who, due to his physical disability, can be left out of certain activities, like swimming. This parent acknowledged that there are a lot of logistical challenges to overcome for his son to go swimming with his peers, an example being a lack of school personnel and suitable transport for a wheelchair user. However, we need to push past this to be more creative in our solutions, as this is unacceptable for any child to experience.

6.2.2 The Role of the Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator (SENCo) in Facilitating the Voice of the Child

A key element of the SENCo role is “to ensure that the voices of all children and young people are listened to in authentic and meaningful ways” (Beaton, 2021, p. 10). In this research, the children spoke about the vital role of their special education teacher (SET) teacher, who in many instances is also the SENCo of their school, in ensuring they had a positive, more engaging, inclusive experience in school. Beaton (2021) furthermore emphasises how the role of SENCo is vital in enhancing the voice of these children and how it links closely with the role of SENCo to enhance the social skills and emotional literacy of these children, both in alignment with the implementation of student's voice. This was witnessed throughout this research also, with SENCos playing a vital role in the pastoral care

of the children, building the children up to be more resilient in the world and ready to embrace more independence.

Beaton (2021) argues that SENCos also play an intrinsic leadership role in guiding other staff on how to implement pedagogies that incorporate the voice of the child, particularly for children with AEN, alongside their peers. This was evident in the work of the SENCo in School B, where the power of the “team” approach was clearly emphasised.

The strength and power of the advocacy SENCos enact for the children in their care is witnessed in this research and acknowledged by the children and parents alike. For example, in one instance, a parent acknowledged the imperative role the SENCo played in securing a much-needed assessment for his child.

6.2.3 Teachers and the Voice of the Child

The inclusion of the voice of the child in schools has many benefits for teachers, also (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). When acting as collaborators with their teachers, students develop better relationships with their teachers. This concurs with the findings of this research, where children develop a trusting, close relationship with adults who listen meaningfully to them. Often, this may be the SET or their special needs assistant (SNA), due to the nature of their close relationship. There is a feeling that there is a sense of advocacy

for them and for their voice. As a result, their opinions are heard and duly considered.

However, this research demonstrates how it is more difficult for mainstream teachers, because they feel there is a lack of support in the classroom to enable them to fully engage with the voice of the child. Yet, as Beaton (2021) points out, in the mainstream classroom, feedback can be given by the students regarding teaching, learning and assessment, and pupils can provide key information around their progress whilst identifying any barriers to learning they are experiencing. A simple “thumbs up, thumbs down” allows the children to give feedback, and an opportunity for their voice to be heard. There is an urgent need to create more opportunities in larger group and class settings for this to happen.

The CRAG commented that the statement *“Children are given enough information to understand why teachers make certain decisions in school”* is rarely true. Mitra (2003) suggests that children may express views and opinions that teachers and schools find challenging and unacceptable. Some of these views were reinforced in the focus groups and may seem uncomfortable for schools and school leaders to hear. However, it is necessary to iterate that the voice of the child does not take away from the teacher's professional knowledge and competence of curriculum and pedagogy but rather further informs their professional decisions (Beaton, 2020). Yet, teachers seem

somewhat reluctant to often move past the typical avenues of Student Council and delve deeper into power-sharing within the class. In fact, these power imbalances are rarely addressed.

Creating a new set of working conditions requires developing new norms, relationships, and organisational structures (Della Porta & Diani, 2020). To do so, adults must relinquish some of their power and work to build a tone of trust among adults and children (Cervone, 2002). Without an intentional focus on building relationships and relinquishing some of the power within the classroom, student voice can easily become tokenistic (Mitra et al., 2012).

6.2.4 Benefits for the School Environment

For the school itself, there are also many potential benefits of student voice, as suggested by Flutter and Rudduck (2004). Benefits include a more positive learning culture throughout the school and new suggestions for school improvement planning directed by students' discussion of teaching and learning (Fielding, 2001, 2004b; Sandoval Mena & Waitoller, 2025). More student involvement can be seen within two of the three schools, and the positivity of this is reflected in the data collected from all stakeholders. However, the third school has much more limited access to SET teachers, SNAs, and general personnel. It is worth considering if this impacts their ability to garner student feedback meaningfully.

An argument supporting children's voice is that children possess expert knowledge and an insider's understanding of being a student (Leitch, 2005). They have important insights on teaching and learning which may serve as “commentary on the curriculum” (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Research indicates that students’ active participation in changing the curriculum fosters in them a greater understanding of how they learn and leads to a stronger sense of their own abilities (Mitra, 2003). This practice encourages engagement with learning (Sebba & Robinson, 2010) which can be seen in this research also. The children love this level of autonomy and thrive on it. Furthermore, it improves teacher-student relationships (Tangen, 2009), all of which have multiple benefits for the school environment (Giannakaki et al., 2018).

For children, an improvement in self-reported levels of confidence and wellbeing, a heightened sense of being “cared for”, a general experience of comfort in their educational environment, greater engagement with schoolwork and improved academic achievement (Flynn, 2014; Simmons et al., 2015; Smyth, 2015) can be seen when their opinions are taken into account meaningfully. Their sense of belonging and connectedness to school is fostered and strengthened (Giannakaki et al., 2018). This can be seen in the research carried out in this study by the way children immediately become more animated and engaged in aspects of school they are actively involved in, such as yard and choosing friends.

Research shows that the development of dialogue with students is important for fostering their personal intelligence, including empathy and awareness of their rights and those of others (Flynn, 2013; Noddings, 2005; Smyth et al., 2010), as evidenced in this research when the senior focus group children in School C started chatting about how to help make a new child with English as an additional language (EAL) feel welcome. Their suggestions were incredibly insightful and unprompted.

If the success of student voice and its impact could be seen and experienced by schools in a practical, real-life way, it would gather momentum and propel the process so much more quickly. However, it often becomes a vicious circle—taking that initial plunge can feel daunting, and without visible examples, teachers may hesitate to begin.

6.2.5 Hearing the Voice of Every Child

Ravet (2008) and Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) highlight the benefits of input from children with additional needs. Though, perhaps at times, difficult to ascertain, the voices of these children provide very valuable information about the pedagogies and learning experiences that work for children who are likely to struggle the most and who may learn best in an atypical way.

Yet, it proves more difficult to elicit the voice of the child with additional needs. Ravet (2008) and Rudduck and McIntyre (2007)

suggest that enacting pupil voice can enhance inclusion and tolerance of diversity. This is reflected in the research here, as it is vital that the child with AEN is heard just as clearly as others. The voice of the child with AEN, when listened to, is powerful and well respected by the other children. It also draws attention to the fact that what benefits the learning of children with AEN, in practice, can benefit all children (Ainscow, 2020).

It is imperative to recognise that the input of children's voice from children with additional needs may not just be verbal but may be expressed in non-verbal ways also (Robinson et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of using visual representations in this research, especially for children not as comfortable verbally giving feedback. The visual drawings gave an insight into the thoughts of the children that may not have been communicated verbally. However, Wall et al. (2019, p. 268) goes one step further by emphasising the need for a broader range of tools and methods to collect true and meaningful input from children with additional needs, saying:

any definition of voice will be, by necessity, broader and more inclusive of a greater range of communication strategies beyond words and cannot exclude behaviour, actions, pauses in action, silences, body language, glances, movement, and artistic expression.

This push to remove barriers to inclusion of participants with complex needs across methodological approaches is reiterated by Kenny et al. (2023b). The CRAG expressed the necessity for more ways for children to express their opinion also in this research. Best practice would indicate that this should be a consideration and reflected in future research around student voice, especially with children who have AEN.

6.2.6 Resistance from Teachers

The findings from this research align with those of Beaton (2020), Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) and Gallagher (2009) who found that some teachers believed children were not sufficiently prepared to engage in meaningful dialogue about their education. This belief was perceived to be even more pronounced in relation to children with AEN, echoing the findings of Franklin and Sloper (2008). This research also concurred with a consideration by some teachers in the work by Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) where they believed that the inclusion of children in dialogue about their learning is time-consuming in a curriculum that already feels like it is under restrictive time constraints. This was reiterated in the findings in this research also, where big classes and a lack of support teachers were sources of key frustrations amongst teachers.

However, it is essential to note that suggesting children should have a voice does not negate the importance of teacher voice. In fact, they

enhance one another, benefiting teachers, children and schools alike (Alexander, 2010). In fact, listening to student voice has the potential to help the teacher in the classroom by informing their teaching and helping to refine learning objectives for the children. Having the children engaged and ready to learn is half the battle. Enabling the children to have a voice instead has the potential to mitigate negative behaviour in the classroom and foster improved teacher-student relationships.

Avramidis and Norwich (2002), in a review of the international literature that discusses teacher attitudes to inclusive education, found that while teachers were generally positive about inclusion, they often expressed reservations about whether it was appropriate for all students. This was also reflected in the findings of this research also.

In addition to this, teachers suggested that changes to the resourcing of schools and the learning environment and focused training opportunities were also important considerations if an expansion of inclusive practice was to be achieved (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Again, this was similar to the results of the findings of this research where teachers spoke about the challenges of meaningful differentiation in the classroom—namely a lack of resources.

True student voice requires a “rupture of the ordinary” (Fielding, 2004b, p. 296), which demands as much of teachers as it does of

students (Mitra et al., 2012). This shift challenges established norms and expectations, pushing everyone outside their comfort zone. While change can be stressful, with change comes opportunity. As educators, we need to consider the exact stressful factors for the child here and what needs to be done for them to feel more comfortable in the mainstream classroom. As leaders, we need to recognise and examine what supports teachers need and implement them.

Ultimately, true student voice is not just about listening—it's about transforming educational spaces to be more responsive, inclusive, and empowering for students and teachers alike.

6.2.7 Imbalance of Power

The children in this research felt an imbalance of power in the school environment regarding decision-making. The children indicated that the principal, teachers, and other authority figures often felt the need to command respect because of their role in the school. The children did feel they were respected in their schools, but their voice was not being actively facilitated to address these issues and communicate their needs.

Ellsworth (1989, p. 309) considers the challenge of student voice in being the balance of facilitating the empowerment of those whose “voices have been silenced or distorted” without directing students or imposing another discourse reflecting the values of the teacher.

Flynn and Hayes (2021, p. 46) highlight how engaging the voices of children in student voice work challenges these power relations and “the privileging of one voice over another”. The balance of power between teachers and children changes as they learn to trust each other (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). This is also reflected in this research where the implementation of Restorative Practice (RP) used by one principal with a child experiencing difficulties entirely transformed their relationship.

It is important to iterate that while there may be challenges to gathering the input of children most struggling in our schools, they may be some of the most critical voices to be heard (Mitra, 2009). By listening to these voices, the traditional power relationships have an opportunity to be disrupted, permitting children, including those with AEN, “to share the unique knowledge and understanding they hold about their experiences of their educational provision and how it might be enhanced” (Mitra, 2009, p. 15). It is imperative for SENCos, and all teachers to “model in their own practice and take a strategic lead through the promotion of creative, courageous and innovative approaches to allow all pupils to have their voices heard” (Mitra, 2009, p. 15).

6.2.8 Children’s Vision for a Positive Learning Environment

Generally, the students interviewed were happy or relatively happy in their school context. However, with that said, there was little

evidence of them impacting the decisions made around them and their learning.

The discussions with the children revealed a deep appreciation amongst them for inclusivity and the opportunity to participate in a supportive community. This was consolidated through their visual depictions and narratives of their ideal school.

Significant discussions around technological access, for example, suggested the untapped potential that could improve learning experiences. The children also expressed a need for an even more welcoming and physically engaging environment, hinting at the relationship between physical spaces and student wellbeing. Overall, the children articulated a nuanced understanding of both the advantages and areas for improvement in their educational experiences. They displayed maturity in their discussion and a clear ability to think critically.

However, there was a sense that opinions and feedback such as this went unheard. This concurs with Skerritt et al. (2021) who note in their research, that while student voice continues to focus on non-academic issues, student voice did not feature strongly at the level of classroom or in relation to teaching and learning.

The children articulated visions of idyllic educational environments that were colourful, supportive, and nurturing. This highlights their desire for transformation and provides key insights into the aspects

of school life these children perceive as valuable and fulfilling. The conversation reflects a longing for inclusive and engaging forms of education, suggesting that students thrive in environments that prioritise emotional wellbeing and active participation, concurring with Flynn (2019).

This research highlighted the urgent need for more inclusive communication approaches within these school settings. For instance, some children imagined scenarios in which homework did not exist, a perspective that could be meaningfully explored through the lens of student voice. For children who experience challenges with learning and interaction during the school day, it may be valuable to critically examine the impact and value of homework, particularly in cases where children with AEN return home exhausted and where academic support in the home may be limited.

Through their artwork, it was possible to get a more in-depth sense of what they would like their learning environments to be like with elements such as environmental changes, subject changes, and decisions around the content of what they were learning being influenced by them.

The new *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education, 2023b) advocates for agentic learning. It will be important that the children are part of this agency and that they also have their voices heard. Thomson (2011) agrees with facilitating the child to be

agentive in the context of their education, pointing to a rights-based definition referring to “student voice” as a process through which children, both individually and collectively, can be vocal about their education (Fleming, 2015).

The children in the senior focus group in School C expressed appreciation for having some say in their educational activities, like choosing reading methods or art projects, signifying the value of student autonomy.

6.2.9 Challenges to Enabling the Voice of the Child in Schools

Despite the belief that the engagement of student voice enables the potential of improved pupil-teacher relationships and quality learning, which would help empower marginalised pupils (Tangen, 2009), it is unfortunate that the most marginalised children are rarely given a voice. This was evident in this research when the children spoke about some voices being heard louder than others. The role of the SNA enabling the voice of the child, and amplifying the voice of the child became a prominent feature of this research. Robinson and Taylor (2007) speak about some schools only listening to articulate and able students or perhaps those who say what the school want to hear. For meaningful, non-tokenistic engagement, schools need to “think carefully about what they listen to, how they listen to pupils and what they listen to pupils about” (Robinson & Taylor, 2007, p. 10). Flynn et al. (2012, p. 248) argue that this is particularly significant

if we are to consider input from the children to determine “the kind of education they think would facilitate their needs and wellbeing while at the same time include those students who are disaffected, disengaged and perhaps at risk of social inclusion”. This is most relative to the children with additional needs and the most vulnerable in our schools.

This is also argued by Lundy (2007), indicating how adults can comply with outward signs of consultation while ultimately ignoring children’s views. She argues that not only is this in breach of Article 12 of the *UNCRC* (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) but “can be counter-productive in giving children a false sense of having been consulted or having participated in a meaningful way” (Flynn & Hayes, 2021, p. 45). Authentic listening is essential and can only be achieved through “acknowledgement and response to the views expressed and suggestions made by student participants” (Flynn, 2014, p. 166). Furthermore, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2003, para. 12) warns that “appearing to listen to children is relatively unchallenging”, however, “giving due weight to their views requires real change”. It is this transformative piece that we have yet to see in schools. Their experience needs to be authentic rather than tokenistic (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007).

Flynn et al. (2012) make the point that for children who are perceived as different, such as children with social, emotional and behavioural

difficulties (SEBD), there are implications in their relationships with others around notions of normality and abnormality. Lynch and Lodge (2002) correlate this as possibly leading to a sense of powerlessness and rejection, which Flynn et al. (2012) suggest may lead to their peers being very intolerant towards them. This may be true in some cases. However, in this research, there was also a sense that if children with AEN were with their peers from the beginning of Junior Infants, their class were quite protective of them. At times, there was a sense that some peers could be judgmental within the classroom setting. However, outside of the classroom, for example, in the yard, the same children demonstrated a protective stance, not allowing others from outside their class to treat their classmates inappropriately.

Students' voices and their perceptions embody their learning experiences and include information that schools and teachers need. Students are observant and analytic, and their voices are constructive (Rudduck, 2001). Research indicates that when children are actively involved in decisions affecting their education, the process becomes more democratic and responsive to their unique needs. Moreover, when both students and their families are invited to participate, they are more likely to feel valued and respected, which can lead to increased engagement and improved educational outcomes. In this way, inclusive practice is not merely a top-down implementation of

policies but a collaborative effort that recognises the intrinsic worth of every learner. By creating structured opportunities for dialogue and participation, schools can ensure that decisions are enriched by the lived experiences of students and their families, ultimately fostering an environment where every voice contributes to the shaping of educational practice.

6.3 The Effect of Leadership on Inclusive Education and Enabling the Voice of the Child

This section explores the effect of leadership on inclusive education and the enabling of student voice. Firstly, the role of the principal is examined, focusing on their leadership in fostering an inclusive culture and the challenges they encounter in doing so. The discussion then moves to the BoM, outlining its responsibilities in the leadership of the school from a governance perspective, ensuring that inclusive education is effectively implemented, and that student voice is recognised and heard. Following this, the importance of policy development is considered, with an emphasis on how policies should be dynamic and reflective of inclusive practices. Finally, the section concludes by addressing staff wellbeing, recognising its impact on teachers' ability to create meaningful and inclusive learning environments where student voice is fostered and highlighting the role of leadership in fostering this wellbeing.

6.3.1 The Role of the Principal

The Irish Department of Education and Youth (DEY) outlines that the principal of the school is responsible for the day-to-day running of the school (Department of Education, 2023a). This study indicated that there is a sense that principals are aware of their vital role in the achievement of an inclusive school. However, some challenges are encountered on that path towards inclusion. The principals interviewed gave a sense of their understanding that to have an inclusive school, their actions and leadership need to be proactive rather than reactive. This concurs with findings reported by Ainscow and Sandill (2010). There is an awareness amongst school leaders of the important role of the principal to help cultivate the culture of a school, and in the case of this study, a culture of inclusivity.

McGhie-Richmond and Haider (2020, p. 40), speak about principals recognising their role in “putting the idea of ‘education for all’ into action,” which aligns with the sentiment of all three principals who emphasised the importance of leading by example.

Furthermore, Flynn (2019, p. 38) corroborates this point by saying that “a bottom-up approach” facilitating student participation, consultation and partnership, which leads to school improvements, and ultimately helps build a more inclusive school culture, requires a “top-down response that is committed to facilitating opportunities

for young people to be heard and responding to what is shared and learned as a consequence”.

The relationship between the principal and teachers “is critical for enabling voice” (Mitra et al., 2012, p. 104). A clear vision for the school that is incorporated deeply into practice as “the way we do things here”, allowing opt-in strategies for teachers when possible and recognising that implementation across classrooms and personnel will vary depending on individual contexts, beliefs and experiences are all essential concepts which are important toward efforts to enable and foster student voice within schools (Mitra et al., 2012).

6.3.2 The Role of the Board of Management (BoM)

The BoM’s responsibilities are set out in Section 15 of the Education Act (1998), which dictates that it is the duty of the BoM to “manage the school on behalf of the patron and for the benefit of the students and their parents and to provide or cause to be provided an appropriate education for each student at the school for which that board has responsibility” (Department of Education, 2023a, p. vi). In this research, principals identified the need for a good relationship with their respective BoMs. The role of BoMs in supporting leadership is outlined by the DE, “Boards of management must be cognisant of the importance of encouraging and facilitating the

principal, deputy principal and assistant principals in developing and effectively exercising their leadership role in the school” (Department of Education, 2023a, p. 9). A strong, supportive and innovative BoM can allow for transformational leadership to evolve within the school. This style of leadership is most effective for active, meaningful inclusion (Ainscow, 2020; McGhie-Richmond & Haider, 2020) and this “good leadership increases the overall effectiveness of the school generally but is particularly important in the context of the effective delivery of the curriculum, policy development and implementation, school self-evaluation and the creation of a positive school culture and climate for all pupils and staff” (Department of Education, 2023a, p. 9).

Members of the Boards of Management (BoMs) in all three schools expressed a strong willingness to promote a culture of inclusivity. Two-thirds of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that children have a sense of ownership within the school. However, one-third reported that they do not take children’s opinions into account when making important decisions or developing policies. One BoM member also highlighted the difficulty of addressing challenging behaviour in an inclusive school context.

Overall, the concept of student voice appeared to be difficult for BoM members to interpret in a practical or actionable way. This research suggests that, in order for student voice to be meaningfully

embedded at the governance level, targeted training and support for BoM members is necessary to illustrate its value and relevance in school leadership and decision-making.

6.3.3 Policy Development

All three principals referred to policy development in their schools. While “the Board has overall responsibility for school policies”(Department of Education, 2023a, p. 4), the principal, more often than not, takes the lead on policy development within the school. It is the BoM’s responsibility to ensure “that policy principles of equality and the right of parents to send their children to a school of the parents’ choice are respected” (Department of Education, 2023a, p. 15). All three principals spoke of the need for policies to be living documents. It shows an awareness of the policy documents informing the actual practice of the school. Yet, student involvement in these same policies was nominal, if not non-existent.

6.3.4 Staff Wellbeing

Turan and Bektaş (2013) suggest that the main task of a school principal in creating a positive atmosphere is to contribute to the creation of a strong school culture. It is this strong culture that lends itself to an inclusive school (Ainscow, 2020). School leadership behaviours are consistently acknowledged as a core factor in influencing school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2006; Sigurðardóttir & Sigþórsson, 2016). Furthermore, they have been

linked to teachers' emotions (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017) and wellbeing (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018). If staff wellbeing is supported, it will help lead towards more competent, capable staff looking for meaningful inclusion in their classrooms. If staff feel depleted, they will not have the energy or enthusiasm to inject as much meaning into what is needed for all children to be fully included in the classroom. On the whole, principals recognised the importance of being there for their staff, so as to be as conducive as possible to an inclusive environment within the classroom (Poon-McBrayer, 2017).

6.4 Supporting a Policy of Inclusion

This section examines key factors identified from this research that contribute to creating an inclusive educational environment. Firstly, the necessity of building staff capacity is considered, recognising that school leaders and teachers must be adequately trained and supported to respond effectively to the diverse needs of the children. Next, the importance of professional development and cultural shifts in embedding student voice and inclusive practices is highlighted. Finally, the role of quality relationships between parents, teachers, and children is assessed, emphasising the collaborative efforts required to ensure all children are enabled to meet their true potential.

6.4.1 Building Capacity of Staff

Shevlin and Flynn (2011) speak about building the capacity of the school leaders and staff so they are enabled to respond to the challenging needs of all the learners within their school community. It is evident from this research that there is some work to be done in this regard. Teachers feel inadequately trained and under-skilled to deal with the complexity of some of the additional needs presented in their classes. This leads to frustration and weariness rather than a lack of willingness to support each child.

Just as there is training and upskilling for many initiatives, Beaton (2021, p. 12) concludes that “teachers and pupils need to have the benefits of authentic pupil voice to be explained to them, and this can be a role that the SENCo can lead with—being informed of the benefits that will accrue to all”. Flynn (2017) concurs that to embed the principles of student voice within the curriculum and build a culture of listening to students in schools, more continuing professional development (CPD) is required for teachers. This could be extended to principals, BoMs and other school staff.

Flutter (2024) reinforces this perspective, advocating that school leaders, teachers, teaching assistants and those with responsibility for school governance acquire training and support to enable these principles of student voice to become fully embedded within the curriculum as they are integral to effective pedagogy.

Furthermore, just as some of the principals in this research expressed the need for an inclusion cluster—similar to the literacy and numeracy clusters in which they are already involved, Ainscow (2020) advocates for the transformative potential of school-to-school collaboration. Building networks that facilitate the sharing of experience and knowledge can strengthen each school’s capacity to respond to learner diversity (Muijs et al., 2011). In addition, such collaboration may also help to reduce teacher resistance, as more connected and reflective ways of working across schools can influence how teachers perceive their roles and practices, encouraging them to view “underachieving students in a new light” (Ainscow, 2020, p. 13). In essence, these communities of practice support the exchange of effective strategies while also providing collegial support to navigate the everyday challenges of teaching.

6.4.2 Quality Relationships

Parental support for inclusion is vital, and there is a need for co-operation and communication between teachers, students and parents (Shevlin et al., 2013). As seen through the research, the most effective progress for the child can be seen when all parties are working together. The child is more likely to be given the opportunity to reach their full potential. The building of these relationships does not happen accidentally and needs to be fostered by all parties.

The intervention of parents, in particular, plays a significant role in shaping their children's responses and actions to hostile learning environments as well as enabling resilient strategies in children with AEN (Buchner et al., 2014). The data collected from the parent focus groups highlighted this. However, it also portrayed how weary parents can be from all their advocacy work. Everything is a battle. This can sometimes result in tensions between school and home and requires delicate yet honest management. The strength of the relationship between home and school comes into play here in a very important way. In general, the parents involved in this research were so appreciative of the support of their respective schools. For many, the relationship with the school had been established over a number of years, with ongoing communication and effort invested in maintaining and nurturing this partnership.

It was evident that the principals and SENCOs in this study engaged in significant advocacy work on behalf of children with additional needs, particularly in their interactions with external agencies. They expressed a willingness to collaborate with professionals in order to secure additional supports. Such support was considered essential not only for the schools themselves but also for parents in navigating the system and meeting their children's needs.

The parents in School C spoke about the strides the school had made in integrating children with diverse needs and backgrounds. They

highlighted initiatives such as buddy programs and the relationships their children had with their respective SNAs and teachers, which had significantly contributed to their children's progress.

A sense of pride emerged as parents described how children from the school's autism classes were meaningfully included in mainstream classrooms.

Parents also spoke about inclusion extending beyond the walls of the school, noting that children often played together outside of school hours. However, some parents felt that there was still work to be done in this area. While school was viewed as a strong starting point, they believed that inclusion within the wider community had not yet fully caught up. This aligns with Ainscow (2020), who emphasises the importance of broader community engagement in the development of truly inclusive schools and societies.

The discussion naturally shifted towards cultural and religious dynamics, with parents acknowledging positive changes while also recognising the need for further progress, particularly in engaging families from diverse backgrounds. Some parents expressed concern that, despite the school's inclusive efforts, cultural and social barriers continued to make it difficult for all families to participate fully in school life.

Overall, a vivid picture emerged of school communities deeply committed to inclusion. Parents and schools were working

collaboratively to create environments where every child had an equal opportunity to thrive. While challenges remained, there was a strong sense of optimism and a shared understanding that true inclusion is not merely a policy or programme, but an ongoing, collective effort grounded in strong, trusting relationships.

6.5 Conclusion

To conclude, in this chapter the findings from the research were reviewed and discussed. The data gathered from the CRAG and the three case study schools were examined in relation to existing literature on inclusive education, with particular attention to the themes of inclusion, leadership, student voice, and relationships.

The final chapter presents the overall conclusions and implications of the research. It also considers the limitations of the study, outlines its contribution to existing theory and practice, and identifies areas for future research.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and

Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

In this final chapter, the purpose of this thesis will be summarised. The major findings will be reviewed, and their contribution to the literature will be assessed. Next, the limitations of this study will be acknowledged. The final implications and recommendations will then be presented. Finally, there will be a personal reflection piece.

7.2 Summary of the Research

This research was carried out to answer these three main research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of inclusive education reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools?
2. Is the voice of the child heard as part of inclusive practice in these schools and if so, how?
3. What effect does leadership have on inclusive education and the enabling of student voice in these schools?

To attempt to answer these questions, a thorough understanding of the literature in the area of inclusion, student voice and leadership had to be gained. Regarding this, it was found that there a significant amount of literature surrounding inclusion, student voice and

leadership separately. However, it was very difficult to find literature concerning all three aspects together.

Once an understanding of the existing literature on the topic had been grasped, it helped to refine the research questions. It also enabled the researcher to gain a critical analysis of where the gaps were in the literature.

The next phase of this study was to draw up a research design. This involved reflecting on the questions which needed to be answered and deciding accordingly which methodologies were best suited. It was decided that the research would be carried out using a multiple case study approach.

Firstly, a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) was formed with 10 children from the Student Council in the school where the researcher is the principal, based on the principles of Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation. These children helped design the questions used in the focus groups with the children in the three case study schools. The children helped choose the language of the questions to ensure they were understood and set at an appropriate level. The CRAG also helped with the interpretation and analysis of the data garnered from the children.

Looking at the three schools involved in the research, the researcher decided to use a teacher questionnaire to explore teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education and the voice of the child in the classroom

and school environment. Questionnaires were also issued to all Board of Management (BoM) members. In each school a focus group interview was held with a group of four to five children from 1st – 3rd Class and a group of four to five children from 4th – 6th Class, including some children with additional educational needs (AEN). It was decided to break the children's focus groups into two age categories to determine whether this distinction had any significant impact on the results obtained, as it was anticipated that the children would feel more comfortable in groups with peers of their own age. Artwork was gathered from the children participating in the focus groups, portraying their image of a school they would like to attend and a school they would not like to attend. This visual data complemented the verbal insights gathered during the focus group discussions. A focus group interview was held in each school with four parents of children with AEN. Their children had taken part in the focus groups. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) and the principal in each school. Finally, a document analysis was carried out on relevant documents, where available, pertaining to each school, such as the Special Educational Needs (SEN) policy, the Code of Behaviour policy, the English as an Additional Language (EAL) policy and a selection of School Support Plans (SSPs). The documents are not included in the data for analysis, but they enabled the researcher to gain a clearer contextual understanding of each school's policies and procedures.

Overall, this triangulation of methods worked well. It also further validated the results as they acted like “cross checks” to one another.

7.3 Major Findings

As the research took place with a relatively small sample of participants, it is important to acknowledge that the findings are indicative rather than representative of an Irish primary school context.

7.3.1 Perspectives of Inclusive Education

The perspectives of inclusive education are varied across the context of an Irish primary school.

Teacher perspectives showed that there is an open willingness to inclusion and an acknowledgement that it has the potential to benefit all children, not just those with AEN. With proper training and support, teachers can successfully implement inclusive practices. Currently, a lack of continuing professional development (CPD) and resources contributes to a lack of confidence in delivering inclusion in the classroom. Large class sizes make differentiation difficult, and teachers find it challenging to balance individual children’s needs with curriculum demands due to a dearth of support teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs).

From the students' perspective, feeling included and valued positively influences their self-esteem and academic engagement.

Learning in diverse classrooms where the voice of the child is amplified also promotes empathy and peer collaboration. Students with AEN have the potential to feel isolated where support structures are inadequate.

From parents' perspectives, inclusion supports holistic development and prepares children for real-world diversity. It helps break down stigma and discrimination against children with additional needs. There are concerns about whether their child's needs are being fully met and resentment from parents of children with AEN who have to fight for resources their children should be automatically entitled to.

From a school leadership perspective, strong leadership is essential for fostering an inclusive school culture. Inclusion aligns with policy directives and ethical responsibilities. However, there are serious challenges to practical implementation, such as managing competing demands with limited funding, resources and staffing. Also, there is the challenge of sharing an inclusive vision with the whole school community and ensuring that all staff members are committed to inclusive education.

From a policy and governance level perspective, inclusion aligns with the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)* (United Nations, 2006). Inclusion is a fundamental right that benefits society as a whole. However, there is a gap between policy and practice due to funding, training, and implementation

barriers. Standardised testing and a rigid curriculum conflict with inclusive approaches.

7.3.2 The Voice of the Child

The power of children having agency and input into their learning is evident. However, there is scope for so much more of this to be a regular part of the classroom. Apart from the usual democratic forms in schools, such as Student Councils and Green School Committees, student voice is limited. In general, the students interviewed were happy or relatively happy in their school context. However, with that said, there was little evidence of them having an impactful influence on the decisions made around them and their learning. There was a sense that opinions and feedback such as this went unheard.

While there is definitely an element of teacher resistance to be seen, both in regard to inclusion and student voice, it is necessary to iterate that the voice of the child does not take away from the teacher's professional knowledge and competence of curriculum and pedagogy but rather further informs their professional decisions (Beaton, 2020). Teachers are often reluctant to move past typical avenues of student voice and delve deeper into power-sharing within the class. In fact, these power imbalances are rarely addressed. As a result, student voice often seems tokenistic and a “tick box” exercise at best.

A lack of meaningful differentiation was evident in the classrooms. This was due to a number of factors, namely class size, lack of resources (mainly teaching personnel) and time constraints in the classroom. There is also no dedicated official planning time allowed for in daily or weekly timetables, which is essential for effective planning to be facilitated between class teachers and special education teachers (SET) teachers. Often, differentiation for these children with AEN means doing something entirely different in parallel with their class.

It is important to iterate that while there are challenges to gathering the input of children who are struggling the most in our schools, they are some of the most critical voices to be heard (Mitra, 2009). By listening to these voices, the traditional power relationships can be disrupted, permitting children, including those with AEN, to contribute their insights into their educational experiences and suggest ways these could be improved. It is imperative that SENCOs, and all teachers lead by example and take a strategic role in promoting creative, courageous, and innovative practices that enable all pupils to express their views and be genuinely heard. The voice of the child with or without AEN, when listened to, is powerful and well respected by the other children. This research also draws attention to the fact that what benefits the learning of children with AEN, in practice, can be of benefit to all children.

Students' voices and their perceptions embody their learning experiences and include information that schools and teachers need. Students are observant and analytic, and their voices are constructive, as witnessed through the research process. When children are actively involved in decisions affecting their education, the process becomes more democratic and responsive to their unique needs. When both students and their families are invited to participate, they are more likely to feel valued and respected, leading to increased engagement and improved educational outcomes. In this way, inclusive practice is not merely a top-down implementation of policies but a collaborative effort that recognises the intrinsic worth of every learner. By creating structured opportunities for dialogue and participation, schools can ensure that decisions are enriched by the lived experiences of students and their families, ultimately fostering an environment where every voice contributes to the shaping of educational practice.

A higher level of student involvement can be seen within two of the three schools, and the positivity of this is reflected in the data collected from all stakeholders. However, the third school does have much more limited access to SET teachers, SNAs, and personnel in general. This is indicative of the practical struggles of inclusion, student voice and differentiation without appropriate resources and training, as it is clear that intentions are well-meaning, but in a practical, realistic sense, people feel stretched.

It is very clear that there are tensions between policy ideals and classroom realities. As a result, addressing and incorporating the voice of the child in the classroom still requires significant progress.

7.3.3 Leadership in Inclusive Education

Leadership is essential to ensuring a culture of inclusive education and a positive attitude towards student voice. Effective leadership from both principals and governance in the form of Boards of Management is essential for the motivation of staff, as well as the maintenance of good staff morale and a sense of wellbeing in the school.

The SENCo plays a vital role in ensuring that the voices of the most vulnerable children in school are listened to in an authentic and meaningful way (Beaton, 2021). The relationship between children with AEN and their SET teacher is such an important one. Not only is this relationship significant to the children, but the SENCo also plays an important part in leading the SET team with the principal. Furthermore, the principal and SENCo are key to building relationships with patients, especially in the early days of navigating a possible diagnosis.

The intervention of parents, in particular, plays a significant role in shaping their children's responses and actions to hostile learning environments, as well as enabling resilient strategies in children with AEN (Buchner et al., 2014). The data collected from the parent focus

groups highlighted this. However, it also portrayed how weary parents can be from all their advocacy work. Every step is a battle. This can sometimes lead to tensions between home and school, necessitating careful and transparent management. The role of the principal and SENCo are essential in establishing relationships to navigate situations like this when they arrive and in working through difficulties with parents to ensure their child receives the best support they can.

Having discussed the central findings, the study's limitations will now be considered, recognising the factors that may have shaped the scope, depth, and applicability of the conclusions.

7.4 Limitations

There were a number of limitations associated with this study.

While this study was conducted on a relatively small scale, the case study approach allowed for rich, in-depth engagement with each school context. This design prioritised depth over breadth, enabling nuanced insights into inclusive education, student voice, and leadership practices.

Despite repeated reminders, the return rates of the questionnaires for both teachers and Board of Management (BoM) members were lower than anticipated, which limited the breadth of quantitative data available. However, the questionnaires were still data-rich,

particularly through the insights provided in the open-ended questions.

Additionally, while the perspectives of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) emerged through the voices of children, parents, and teachers, SNAs themselves were not directly consulted, representing a gap in the data, primarily due to time constraints and the scope of the research.

Finally, while efforts were made to capture the voices of children with AEN in this research, some children with additional needs required adapted environments or trusted relationships to express themselves fully. The time constraints of this study did not allow the researcher to build up this relationship with some of the relevant children, thus allowing fuller participation.

The following section outlines how this study contributes to the wider literature on inclusion, student voice, and leadership.

7.5 Contribution to Knowledge

This research makes a significant and original contribution to the field of inclusive education by bringing together the three areas of inclusion, student voice, and leadership in Irish primary schools. These three dimensions have previously been examined largely in isolation. This study integrates them within a unified analytical framework grounded in social constructivism. There is also a notable gap in the literature when it comes to effectively capturing and

understanding the voices of children with additional needs, particularly in Irish primary schools, despite increasing recognition of the importance of student voice in general education research.

By bringing these elements together, this study advances theory, introduces methodological innovation, and offers practical, evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice.

7.5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study weaves together the concepts of inclusion, student voice, and leadership into a fresh theoretical perspective, positioning them as inherently interconnected and mutually supportive within the everyday practices of Irish primary schools. While earlier research has tended to look at these aspects separately, this research conceptualises them as co-dependent processes that together enable more equitable and participatory school cultures.

By emphasising the voice of the child as both a theoretical construct and a lived experience, this research challenges traditional top-down understandings of inclusion and leadership. It argues that inclusion cannot be fully achieved unless children are active participants in shaping their own educational experience.

Furthermore, it reframes effective leadership as transformational and participatory, rather than solely administrative or instructional, acting as a tool for embedding democratic values within school life.

The findings show how inclusive leadership fosters a culture where

all stakeholders, including children, can exercise genuine agency and voice, moving beyond tokenistic consultation towards meaningful participation.

7.5.2 Methodological Contributions

Methodologically, this research makes an important contribution through its use of the CRAG as a participatory strategy embedded within a multiple case study design. Informed by Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation, the CRAG enabled children, including those with AEN, to act as co-researchers, influencing research questions, shaping data collection tools, and contributing to data interpretation.

This approach moved beyond conventional participatory methods by redistributing aspects of research power to children and improving the ethical integrity, contextual validity, and relevance of the study. It also provides a scalable and replicable model for authentically integrating children's perspectives into future educational research, particularly when working with those whose voices are often underrepresented. The mixed-methods triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data, enriched by both children's narrative and visual contributions, added unique depth to the analysis. It highlighted nuanced understandings of inclusion that might have been overlooked through adult-centred inquiry alone.

In conclusion, while this is a small-scale study, its implications are significant. It addresses a notable gap in Irish primary education research by examining how inclusion, leadership, and student voice intersect in daily school life, and by modelling a participatory approach that ensures children's perspectives shape both research and practice. The insights generated offer a pragmatic, theoretically grounded framework for teacher education, leadership development, and policy reform. This research reflects the real-world complexities of inclusive education while remaining firmly committed to equity, relational practice, and student agency. The implications and recommendations of this study will now be detailed in the next section.

7.6 Implications and Recommendations

Practically, this research points to a set of connected actions that can help move inclusive education forward in Irish primary schools.

Student voice has the very real potential to influence everyday life in school — for example, through approaches such as Restorative Practice (RP). By listening to student voice in this manner, schools are able to act inclusively with the interests of all children at heart.

Incorporating brief, 30-second self-assessment opportunities into everyday lessons can help children reflect on their learning, build metacognitive skills and embed student voice into the daily classroom routine. Integrating the voice of the child into everyday

structures should be a natural part of teaching and learning. It is vital to build the confidence of teachers to do this. Encouraging children to give feedback on lessons should become the norm as authentic feedback allows teachers to meaningfully adapt and improve their practice.

However, student voice needs to continue to move far beyond gaining perspectives from children on their experience of education and move more towards a democratic process of shared curricular development and co-construction, also giving responsibility for developing solutions in education environments. There was an opportunity in the new *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education, 2023b) for this to happen, with children's input sought from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). This needs to continue to be built upon. Furthermore, training and upskilling are required for teachers to be fully aware of its benefits and for them to feel competent in their practice. If we want teachers and pupils to be agentic in their learning, then we need to give them the skills and opportunities to do so. There is inevitably a gap here where the voice and input of children with AEN are not heard as readily. There is a need for all children's voice and input to be reflected in documents such as the new Primary Curriculum Framework.

The voice of the child must be included in the development and review of all school policies. Currently, the Anti-Bullying policy is the only policy where the Department of Education and Youth (DEY) mandates the inclusion of children's feedback as part of its annual review. While it is not a legal requirement, consultation with children is encouraged as good practice in the annual review of some other policies, such as the Child Safeguarding Statement. This needs to be extended to all policies. Children have a right to understand how their school operates and why certain decisions are made; involving them in policy processes not only promotes transparency but also fosters a sense of belonging and agency.

While policies increasingly advocate for inclusive education and student participation, there remains significant scope to improve how this is practically implemented for children with AEN. More research is needed on how schools can meaningfully include these students in decision-making processes—and, crucially, how these practices can be translated into consistent and genuine implementation.

Embedding Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation into school structures and policies could ensure that children's voices are not only heard but also acted upon, particularly in areas such as school policy review, curriculum planning, and individual support plans.

Inclusion of all children in mainstream schools is the ideal. However, for this to happen, appropriate supports need to be firmly in place. For the voice of the child with AEN to be heard, there needs to be the time and space for trusting relationships to be built and unhurried, meaningful dialogue to take place. This cannot happen with one teacher alone in a class of 30 children, each with diverse needs, including some children with quite complex needs. Even with the best of intentions, inclusion and student voice face implementation challenges without sustained investment in personnel and resources. Schools are under increasing pressure to uphold and maintain high standards of inclusive education. This must be recognised and prioritised in government and policy decisions.

A neuro-affirmative approach to the use of language and provision of supports is important. Despite this, it is important to note that the language used in the guidelines and policy documents issued by the DE reflects terminology that is dated, for example, referring to “special needs” rather than “additional needs”. This is in contrast to the evolving language used in schools in “on-the-ground” practice, where terms such as additional educational needs (AEN) and additional needs assistant (ANA) are becoming more common. It is crucial that policy and guidelines are regularly updated to reflect current best practices and align with the language used in schools.

The role of the SENCo in each school is vital, as depicted in the research. Yet, currently, there is no formal recognition from the DE for the role of SENCo in Irish primary schools. A lack of official acknowledgement leads to inconsistencies with the role across schools. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Furthermore, training and financial remuneration for this pivotal role need to be re-examined without delay.

Finally, with the very recent publication of the Review of the EPSEN Act (2004) (Department of Education and Youth, 2025b), the focus must now shift to the timely implementation of its recommendations. Current practice in schools should be supported and guided by legislation that is updated, accurate, and reflective of the realities of inclusive education in Ireland. It is essential that this momentum is maintained so that policy and law meaningfully underpin inclusive practice and the rights of all learners.

7.7 Future Research

Much of the existing research on inclusion and student voice focuses on neurotypical children or children without additional needs. Fewer studies specifically explore the perspectives of students with disabilities, learning difficulties, or complex communication needs.

Many existing studies on student voice, especially those considering children with AEN are short-term or small-scale. There is a lack of research tracking how student voice initiatives impact educational

experiences and outcomes over time for children with AEN. Future research could explore the longitudinal impact of sustained student voice initiatives in Irish primary schools.

It is imperative to recognise that the input of children's voice from children with additional needs may not just be verbal but may be expressed in non-verbal ways also (Robinson et al., 2019; Wall et al., 2019). Current research primarily employs traditional methods for gathering student voice, including surveys, interviews, and focus groups. These methods often assume verbal or written communication skills, which can exclude children with communication difficulties. Future research could focus on alternative ways of gathering input from children in non-traditional methods. Future research could even explore alternative, accessible methods that are still developing, an example being visual, sensory, or assistive technology-supported approaches. This is a consideration for future research.

7.8 Personal Reflection

As a result of engaging with this area of study, I am encouraged by the positive attitudes toward inclusion and student voice portrayed by leadership in each of the three schools. I believe that meaningful culture and sustainable change in schools emerge through collaborative leadership, where responsibility is shared across the school community. When leadership is distributed among principals,

teachers, SENCos, and other key stakeholders, including students, everyone is empowered to contribute to inclusive, student-centred practices.

This study has reinforced for me the significance of student voice as a powerful driver of inclusive education. It is not simply a mechanism for feedback, but rather an essential element of democratic schooling and a vital means of ensuring that educational experiences reflect the real needs and perspectives of children. Children are not passive recipients of education. They are active participants whose insights can shape more responsive, respectful, and effective teaching and learning environments. When schools commit to genuinely listening to students, especially those with AEN, the result is not only more inclusive policy and practice, but also increased student engagement, confidence, and wellbeing.

At the same time, I have seen the practical realities and systemic challenges that often hinder the realisation of inclusion and student voice in the classroom. Teachers are navigating increasing demands with fewer resources, and without adequate structural support, the implementation of inclusive, participatory practices can become an overwhelming task. More needs to be done to empower and equip teachers to integrate student voice meaningfully and confidently into their everyday practice.

I feel for parents navigating this system, often encountering barriers at every step. As a mother, I know there are no limits to what I would do for the benefit of my children. As a principal and school leader, I feel obligated to do my very best to work in partnership with parents to achieve the ultimate support for their children, with the goal for every child to be able to reach their full potential.

I hope that by carrying out this research, I can make a meaningful difference in my own school and practice, particularly in how I lead inclusion and promote student voice within my own setting. The use of the CRAG gave me some incredible insights into practice in my own school and delivered some immediate signposts of areas I need to work on with my team. I would hope to be able to raise competence and awareness among staff through open dialogue, professional development opportunities, and, most importantly, through leading by example, modelling inclusive leadership and a deep commitment to student participation. I am committed to further developing authentic structures for student voice in my school, moving far beyond tokenism to enable children to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their learning and wellbeing. I believe the voice of the child should not only be heard but should inform leadership decisions at the highest level within schools.

It has been a very enjoyable and worthwhile, yet challenging, experience to undertake this study. I feel that I have grown both

personally and professionally because of it. It has deepened my resolve to continue advocating for inclusive, student-led education, and to share this knowledge more widely. The research has also heightened my curiosity about how inclusive practice and the voice of the child can continue to evolve within the Irish primary education system, and how effective leadership can act as the enabler of both.

References

- Ackermann, T. (2021). Co-production Approaches in Social Research with Children and Young People as Service Users-Challenges and Strategies. *Social Work & Society*, 18(3), 1-17.
- Ainscow, M. (1998). Would it work in theory? Arguments for practitioner research and theorising in the special needs field. In C. Clark, A. Dyson, & A. Millward (Eds.), *Theorising Special Education*. Routledge.
- Ainscow, M. (1999). *Understanding the development of inclusive schools*. Taylor & Francis.
<https://books.google.ie/books?id=YzSQAgAAQBAJ>
- Ainscow, M. (2016). Collaboration as a strategy for promoting equity in education: possibilities and barriers. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 1 (2), . *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 1(2), 159 - 172.
- Ainscow, M. (2020). Promoting inclusion and equity in education: lessons from international experiences. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 6(1), 7-16.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2020.1729587>
- Ainscow, M., Booth, T., & Dyson, A. (2006). Inclusion and the standards agenda: negotiating policy pressures in England. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 10(4-5), 295-308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110500430633>
- Ainscow, M., Chapman, C., & Hadfield, M. (2019). *Changing Education Systems: A Research-based Approach* (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429273674>
- Ainscow, M., Howes, A., Farrell, P., & Frankham, J. (2003). Making sense of the development of inclusive practices. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 18(2), 227-242.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0885625032000079005>
- Ainscow, M., & Sandill, A. (2010). Developing inclusive education systems: the role of organisational cultures and leadership. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(4), 401-416.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110802504903>
- Alexander, R. J. (2010). *Children, Their World, Their Education: Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. Routledge.
<https://books.google.ie/books?id=0QRXAAAAYAAJ>
- Allan, J. (1999). *Actively seeking inclusion: Pupils with special needs in mainstream schools*. Routledge.
- Allan, J. (2005). Inclusion as an ethical project. In S. Tremain (Ed.), *Foucault and the Government of Disability* (pp. 281-297). University of Michigan Press.

- Allan, J. (2006). The repetition of exclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 10(2-3), 121-133.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110500221511>
- Anderson, A., & Ronson, B. (2005). Democracy – The first principle of health promoting schools. *The Electronic Journal of Health Education*, 8, 24-35.
- Anglim, J., Paula, P., & Kinsella, W. (2018). The self-efficacy of primary teachers in supporting the inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 34(1), 73-88.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2017.1391750>
- Antonak, R., & Livneh, H. (2000). Measurement of attitudes toward persons with disabilities. *Disability and rehabilitation*, 22(5), 211-224.
- Antony-Newman, M. (2024). Preparing teachers for parent engagement: role of teacher educators in Canada. *Educational Review*, 1-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2024.2324154>
- Arnaud, S., Cristina, A., Julie, P., Marie-Christine, T.-C., Odile, R., & Mickael, J. (2024). Can Students with Special Educational Needs Overcome the 'Success' Expectations? , 27(3), 687-708.
- Arnot, M., Brown, P., Coffey, A., David, M., Davies, L., James, D., Naidoo, R., Reay, D., Reid, I., & Vincent, C. (2010). The sociology of disability and education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 31(5), 529-535.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2010.500086>
- Arnot, M., & Reay, D. (2007). A Sociology of Pedagogic Voice: Power, inequality and pupil consultation. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 28(3), 311-325.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300701458814>
- Avramidis, E., Bayliss, P., & Burden, R. (2000). Student teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the ordinary school. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16(3), 277-293.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/s0742-051x\(99\)00062-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0742-051x(99)00062-1)
- Avramidis, E., & Norwich, B. (2002). Teachers' attitudes towards integration / inclusion: a review of the literature. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 17(2), 129-147.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250210129056>
- Bae, B. (2004). *Dialogues between preschool teacher and child: A descriptive and interpretive study*. University of Oslo.
- Bahou, L. (2011). *Rethinking The Challenges and Possibilities of Student Voice and Agency*.
<https://www.educatejournal.org/index.php/educate/article/view/286>

- Balfe, T., & Travers, J. (2011). The Children's Voice: What Makes Students Feel Included? *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland*, 25(1), 8-24.
<https://reachjournal.ie/index.php/reach/article/view/83>
- Ballard, K. (1996). Inclusive Education in New Zealand: culture, context and ideology. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 26(1), 33-45.
- Banks, J. (2021). A Winning Formula? Funding Inclusive Education in Ireland. In J. Goldan, J. Lambrecht, & T. Loreman (Eds.), *Resourcing Inclusive Education* (Vol. 15, pp. 7-19). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-363620210000015003>
- Baroutsis, A., McGregor, G., & Mills, M. (2015). Pedagogic voice: student voice in teaching and engagement pedagogies. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 24(1), 123-140.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2015.1087044>
- Beaton, M. C. (2020). Old Learning, New Learning: The Need for Teacher Educator Critical Reflection. In A. Swennen & E. White (Eds.), *Being a Teacher Educator*. Taylor and Francis.
- Beaton, M. C. (2021). Hearing their voices: The role of SENCOs in facilitating the participation of all learners. In M. Beaton, G. Codina, & J. Wharton (Eds.), *Leading on Inclusion The Role of the SENCO* (pp. 163-170). Nasen spotlight. Routledge.
- Beattie, H. (2012). Amplifying student voice: the missing link in school transformation. *Management in Education*, 26(3), 158-160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020612445700>
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Doubleday & Company.
- Berkovich, I., & Eyal, O. (2017). The mediating role of principals' transformational leadership behaviors in promoting teachers' emotional wellness at work: A study in Israeli primary schools. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(2), 316-335.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143215617947>
- Berkovich, I., & Eyal, O. (2018). Principals' emotional support and teachers' emotional reframing: The mediating role of principals' supportive communication strategies. *Psychology in the Schools*, 55(7), 867-879.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22130>
- Bird, D., Culley, L., & Lakhanpaul, M. (2013). Why collaborate with children in health research: an analysis of the risks and benefits of collaboration with children. *Arch Dis Child Educ Pract Ed*, 98(2), 42-48. <https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2012-303470>

- Black, T. R. (1999). *Doing quantitative research in the social sciences: An integrated approach to research design, measurement and statistics*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Blaikie, N., & Priest, J. (2019). *Designing social research: The logic of anticipation* (3rd, Ed.). Polity Press.
- Booth, T. (1996). A perspective on inclusion from England. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 26(1), 87-99.
- Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2016). *The Index for Inclusion: A Guide to School Development Led by Inclusive Values* (4th ed.). Index for Inclusion Network Limited.
<https://books.google.ie/books?id=zVZMQAACAAJ>
- Booth, T., Ainscow, M., & Dyson, A. (1997). Understanding inclusion and exclusion in the English competitive education system. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1(4), 337-355.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1360311970010404>
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *Sociology in Question*. Sage.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1977). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. Sage Publications.
<https://books.google.ie/books?id=tIQOQAAMAAJ>
- Bourke, R., & Loveridge, J. (2016). Beyond the official language of learning: Teachers engaging with student voice research. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 57(3), 59-66.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.03.008>
- Boyle, C., Topping, K., & Jindal-Snape, D. (2013). Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion in high schools. *Teachers and Teaching*, 19(5), 527-542.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2013.827361>
- Bradbury-Jones, C., & Taylor, J. (2015). Engaging with children as co-researchers: challenges, counter-challenges and solutions. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18(2), 161-173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2013.864589>
- Bragg, S. (2001). Taking a joke: Learning from the voices we don't want to hear. *Forum*, 43(2), 70-73.
<https://doi.org/10.2304/forum.2001.43.2.9>
- Bragg, S. (2007). "Student Voice" and Governmentality: The production of enterprising subjects? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 28(3), 343-358.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300701458905>
- Bragg, S. (2010). *Consulting Young People: A Review of the Literature*. CCE.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological*. (pp. 57-71). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.
- Brien, J., & Forest, M. (1989). Action for Inclusion. In G. Thomas & M. Vaughan (Eds.), *Inclusive Education: Readings and Reflections* (pp. 89-91). Open University Press.
- Briggs, A., Coleman, M., & Morrison, M. (2012). *Research Methods in Educational Leadership & Management* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473957695>
- British Educational Research Association. (2024). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (5th ed.). www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethicalguidelines-for-educational-research-2024
- Brooker, R., & MacDonald, D. (1999). Did we hear you?: Issues of student voice in a curriculum innovation. *Curriculum studies*, 31(1), 83-97.
- Buchner, T., Smyth, F., Biewer, G., Shevlin, M., Ferreira, M., Martín, M., Díaz, S., Šiška, J., Latimier, C., & Káňová, Š. (2014). Paving the way through mainstream education: the interplay of families, schools and disabled students. *Research Papers in Education*, 30(4), 411-426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2014.989175>
- Burke Johnson, R., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed Methods Research: A Research Paradigm Whose Time Has Come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14-26. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x033007014>
- Burr, V. (1995). *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203133026>
- Busher, H. (2012). Students as expert witnesses of teaching and learning. *Management in Education*, 26(3), 113-119. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020612445679>
- Byrne, B. (2022). How inclusive is the right to inclusive education? An assessment of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities' concluding observations. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(3), 301-318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1651411>
- Byrne, B. (2023). An Analysis of the UNCRPD Concluding Observations on the Rights of Children with Disabilities. In A. E. Beckett & A.-M. Callus (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Children's Rights and Disability* (pp. 56-72). Routledge.
- Byrne, B., & Lundy, L. (2019). Children's rights-based childhood policy: a six-P framework. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 23(3), 357-373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2018.1558977>
- Camino, L. (2005). Pitfalls and Promising Practices of Youth-Adult Partnerships: An Evaluator's Reflections. *Journal of*

- Community Psychology*, 33(1), 75-85.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20043>
- Carey, D. (2005). *The essential parents' guide to special education in Ireland*. Primary ABC.
- Cervone, B. (2002). *Taking democracy in hand: Youth action for educational change in the San Francisco Bay Area Rhode Island*.
- Chesson, R. (1993). How to design a questionnaire – a ten-stage strategy. *Physiotherapy*, 79(10), 711-713.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/s0031-9406\(10\)60012-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0031-9406(10)60012-0)
- Children's School Lives. (n.d.). *Exploring the lived experiences of children in Irish primary schools*. University College Dublin. Retrieved 25th January 2025 from <https://cslstudy.ie/>
- Christensen, P., & Prout, A. (2005). Anthropological and sociological perspectives on the study of children. In S. Greene & D. Hogan (Eds.), *Researching Children's Experience: Approaches and Methods* (pp. 42-60). Sage.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209823>
- Cigman, R. (2007). A Question of Universality: Inclusive Education and the Principle of Respect. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 41(4), 775-793. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2007.00577.x>
- Clancy, P. (1996). Investment in Education. The Equality Perspective: Progress and Possibilities. *Administration* 44(3), 28-41.
- Clark, A., McQuail, S., & Moss, P. (2003). *Exploring the field of listening to and consulting with young children*.
<http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/support/GuidanceReports/documents/172.pdf>
- Clark, T., Foster, L., Bryman, A., & Sloan, L. (2021). *Bryman's Social Research Methods* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.
<https://books.google.ie/books?id=QJg5EAAAQBAJ>
- Cobb, C. (2015). Principals play many parts: a review of the research on school principals as special education leaders 2001–2011. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19(3), 213-234.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2014.916354>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research Methods in Education* (8th ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539>
- Colum, M., & Mac Ruairc, G. (2023). 'No one knows where we fit in really': the role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in primary school settings in Ireland – the case for a distributed model of leadership to support inclusion. *Irish Educational Studies*, 42(4), 543-560.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2023.2260807>
- Comhairle na nÓg. (2025). *Our Structures*. Government of Ireland. Retrieved 4th January 2025 from
<https://comhairlenanog.ie/our-structures/>

- Conway, R. (2010). Engaging teachers in supporting student behaviour change. In C. Forlin (Ed.), *Teacher education for inclusion: Changing paradigms and innovative approaches* (pp. 172-179). Routledge.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2002). Authorizing Students' Perspectives: Toward Trust, Dialogue, and Change in Education. *Educational Researcher*, 31(4), 3-14.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X031004003>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, Presence, and Power: "Student Voice" in Educational Research and Reform. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36(4), 359-390.
<http://www.jstor.org.elib.tcd.ie/stable/4124743>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2007). What Would Happen If We Treated Students as Those With Opinions That Matter? The Benefits to Principals and Teachers of Supporting Youth Engagement in School. *Nassp Bulletin*, 91(4), 343-362.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636507309872>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2014). The trajectory of student voice in educational research. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 49(2), 131-148.
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/1639632730?accountid=14404&parentSessionId=tZ9Dhi84mW3ze3ZXAvmFag%2FHO4M79AVTkhLOhz8mtIE%3D&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2020). Student voice across contexts: Fostering student agency in today's schools. *Theory Into Practice*, 59(2), 182-191.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1705091>
- Cooper, P., & Jacobs, B. (2011). *Evidence of best practice models and outcomes in the education of children with emotional disturbance/behavioural difficulties: An international review*. National Council for Special Education. https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Research_Report_7_EBD.pdf
- Creswell, J., & Plano Clark, V. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd, Ed.). Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative & quantitative approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry. In J. W. Creswell (Ed.), *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five approaches* (pp. 53-84). Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.

- Crotty, M. J. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. SAGE.
- Czerniawski, G., & Kidd, W. (Eds.). (2011). *The Student Voice Handbook: Bridging the Academic/Practitioner Divide*. Emerald.
- de Boer, A., Pijl, S. J., & Minnaert, A. (2011). Regular primary schoolteachers' attitudes towards inclusive education: a review of the literature. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(3), 331-353.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110903030089>
- Della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (2020). *Social Movements: An Introduction* (3rd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Deng, Z. (2010). Curriculum planning and systems change. In B. McGaw, E. Baker, & P. Peterson (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Education* (3rd ed., pp. 384-389). Elsevier.
- Denscombe, M. (2017). *The Good Research Guide for small-scale social research projects* (6th ed.). Open University Press.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research. In *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 1-32). Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 1-19). Sage.
- Department for Education and Skills. (2004). *Working together: giving children and young people a say*.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs. (2014). *Better outcomes, better futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014 – 2020*.
- Department of Children, E., Disability, Integration and Youth, . (2023). *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2023–2028)* Government of Ireland.
- Department of Children, E., Disability, Integration and Youth, . (2024). *The Participation of Children and Young People in Decision Making: Action Plan (2024–2028)*. Government of Ireland.
- Department of Education. (1965). *Investment in Education: Report of the Survey Team Appointed by the Minister for Education in October, 1962 (and) Annexes and Appendices*. Stationery Office.
- Department of Education. (1993). *Special Education Review Committee Report*. Stationary Office.
- Department of Education. (2023a). *Governance manual for primary schools 2023 – 2027*. Retrieved from
<https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/143bed-schools->

- [boards-of-management/#governance-manual-for-primary-schools](#)
- Department of Education. (2023b). *Primary Curriculum Framework*. <https://ncca.ie/en/primary/primary-developments/primary-curriculum-review-and-redevelopment/the-primary-curriculum-framework/>
- Department of Education. (2024a). *Guidelines for Primary Schools Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Classes*. Dublin
- Department of Education. (2024b). *Statistical Bulletin, August 2024: Overview of Education 2003/04–2023/24*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/annual-statistical-reports/>
- Department of Education and Science. (2002). *Student Councils: a voice for students*. Dublin: The Stationery Office
- Department of Education and Skills. (2011). *A Guide to Whole School Evaluation - Management, Leadership and Learning*. Dublin: Stationary Office
- Department of Education and Skills. (2016). *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020 Primary*. Dublin: Inspectorate
Retrieved from <https://assets.gov.ie/25262/f4a6f2a21e1c4c26a55234511085d5a3.pdf>
- Department of Education and Youth. (2025a). *Ministers McEntee and Moynihan announce the publication of the report on the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004*. Government of Ireland. Retrieved 5th July 2025 from <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/ministers-mcentee-and-moynihan-announce-the-publication-of-the-report-on-the-review-of-the-education-for-persons-with-special-educational-needs-act-2004/>
- Department of Education and Youth. (2025b). *Report on the Review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004*. <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/9c6a9-ministers-mcentee-and-moynihan-announce-the-publication-of-the-report-on-the-review-of-the-education-for-persons-with-special-educational-needs-act-2004>
- Diener, E., & Crandall, R. (1978). *Ethics in social and behavioral research*. Chicago Press.
- Dornyei, Z. (2003). *Questionnaires in second language research: Construction, administration and processing*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Drudy, S., & Kinsella, W. (2009). Developing an inclusive system in a rapidly changing European society. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13(6), 647-663.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110802106170>

- Dyson, A. (2002). Special needs, disability and social inclusion - the end of a beautiful friendship. In B. Norwich (Ed.), *Disability, Inclusion and social inclusion: Special Educational Needs Policy Options Steering Group Policy Paper 3 (4th series)* (pp. 1-18). NASEN.
- Eckstein, H. (1975). Case Study and Theory in Political Science. In F. I. Greenstein & N. W. Polsby (Eds.), *Handbook of political science* (Vol. 7, pp. 79-138). Addison-Wesley.
- Ellsworth, E. (1989). Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 59, 297-324.
- Ellsworth, E. (1992). Why Doesn't Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy. In C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds.), *Feminism and Critical Pedagogy* (pp. 90-119). Routledge.
- Elwood, J. (2013). The role(s) of student voice in 14–19 education policy reform: reflections on consultation and participation. *London Review of Education*, 11(2), 97-111.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2013.799807>
- European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. (2009). *Development of a set of indicators for inclusive education in Europe*. https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/development-of-a-set-of-indicators-for-inclusive-education-in-europe_Indicators-EN-with-cover.pdf
- Farrell, P. (2000). The impact of research on developments in inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 4(2), 153-162.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/136031100284867>
- Fielding, M. (2001). Students as Radical Agents of Change. *Journal of Educational Change*, 2(2), 123-141.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1017949213447>
- Fielding, M. (2004a). 'New Wave' Student Voice and the Renewal of Civic Society. *London Review of Education*, 2(3), 197-217.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1474846042000302834>
- Fielding, M. (2004b). Transformative approaches to student voice: theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), 295-311.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192042000195236>
- Fielding, M. (2010). *The voice of students in an inclusive school* International Congress on Inclusive Education and XXVII National Conference of Special Education and Universities, University of Cantabria, Spain.
- Fielding, M. (2011). Student voice and the possibility of radical democratic education: re-narrating forgotten histories, developing alternative futures. In G. Czerniawski & W. Kidd

- (Eds.), *The Student Voice Handbook: Bridging the Academic/Practitioner Divide* (pp. 3-17). Emerald.
- Fielding, M. (2015). Student Voice as Deep Democracy. In C. McLaughlin (Ed.), *The Connected School A Design for Well-Being – Supporting Children and Young People in Schools to Flourish, Thrive and Achieve* (pp. 26-32). Pearson/ National Children's Bureau.
- Fielding, M., & Bragg, S. (2003). *Student as Researchers: Making a Difference*.
- Fielding, M., & McGregor, J. (2005). *Deconstructing student voice: new spaces for dialogue or new opportunities for surveillance?* American Educational Research Association (AERA), Montreal, Canada.
- Fink, D., & Stoll, L. (2005). Educational change: Easier said than done. In A. Hargreaves (Ed.), *Extending educational change: International handbook of educational change* (pp. 17-41). Springer.
- Finneran, R., Mayes, E., & Black, R. (2021). Pride and privilege: the affective dissonance of student voice. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 31(1), 1-16.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1876158>
- Fleming, D. (2015). Student Voice: An Emerging Discourse in Irish Education Policy. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 8(2), 199-218.
- Fleming, D. P. (2013). *Student voice in Irish post-primary schools: a drama of voices* [Unpublished PhD Thesis].
- Fletcher, A. (2005). *Meaningful Student Involvement Guide to Students as Partners in School Change*. SoundOut.
- Flores, O. J., & Ahn, J. (2024). Kids Have Taught Me. I Listen to Them”: Principals Legitimizing Student Voice in Their Leadership. *AERA Open*, 10.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584241232596>
- Florian, L. (2019). On the necessary co-existence of special and inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23(7-8), 691-704.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1622801>
- Florian, L., & Beaton, M. (2018). Inclusive pedagogy in action: getting it right for every child. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22(8), 870-884.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2017.1412513>
- Florian, L., Young, K., & Rouse, M. (2010). Preparing teachers for inclusive and diverse educational environments: studying curricular reform in an initial teacher education course. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(7), 709-722.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603111003778536>

- Flutter, J. (2024). Pupil Voice and Agency: Exploring the evidence base. *Chartered College of Teaching*.
<https://my.chartered.college/research-hub/pupil-voice-and-agency-exploring-the-evidence-base/>
- Flutter, J., & Rudduck, J. (2004). *Consulting Pupils: What's in it for Schools?* Routledge Falmer.
<https://books.google.ie/books?id=kLxqhKsgguwC>
- Flynn, P. (2013). The transformative potential in student voice research for young people identified with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. *Trinity Education Papers*, 2(2), 70–91.
- Flynn, P. (2014). Empowerment and transformation for young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties engaged with student voice research [Journal Article]. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 49(2), 162-175.
<https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.842518244550975>
- Flynn, P. (2017). *The learner voice research study*.
<https://ncca.ie/media/3442/16539-ncca-the-learner-voice-research-study-v2.pdf>
- Flynn, P. (2018). *The Learner Voice Report. Embedding student voices in education discourse: Curricular co-construction and development*. NCCA.
- Flynn, P. (2019). Activating Voice in the Learner Voice Space Framework 1(1), 37-42.
<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/62931258/education-and-training-boards-ireland-etbi-journal-of-education-october-2019>
- Flynn, P., & Hayes, N. (2021). Student Voice in Curriculum Reform: Whose Voices, Who's Listening? In *Curriculum Change within Policy and Practice* (pp. 43-59). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50707-7_3
- Flynn, P., Shevlin, M., & Lodge, A. (2011). Are You Listening? I'm Me! [Article]. *Reach*, 25(1), 60-74.
<https://elib.tcd.ie/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ukh&AN=67270404>
- Flynn, P., Shevlin, M., & Lodge, A. (2012). Empowering Children with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. In T. Cole, H. Daniels, & J. Visser (Eds.), *The Routledge International Companion to Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* (pp. 246-253). Routledge.
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (1994). Interviewing: The art of science. In *Handbook of qualitative research*. (pp. 361-376). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Forlin, C., Tait, K., Carroll, A., & Jobling, A. (1999). Teacher education for diversity. *Queensland Journal of Educational Research*, 15(2), 207-226.

- Franklin, A., & Sloper, P. (2008). Supporting the Participation of Disabled Children and Young People in Decision-making. *Children & Society*, 23(1), 3-15.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2007.00131.x>
- Franks, M. (2011). Pockets of Participation: Revisiting Child-Centred Participation Research. *Children & Society*, 25(1), 15-25.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2009.00258.x>
- Freire, P. (1973). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury.
- Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum Publishing.
- Frost, R. (2008). Developing student participation, research and leadership: the HCD Student Partnership. *School Leadership & Management*, 28(4), 353-368.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430802292308>
- Gaeloideachas. (2025). *Primary Schools*. Retrieved 24/02/2025 from <https://gaeloideachas.ie/i-am-a-parent-pupil/primary-schools/>
- Gallagher, M. (2009). Data Collection and Analysis. In E. Tisdall, J. Davis, M. Gallagher, & M. Gallagher (Eds.), *Researching with Children and Young People Research Design, Methods and Analysis* (pp. 65-88). Sage.
- Gaona, C., Palikara, O., & Castro-Kemp, S. (2018). 'I'm ready for a new chapter': The voices of young people with autism spectrum disorder in transition to post-16 education and employment. *British Educational Research Journal*, 45(2), 340-355. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3497>
- Garner, P. (2009). *Special Educational Needs: The Key Concepts* (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203088494>
- Gergen, K. J. (1999). *An Invitation to Social Construction*. SAGE Publications. <https://books.google.ie/books?id=y-gliu6Vx7kC>
- Gerschel, L. (2003). Connecting the disconnected: Exploring issues of gender, 'race' and SEN within an inclusive context. In C. Tilstone & R. Rose (Eds.), *Strategies to promote inclusive practice*. Routledge Falmer.
- Giannakaki, M. S., Flynn, B. P., Hayes, D. N., Fitzsimons, S., & Emerson, L. (2018). *Teachers' beliefs about education and children's voice practices in the island of Ireland*.
<https://scotens.org/site/wp-content/uploads/Teachers-Beliefs-about-Education-and-Childrens.pdf>
- Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. Longman.
- Goddard, W., & Melville, S. (2004). *Research Methodology: An Introduction*. Juta and Company Ltd.

- Gomm, R., Hammersley, M., & Foster, P. (2000). Case study and generalization. In R. Gomm, M. Hammersley, & P. Foster (Eds.), *Case study method* (pp. 98-115). Sage.
- Goodall, C., & MacKenzie, A. (2018). Title: what about my voice? Autistic young girls' experiences of mainstream school. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 34(4), 499–513.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2018.1553138>
- Gore, J. (1992). What can we do for you? What can “we” do for “you”? Struggling over empowerment in critical and feminist pedagogy. In C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds.), *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Gormley, L., Ramey, D., Grennan, C., & Koka, N. (2024). Individual Education Plan Priorities: Insights From the Autistic Community and Educators Supporting Autistic Learners. *European Journal of Education*, 59(4), Article e12800.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12800>
- Green, T. L. (2018). School as Community, Community as School: Examining Principal Leadership for Urban School Reform and Community Development. *Education and Urban Society*, 50(2), 111-135.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124516683997>
- Greene, J. C. (2005). The generative potential of mixed methods inquiry. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 28(2), 207-211.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01406720500256293>
- Grenfell, M. (2013). Psychology and inclusion: Caught between theory and practice? *Trinity Education Papers: Examining Theory & Practice in Inclusive Education*, 2(2), 12-23.
- Griffin, S., & Shevlin, M. (2011). *Responding to special educational needs: an Irish perspective* (2nd ed.). Gill & Macmillan.
- Gronn, P. (2002). Distributed Leadership. In K. Leithwood, P. Hallinger, G. C. Furman, K. Riley, J. MacBeath, P. Gronn, & B. Mulford (Eds.), *Second International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration* (pp. 653-696). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0375-9_23
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 105-177). Sage Publications.
- Hall, B. (1975). Participatory research: An approach for change. *Convergence*, 8(2), 24.
- Hamilton, L. (2011). *Case studies in educational research: British Educational Research Association on-line methods resource*.

- <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/case-studies-in-educational-research>
- Hammersley, M. (1992). *What's Wrong With Ethnography?* Routledge.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351038027>
- Harris, A. (2014). *Distributed Leadership Matters: Perspectives, Practicalities, and Potential*. Corwin Press.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483332574>
- Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation: From Tokenism To Citizenship. *Innocenti Essays*, 4.
- Hattie, J. (2005). *What is the nature of evidence that makes a difference to learning?* Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) Research Conference - Using Data to Support Learning.
https://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference_2005/7
- Hildreth, R. W. (2012). WordandDeed: A Deweyan Integration of Deliberative and Participatory Democracy. *New Political Science*, 34(3), 295-320.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2012.703852>
- Hipkins, R. (2010). *Reshaping the Secondary School Curriculum: Building the Plane while flying it? Findings from NZCER National Survey of Secondary Schools 2009*. Council for Educational Reform.
- Hodkinson, A. (2010). Inclusive and special education: Inclusive and special education in the English educational system: historical perspectives, recent developments and future challenges. *British Journal of Special Education*, 37(2), 61-67.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8578.2010.00462.x>
- Hogan, D. (2005). Researching "the child" in developmental psychology. In S. Greene & D. Hogan (Eds.), *Researching children's experience: Approaches and methods* Sage.
- Holdsworth, R. (2000). Schools that create real roles of value for young people. *Prospects*, 30(3), 349-362.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02754058>
- Hollins, E. R., & Torres Guzman, M. (2005). Research on preparing teachers for diverse populations. In M. Cochran-Smith & K. M. Zeichner (Eds.), *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education* (pp. 477-548). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Holt, L. (2004a). Childhood disability and ability: (Dis)ableist geographies of mainstream primary schools. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 24(3), 1-20.
- Holt, L. (2004b). Children with mind-body differences: performing disability in primary school classrooms. *Children's Geographies*, 2(2), 219-236.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14733280410001720520>

- Horgan, D., & Martin, S. (2021). Children's research advisory groups. In *Child and Youth Participation in Policy, Practice and Research* (pp. 168-181). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003099529-16>
- Horgan, F., Kenny, N., & Flynn, P. (2023). A systematic review of the experiences of autistic young people enrolled in mainstream second-level (post-primary) schools. *Autism*, 27(2), 526-538.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221105089>
- Horn, R. A. (2003). Developing a Critical Awareness of the Hidden Curriculum through Media Literacy. *The Clearing House*, 76(6), 298-300. <http://www.istor.org/stable/30189856>
- Hornby, G. (2010). Supporting parents and families in the development of inclusive practice. In R. Rose (Ed.), *Confronting obstacles to inclusion: International responses to developing inclusive education* (pp. 75-87). Routledge.
- Hornby, G., & Kauffman, J. M. (2024). Inclusive Education, Intellectual Disabilities and the Demise of Full Inclusion. *Journal of Intelligence*, 12(2), 20.
<https://www.mdpi.com/2079-3200/12/2/20>
- Horne, P. E., & Timmons, V. (2009). Making it work: teachers' perspectives on inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13(3), 273-286.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110701433964>
- Islam, A. (2012). Afterword. The space between? The value of student voice from a student's perspective. *Management in Education*, 26(3), 164-164.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020612445703>
- Jones, C. A. (2004). *Supporting inclusion in the early years* Open University Press.
- Jury, M., Perrin, A.-L., Rohmer, O., & Desombre, C. (2021). Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education: An Exploration of the Interaction Between Teachers' Status and Students' Type of Disability Within the French Context [Brief Research Report]. *Frontiers in Education*, 6.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2021.655356>
- Kauffman, J., Anastasiou, D., Felder-gallagher, M., Hornby, G., & Lopes, J. (2022). Recent debates in special & inclusive education. In *International Encyclopedia of Education* (4th ed., pp. 269-283). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-818630-5.12004-4>
- Kauffman, J., & Hornby, G. (2025). Extremism and the potential dismantling of special education: Or moving forward with inclusive special education. *Support for Learning*, 1-12.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12519>
- Kearney, A., & Kane, R. (2006). Inclusive education policy in New Zealand: reality or ruse? *International Journal of Inclusive*

- Education*, 10(2-3), 201-219.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110500256145>
- Kenny, N., Doyle, A., & Horgan, F. (2023b). Transformative Inclusion: Differentiating Qualitative Research Methods to Support Participation for Individuals With Complex Communication or Cognitive Profiles. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 1-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221146992>
- Kenny, N., McCoy, S., & Mihut, G. (2020). Special education reforms in Ireland: changing systems, changing schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1-20.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1821447>
- Kenny, N., McCoy, S., & O'Higgins Norman, J. (2023a). A Whole Education Approach to Inclusive Education: An Integrated Model to Guide Planning, Policy, and Provision. *Education Sciences*, 13(9). <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13090959>
- Kim, S. J., & Merriam, S. B. (2011). *Methodological challenges in studying transformative learning* 2011 Adult Education Research Conference, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
<https://newprairiepress.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3179&context=aerc>
- Kinsella, W., & Senior, J. (2008). Developing inclusive schools: a systemic approach. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 12(5-6), 651-665.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110802377698>
- Kiuppis, F., & Sarromaa Hausstätter, R. (2014). Inclusive education for all, and especially for some? On different interpretations of who and what the “Salamanca process” concerns. In F. Kiuppis & R. Sarromaa Hausstätter (Eds.), *Inclusive education twenty years after Salamanca* (pp. 1-5). Peter Lang.
- Kleine, D., Pearson, G., & Poveda, S. (2016). *Participatory methods: engaging children's voices and experiences in research*. Global Kids Online. www.globalkidsonline.net/participatory-research
- Koskela, T., & Sinkkonen, H.-M. (2025). Parental involvement in supporting their children in inclusive education: Cooperation with school professionals in Finland. *Cogent Education*, 12(1), 2464272.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2464272>
- Kozleski, E. B., & Waitoller, F. R. (2010). Teacher learning for inclusive education: understanding teaching as a cultural and political practice. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(7), 655-666.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603111003778379>
- Krischler, M., & Pit-ten Cate, I. M. (2018). Inclusive education in Luxembourg: implicit and explicit attitudes toward inclusion and students with special educational needs. *International*

- Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(6), 597–615.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1474954>
- Krischler, M., Powell, J. J. W., & Pit-Ten Cate, I. M. (2019). What is meant by inclusion? On the effects of different definitions on attitudes toward inclusive education. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 34(5), 632-648.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2019.1580837>
- Krueger, R., & Casey, M. (2009). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Sage Publications.
- Lac, V. T., & Mansfield, K. C. (2018). What Do Students Have to Do With Educational Leadership? Making a Case for Centering Student Voice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 13(1), 38-58.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775117743748>
- Lamb, S., & Rice, S. (2008). *Effective Intervention Strategies for Students at Risk of Early Leaving*. Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne.
- Lambert, L., Walker, D., Zimmerman, D. P., Cooper, J. E., Lambert, M. D., Gardner, M. E., & Ford Slack, P. J. (1995). *The Constructivist Leader*. Teachers College Press.
- Lambrecht, J., Lenkeit, J., Hartmann, A., Ehlert, A., Knigge, M., & Spörer, N. (2022). The effect of school leadership on implementing inclusive education: how transformational and instructional leadership practices affect individualised education planning. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(9), 943-957.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1752825>
- Lather, P. (1986). Research as Praxis. *Howard Educational Review*, 56(3), 257-277.
- Leitch, R., Lundy, L., Clough, P., Galanouli, D., and Garner, J. (2005). *Consulting pupils on the assessment of their learning (CPAL)* 6th Annual Conference of Teaching and Learning research programme, Warwick.
- Leitch, R., & Mitchell, S. (2007). Caged birds and cloning machines: how student imagery ‘speaks’ to us about cultures of schooling and student participation. *Improving Schools*, 10(1), 53-71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480207073722>
- Leithwood, K., Aitken, R., & Jantzi, D. (2006). *Making schools smarter: Leading with evidence*. Sage Publications.
- Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. T. W. Foundation.
<https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/How-Leadership-Influences-Student-Learning.pdf>

- Leithwood, K. A., & Riehl, C. J. (2003). What Do We Already Know About Successful School Leadership? AERA Division: A Task Force on Developing Research in Educational Leadership.
- Leonard, N. M., & Smyth, S. (2022). Does training matter? Exploring teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder in mainstream education in Ireland. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(7), 737-751.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1718221>
- Lindsay, G. (2003). Inclusive education: A critical perspective. *British Journal of Special Education*, 30, 3-12.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8527.00275>
- Lindsay, G. (2007). Educational psychology and the effectiveness of inclusive education/mainstreaming. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77(1), 1-24.
<https://doi.org/10.1348/000709906X156881>
- Lodge, A., & Lynch, K. (2000). Power: A central educational relationship. *Irish Educational Studies*, 19(1), 46-67.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0332331000190107>
- Lodge, C. (2005). From hearing voices to engaging in dialogue: problematising student participation in school improvement. *Journal of Educational Change*, 6(2), 125-146.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-005-1299-3>
- Loxley, A. (2016). *D.Ed. Ologies Presentation Slides*.
https://tcd.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/content/listContent.jsp?course_id=39823_1&content_id=940752_1
- Loxley, A., Seery, A., & Walsh, J. (2014). Investment in Education and the tests of time. *Irish Educational Studies*, 33(2), 173-191.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2014.920616>
- Lücke, T., & Grosche, M. (2018). Implicitly measuring attitudes towards inclusive education: a new attitude test based on single-target implicit associations. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 33(3), 427-436.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2017.1334432>
- Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927-942.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>
- Lundy, L. (2018). In defence of tokenism? Implementing children's right to participate in collective decision-making. *Childhood*, 25(3), 340-354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568218777292>
- Lundy, L., & Hanna, A. (2020). Revisiting the Three 'R's in Order to Realize Children's Educational Rights Relationships, Resources, and Redress. In J. Todres & S. M. King (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Rights Law* (pp. 386-404). Oxford University Press.

- <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190097608.013.20>
- Lundy, L., & McEvoy, L. (2012). Children's rights and research processes: Assisting children to (in)formed views. *Childhood*, 19(1), 129-144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568211409078>
- Lundy, L., McEvoy, L., & Byrne, B. (2011). Working With Young Children as Co-Researchers: An Approach Informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Early Education and Development*, 22(5), 714-736. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2011.596463>
- Lundy, L., Murray, C., Smith, K., & Ward, C. (2024). Young children's right to be heard on the quality of their education: Addressing potential misunderstandings in the context of early childhood education. *British Educational Research Journal*, n/a(n/a). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3968>
- Lynch, K., & Lodge, A. (2002). *Equality and Power in Schools: Redistribution, Recognition and Representation* Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203018620>
- MacBeath, J. (1999). *Schools Must Speak for Themselves: the case for school evaluation*. Routledge.
- MacBeath, J., Myers, K., & Demetriou, H. (2001). Supporting Teachers in Consulting Pupils about Aspects of Teaching and Learning, and Evaluating Impact. *Forum*, 43(2), 78-82. <https://doi.org/10.2304/forum.2001.43.2.11>
- MacGiolla Phádraig, B. (2007). Towards inclusion: the development of provision for children with special educational needs in Ireland from 1991 to 2004. *Irish Educational Studies*, 26(3), 289-300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323310701491562>
- MacKenzie, A., Owaineh, M., Bower, C., & Özkaya, C. (2023). Barriers to inclusive education under occupation: An evaluative approach using Nussbaum's capabilities approach. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 5. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2023.100299>
- MacRuaric, G. (2013). Including Who? Deconstructing the Discourse. In G. MacRuaric, O. E., & R. Precey (Eds.), *Leadership for Inclusive Education: Values, Vision and Voices* (pp. 9-18). Sense Publishers.
- Marchant, R., & Kirby, P. (2005). The participation of young children: communication, consultation and involvement. In B. Neale (Ed.), *Young children's citizenship* (pp. 92-163). Joseph Rountree Foundation.
- Mason, J. (2018). *Qualitative researching* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

- Maxwell, J. (2010). Using Numbers in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16, 475-482.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410364740>
- McDonnell, P. (2003). Developments in special education in Ireland: deep structures and policy making. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 7(3), 259-269.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1360311032000108876>
- McGhie-Richmond, D., & Haider, F. (2020). Collaborating for Inclusion: The Intersecting Roles of Teachers, Teacher Education, and School Leaders in Translating Research into Practice [Article]. *Exceptionality Education International*, 30(2), 32-50. <https://doi.org/10.5206/eei.v30i2.11080>
- McGivern, Y. (2006). *The practice of market research: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Financial Times Prentice Hall.
- McGregor, G., & Mills, M. (2012). Alternative education sites and marginalised young people: 'I wish there were more schools like this one'. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16(8), 843-862.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2010.529467>
- McKernan, J. (1996). *Curriculum Action Research: A Handbook of Methods for the Reflective Practitioners*. Kogan Page.
- McLaughlin, C., & Kiragu, S. (2011). Voices for change: Student Voices on Sexuality and HIV/ AIDS Education. In G. Czerniawski & W. Kidd (Eds.), *The Student Voice Handbook: Bridging the Academic / Practitioner Divide* (pp. 13-54). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Ltd.
- McNeish, D., & Newman, T. (2002). Involving young people in decision making. In D. McNeish, T. Newman, & H. Roberts (Eds.), *What works for children?*. Open University Press.
- McQuillan, P. (2005). Possibilities and Pitfalls: A Comparative Analysis of Student Empowerment. *American Educational Research Journal* 42(4), 639-670.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312042004639>
- Meijer, C. (2003). *Special Education across Europe in 2003. Trends in provision in 18 European countries*. https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/special-education-across-europe-in-2003_special_education_europe.pdf
- Meijer, C., Soriano, V., & Watkins, A. (2003). *Special needs education in Europe: Inclusive policies and practices. In Special Needs Education in Europe, thematic publication*.
https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/special-needs-education-in-europe-volume-2-provision-in-post-primary-education_Thematic-EN.pdf
- Mercieca, D., & Jones, P. (2018). Use of a reference group in researching children's views of psychotherapy in Malta.

- Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, 44(2), 1-20.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0075417X.2018.1481130>
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Merrigan, C., & Senior, J. (2023). Special schools at the crossroads of inclusion: do they have a value, purpose, and educational responsibility in an inclusive education system? *Irish Educational Studies*, 42(2), 275-291.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2021.1964563>
- Mertens, D. (2010). Divergence and Mixed Methods. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 4(1), 3-5.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689809358406>
- Messiou, K. (2006). Conversations with children: making sense of marginalization in primary school settings. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 21(1), 39-54.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250500491807>
- Messiou, K., & Ainscow, M. (2020). Inclusive Inquiry: Student–teacher dialogue as a means of promoting inclusion in schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(3), 670–687. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3602>
- Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand Curriculum*. G. Printer.
- Minow, M. (1990). *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion, and American Law*. Cornell University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501705106>
- Mishler, E. G. (1986). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*. Harvard University Press.
- Mitra, D. (2003). Student voice in school reform: Reframing student-teacher relationships. *McGill Journal of Education*, 38(2), 289-304. <https://mje.mcgill.ca/article/view/8686>
- Mitra, D. (2005). Adults Advising Youth: Leading While Getting Out of the Way. *Educational Administration Quarterly - EDUC ADMIN QUART*, 41, 520-553.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X04269620>
- Mitra, D. (2007). Student Voice in School Reform: from Listening to Leadership. In *International Handbook of Student Experience in Elementary and Secondary School* (pp. 727-744).
https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-3367-2_29
- Mitra, D. (2009). Increasing student voice and moving toward youth leadership. *Prevention Researcher*, 13(1), 7-10.
- Mitra, D., Serriere, S., & Stoicovy, D. (2012). The role of leaders in enabling student voice. *Management in Education*, 26(3), 104-112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020612445678>
- Moran, H. (2001). Who Do You Think You Are? Drawing the Ideal Self: A Technique to Explore a Child's Sense of Self. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 6(4), 599-604.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104501006004016>

- Moran, H. (2021). A very personal assessment: Using a Personal Construct Psychology assessment technique (Drawing the Ideal Self) with young people with ASD to explore the child's view of the self Editorial comment.
- Morgan, D. (1997). *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412984287>
- Morin, D., Rivard, M., Crocker, A., Boursier, C., & Caron, J. (2013). Public attitudes towards intellectual disability: A multidimensional perspective. *Journal of intellectual disability research : JIDR*, 57(3), 279-292. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jir.12008>
- Moriña Díez, A. (2010). School memories of young people with disabilities: An analysis of barriers and aids to inclusion. *Disability & Society*, 25(2), 163-175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590903534346>
- Morningstar, M. E., Shogren, K. A., Lee, H., & Born, K. (2015). Preliminary Lessons About Supporting Participation and Learning in Inclusive Classrooms. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 40(3), 192-210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796915594158>
- Moser, C. A., & Kalton, G. (1971). *Survey Methods in Social Investigation*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315241999>
- Muijs, D., Ainscow, M., Chapman, C., & West, M. (2011). *Collaboration and networking in education*. Springer.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2023). *Primary Curriculum Framework For Primary and Special Schools*. Dublin, Ireland: Department of Education
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2025). *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* Retrieved 20/11/2024 from <https://curriculumonline.ie/early-childhood/>
- National Council for Special Education. (2013). *Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools*. https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Supporting_14_05_13
- National Council for Special Education. (2014). *Delivery for students with special educational needs: A better and more equitable way*. NCSE.
- National Council for Special Education. (2017). *NCSE Press Release (18th January 2017) NCSE Welcomes a Better and More Equitable Way of Allocating Teaching Resources for Special Needs* <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/NCSE-Press-Release-18th-January-2017final-for-web.pdf>
- National Council for Special Education. (2025a). *Education Provision for students with special educational needs*. Retrieved

- 16/02/2025 from <https://ncse.ie/education-provision-for-students-with-special-educational-needs>
- National Council for Special Education. (2025b). *What is the School Inclusion Model (SIM)?* Retrieved 22nd February 2025 from <https://ncse.ie/faqs-parents>
- National Disability Authority. (2025). *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. Retrieved 19/02/2025 from <https://nda.ie/disability-policy/uncrpd#About%20the%20UNCRPD>
- National Educational Psychological Service. (2007). *Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support – Resource Pack for Teachers – Primary Schools*. Department of Education and Science.
- National Educational Psychological Service. (n.d.). *Student Support File: Guidelines*. assets.gov.ie/41225/dbb957b3172c41efab580705bfaf2d90.pdf
- Nelson, E. (2014). Enacting Student Voice through Governance Partnerships in the Classroom: rupture of the ordinary for radical practice. *Forum*, 56(1), 91-104. <https://doi.org/10.2304/forum.2014.56.1.91>
- Neuman, W. L. (2020). *Social research methods : qualitative and quantitative approaches* (8th ed.). Pearson Education, Inc.
- Nic Aindriú, S. (2020). The Experiences of Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Irish-Medium Schools. *REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland*, 33(2), 101-112. <https://reachjournal.ie/index.php/reach/article/download/32/194>
- Niesche, R., & Keddie, A. (2011). Foregrounding issues of equity and diversity in educational leadership. *School Leadership and Management*, 31(1), 65-77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2010.545381>
- Noddings, N. (2005). *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*. Teachers College Press.
- Norwich, B. (2007). Dilemmas of Inclusion and the Future of Education. In R. Cigman (Ed.), *Included or Excluded? The challenge of the mainstream for some SEN children* (pp. 69-84). Routledge.
- Norwich, B. (2008). Dilemmas of difference, inclusion and disability: international perspectives on placement. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23(4), 287-304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250802387166>
- Norwich, B., & Kelly, N. (2004). Pupils' views on inclusion: Moderate learning difficulties and bullying in mainstream and special schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(1), 43-65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920310001629965>

- Noyes, A. (2005). Pupil voice: purpose, power and the possibilities for democratic schooling. *British Educational Research Journal*, 31(4), 533-540.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920500153614>
- OCO. (2025). *Child Talks*. Retrieved 16/02/2025 from <https://www.oco.ie/childrens-rights/child-talks/>
- Oireachtas. (1998). *Education Act* Dublin: Stationary Office
- Oireachtas. (2000). *Equal Status Act* Dublin: Stationary Office
- Oireachtas. (2004). *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* Dublin: Stationary Office
- Oldfather, P. (1995). Songs “come back most to them”: Students’ experiences as researchers. *Theory Into Practice*, 34(2), 131-137.
- Opie, C. (Ed.). (2004). *Doing educational research*. SAGE.
- Osler, A. (2010). *Students’ Perspectives On Schooling*. McGraw-Hill Education.
<https://books.google.ie/books?id=7RDrRGUwwkC>
- Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*. SAGE Publications.
- Pearce, T., & Wood, B. E. (2019). Education for transformation: an evaluative framework to guide student voice work in schools. *Critical Studies in Education*, 60(1), 113 - 130.
- Pekrul, S., & Levin, B. (2007). Building Student Voice for School Improvement. In D. Thiessen & A. Cook-Sather (Eds.), *International Handbook of Student Experience in Elementary and Secondary School* (pp. 711-726). Springer Netherlands.
https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-3367-2_28
- Pillow, W. (2003). Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(2), 175-196.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839032000060635>
- Poon-McBrayer, K. F. (2017). School leaders’ dilemmas and measures to instigate changes for inclusive education in Hong Kong. *Journal of Educational Change*, 18(3), 295-309.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-017-9300-5>
- Porter, J. (2014). What kinds of support do parents want for their disabled child? *Psychological Science and Education*, 19(1), 82.
- Prunty, A., Dupont, M., & McDaid, R. (2012). Voices of students with special educational needs (SEN): Views on schooling. *Support for Learning*, 27(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9604.2011.01507.x>
- Rainer, J. D., & Matthews, M. W. (2002). Ownership of Learning in Teacher Education. *Action in Teacher Education*, 24(1), 22-30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2002.10463264>

- Ranson, S. (2000). Recognizing the Pedagogy of Voice in a Learning Community. *Educational Management & Administration*, 28(3), 263-279.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263211x000283003>
- Ravet, J. (2008). Enabling pupil participation in a study of perceptions of disengagement: methodological matters. *British Journal of Special Education*, 34(4), 234-242.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8578.2007.00484.x>
- Reason, P., & Rowan, J. (1981). Issues of validity in new paradigm research. In P. Reason & J. Rowan (Eds.), *Human Enquiry* (pp. 239-252). Wiley.
- Reindal, S. M. (2010). What is the purpose? Reflections on inclusion and special education from a capability perspective. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 25(1), 1-12.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250903450806>
- Rice, C., Kenny, N., & Connolly, L. (2023). Exploring the Attitudes of School Staff towards the Role of Autism Classes in Inclusive Education for Autistic Students: A Qualitative Study in Irish Primary Schools. *Education Sciences*, 13(9), 889.
<https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/13/9/889>
- Riddell, S., Tisdall, K., Kane, J., & J, M. (2006). *Literature Review of Educational Provision for Pupils with Additional Support Needs: Final Report to the Scottish Executive Education Department*.
http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/Reports/08b_ASNLitRev_rpt.pdf
- Ring, E., O'Sullivan, L., Ryan, M., & Burke, P. (2018). *A Melange or a Mosaic of Theories? How Theoretical Perspectives on Children's Learning and Development Can Inform a Responsive Pedagogy in a Redeveloped Primary School Curriculum*.
https://ncca.ie/media/3863/seminar_four_er_los_mr_pb_p_aper.pdf
- Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nicholls, C. M., & Ormston, R. (Eds.). (2013). *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. Sage.
- Rix, J., Sheehy, K., Fletcher-Campbell, F., Crisp, M., & Harper, A. (2013). Exploring provision for children identified with special educational needs: an international review of policy and practice. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 28(4), 375-391.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2013.812403>
- Robinson, C., Quennerstedt, A., & l'Anson, J. (2019). The translation of articles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into education legislation: the narrowing of Article 12 as a consequence of translation. *The Curriculum Journal*, 31(3), 517-538. <https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.6>

- Robinson, C., & Taylor, C. (2007). Theorizing student voice: values and perspectives. *Improving Schools*, 10(1), 5-17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480207073702>
- Rogers, C. (2007). *Parenting and inclusive education: Discovering difference, experiencing difficulty*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rogers, C. (2012). Inclusive education, exclusion and difficult difference: a call for humanity? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33(3), 475-485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.664915>
- Rose, R., & Shevlin, M. (2010). *Count Me In! Ideas for Actively Engaging Students in Inclusive Classrooms*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Rose, R., & Shevlin, M. (2020). *Establishing pathways to inclusion : Investigating the experiences and outcomes for students with special educational needs*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Rose, R., Shevlin, M., Winter, E., & O'Raw, P. (2015). *Project IRIS – Inclusive Research in Irish Schools. A longitudinal study of the experiences of and outcomes for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in Irish school*. <http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/NCSE-IRIS-Report-No20.pdf>
- Rose, R., Shevlin, M., Winter, E., O'Raw, P., & Zhao, Y. (2012). Individual Education Plans in the Republic of Ireland: an emerging system. *British Journal of Special Education*, 39(3), 110-116. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8578.2012.00548.x>
- Rouse, M., & Florian, L. (1997). Inclusive education in the market-place. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1(4), 323-336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360311970010403>
- Rudduck, J. (2001). Students and School Improvement. *Improving Schools*, 4(2), 7-16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136548020100400203>
- Rudduck, J. (2006). The past, the papers and the project. *Educational Review*, 58(2), 131-143.
- Rudduck, J. (2007). Student Voice, Student Engagement, And School Reform. In D. Thiessen & A. Cook-Sather (Eds.), *International Handbook of Student Experience in Elementary and Secondary School* (pp. 587-610). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-3367-2_23
- Rudduck, J., & Flutter, J. (2000). Pupil Participation and Pupil Perspective: 'carving a new order of experience'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 30(1), 75-89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640050005780>
- Rudduck, J., & McIntyre, D. (2007). Improving Learning through Consulting Pupils. *Improving Learning through Consulting Pupils*, 1-222. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203935323>
- Salisbury, J. D., Sheth, M. J., Spikes, D., & Graeber, A. (2023). "We Have to Empower Ourselves to Make Changes!": Developing Collective Capacity for Transformative Change Through an

- Urban Student Voice Experience. *Urban Education*, 58(2), 221-249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085919857806>
- Sandoval Mena, M., & Waitoller, F. R. (2025). Students as agents of school change for inclusive education: international approaches and methodological pluralism. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2025.2455981>
- Seale, J., & Barnard, S. (1998). *Therapy research: processes and practicalities*. Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Sebba, J., & Robinson, C. (2010). *The evaluation of UNICEF UK's rights respecting schools award*. UNICEF.
- Sellman, E. (2009). Lessons learned: student voice at a school for pupils experiencing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 14(1), 33-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632750802655687>
- Shevlin, M., & Banks, J. (2021). Inclusion at a Crossroads: Dismantling Ireland's System of Special Education. 11(4), 161.
- Shevlin, M., & Flynn, P. (2011). School Leadership for Special Educational Needs. In H. O. Sullivan & J. West-Burnham (Eds.), *Leading and Managing Schools* (pp. 126-140). Sage.
- Shevlin, M., Kearns, H., Ranaghan, M., Twomey, M., Smith, R., & Winter, E. (2009). *Creating inclusive learning environments in Irish schools: Teacher perspectives*. The National Council for Special Education.
- Shevlin, M., & Rose, R. (2008). Pupils as partners in education decision-making: responding to the legislation in England and Ireland. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23(4), 423-430. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250802387430>
- Shevlin, M., Winter, E., & Flynn, P. (2013). Developing inclusive practice: teacher perceptions of opportunities and constraints in the Republic of Ireland. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(10), 1119-1133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2012.742143>
- Shohamy, E. (2001). Democratic assessment as an alternative. *Language Testing*, 18(4), 373-391. <https://doi.org/10.1191/026553201682430094>
- Sigurðardóttir, S. M., & Sigþórsson, R. (2016). The fusion of school improvement and leadership capacity in an elementary school. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 44(4), 599-616. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214559230>
- Silva, E. (2001). 'Squeaky Wheels and Flat Tires': a case study of students as reform participants. *Forum*, 43(2), 95-99. <https://doi.org/10.2304/forum.2001.43.2.15>

- Simmons, C., Graham, A., & Thomas, N. (2015). Imagining an ideal school for wellbeing: Locating student voice. *Journal of Educational Change*, 16(2), 129-144.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-014-9239-8>
- Sinclair, R. (2004). Participation in practice: Making it meaningful, effective and sustainable. *Children & Society*, 18(2), 106-118.
- Skerritt, C., Brown, M., & O'Hara, J. (2021). Student voice and classroom practice: how students are consulted in contexts without traditions of student voice. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 31(5), 955-974.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1979086>
- Skidmore, D. (2004). *Inclusion: the dynamic of school development*. Open University Press.
- Skrtic, T. M. (1991). *Behind special education: A critical analysis of professional culture and school organization*. Love Publishing
- Slee, R. (2010). The Irregular School: Exclusion, Schooling and Inclusive Education. *The Irregular School: Exclusion, Schooling and Inclusive Education*, 1-220.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203831564>
- Slee, R. (2019). Belonging in an age of exclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23(9), 909-922.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1602366>
- Smyth, E. (2015). *Wellbeing and school experiences among 9 and 13 year olds: insights from the Growing up in Ireland Study*. ESRI and NCCA.
- Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2010). *Hangin' in with kids in tough times: engagement in contexts of educational disadvantage in the relational school*. Peter Lang Publishing.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2011.589138>
- Smyth, J., McInerney, P., & Fish, T. (2013). Blurring the boundaries: from relational learning towards a critical pedagogy of engagement for disengaged disadvantaged young people. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 21(2), 299-320.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2012.759136>
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333-339.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
- Spillane, J. (2005). Distributed Leadership. *The Educational Forum*, 69, 143-150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131720508984678>
- Squires, G., Kalambouka, A., & Bragg, J. (2016). *A Study of the Experiences of Post Primary Students with Special Educational Needs*. National Council for Special Education.
<https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/NCSE-A-Study-of-the-Experiences-of-Post-Primary-Students-with-Special-Ed-Needs.pdf>

- Stainback, S., W., S., & Ayres, B. (1996). Schools as inclusive communities. In W. Stainback & S. Stainback (Eds.), *Controversial Issues Confronting Special Education. Divergent Perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 31-43). Allyn and Bacon.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research: perspectives on practice*. Sage.
- Tangen, R. (2008). Listening to children's voices in educational research: some theoretical and methodological problems. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23(2), 157-166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250801945956>
- Tangen, R. (2009). Conceptualising quality of school life from pupils' perspectives: a four-dimensional model. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13(8), 829-844. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110802155649>
- Templeton, M., Cuevas-Parra, P., & Lundy, L. (2023). Children's participation in international fora: The experiences and perspectives of children and adults. *Children & Society*, 37(3), 786-805. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12629>
- Thomas, G. (1997). Inclusive schools for an inclusive society. *British Journal of Special Education*, 24(3), 103-107.
- Thomson, P. (2011). Coming to terms with voice. In G. Czerniawski & W. Kidd (Eds.), *The Student Voice Handbook: Bridging the Academic / Practitioner Divide*. Emerald.
- Tiburcio, T., & Finch, E. (2005). The impact of high-tech learning environments on pupils' interactions. *Faculties*, 23(5/6), 262-278.
- Tisdall, E. K. M., Davis, J. M., & Gallagher, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Researching with Children and Young People: Research Design, Methods and Analysis*. SAGE Publications.
- Tiwari, A., Das, A., & Sharma, M. (2015). Inclusive education a "rhetoric" or "reality"? Teachers' perspectives and beliefs. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 52, 128-136. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2015.09.002>
- Travers, J., Balfe, T., Butler, C., Day, T., Dupont, M., McDaid, R., O'Donnell, M., & Prunty, A. (2010). *Addressing the Challenges and Barriers to Inclusion in Irish Schools. Report for Research and Development Committee of the Department of Education and Skills*. https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/files/esl/downloads/76_IE_Team_teaching_BarriersToInclusion.pdf
- Turan, S., & Bektaş, F. (2013). The Relationship between School Culture and Leadership Practices. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research (EJER)*, 13, 155-168.
- UNESCO. (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. UNESCO.

- UNESCO. (2000). *Dakar Framework for Action – Education for Action – Education for all, meeting our collective commitment*. UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2016). *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4*.
https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en_2.pdf
- United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities*. United Nations.
- United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2016). *General comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education*. United Nations.
<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1313836>
- United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2003). *General comment No.5: General Measures of implementation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child* United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/496561>
- United Nations General Assembly. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations.
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- Vayrynen, S. (2000). *Inclusive education: A challenge, a process* ISEC, 2000 - Including the excluded, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK.
http://www.isec.org.uk/abstract/papers_v/vayrynen_1.htm
- Verhellen, E. (2000). *Convention on the Rights of the Child: Background, Motivation, Strategies, Main Themes*. Garant.
<https://books.google.ie/books?id=gcexgh3-7kkC>
- Vislie, L. (2003). From integration to inclusion: focusing global trends and changes in the western European societies. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 18(1), 17-35.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0885625082000042294>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4>
- Wall, K., Cassidy, C., Robinson, C., Hall, E., Beaton, M., Kanyal, M., & Mitra, D. (2019). Look who's talking: Factors for considering the facilitation of very young children's voices. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 17(4), 263-278.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718x19875767>
- Walonick, D. S. (2004). *Survival statistics*. Statpac Ltd.
- Warnock, M. (2005). *Special Educational Needs: A New Look*. Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain Publications.

- Warnock, M., & Norwich, B. (2010). Special educational needs: a new look. In L. Terzi (Ed.), *Special Educational Needs: A New Look*. Continuum.
- Watkins, A., & Meijer, C. (2010). The development of inclusive teaching and learning: A European perspective? In *Confronting obstacles to inclusion* (pp. 245-262). Routledge.
- Williams, J., & Hanke, D. (2007). Do you know what sort of school I want? Optimum features of school provision for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder. *Good Autism Practice (GAP)*, 8, 51-63.
- Winter, E., & O'Raw, P. (2010). *Literature review of the principles and practices relating to inclusive education for children with special educational needs*. http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/NCSE_Inclusion.pdf
- Winter, R. (1996). Some Principles and Procedures for the Conduct of Action Research. In O. Zuber-Skerritt (Ed.), *New Directions in Action Research* (pp. 13-27). Falmer Press.
- Yazan, B. (2015). Three Approaches to Case Study Methods in Education: Yin, Merriam, and Stake. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(2), 134-152. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2102>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.
- Zeldin, S. (2004). Youth as Agents of Adult and Community Development: Mapping the Processes and Outcomes of Youth Engaged in Organizational Governance. *Applied Developmental Science*, 8(2), 75-90. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532480xads0802_2

Appendix A: Schedule of CRAG Activities

(Background & Focus Group Input)

MEETING 1:

Introductions and capacity building (approx. 1 hour)

- Meet and greet the children
- Purpose of research
- Purpose of CRAG
- Overview of literature/vocabulary/scope
- What will be done during Meeting 2

Breakdown of Activities

INTRODUCTIONS

- Brief synopsis of the research.
- Icebreaker activity.
- What is 'research'? Explain both the concept and process to the children interactively.
- Explain what a CRAG is and why it is important.
- Research questions for project.
- Go over agenda.

INTRODUCTION TO BROADER CONCEPTS

- Pose questions to children linked to broader concepts to encourage them to think about the wider topic of inclusion.

ACTIVITY A:

Brainstorm on large sheets of paper in pairs -

- What makes you feel happy in school?
- What makes you feel unhappy in school?

ACTIVITY B:

The children will be split into two groups of 5. Each group will be given a large piece of chart paper with one of the below questions (1B and 2B) written onto it. One group will be thinking about children, the others about adults in the school. The five children will write down answers around the page.

1B. Where do you hear children's voices at school?

The children will be asked aloud: Of those places, draw circles (or several circles if you want to emphasise) around the places that you think children's voice has the most influence.

2B. Where do you hear adult voices at school?

The children will be asked aloud: Of those places, draw circles (or several circles if you want to emphasise) around the places that you think adult voice has the most influence.

The discussion around this will be recorded.

ACTIVITY C:

The same groups will be given a second piece of chart paper with one of the below questions (1C and 2C) written onto it. The five children in each group will write down answers around the page.

1C. Thinking of these places, who are the children whose voices are mostly heard?

(Ask CRAG members to describe these children's characteristics).

2C. Thinking of these places, who are the adults whose voices are mostly heard?

(Ask CRAG members to describe these adults' characteristics).

The two groups will share their answers with the rest of the 'research team'.

There will be discussion to allow for questions, disagreements, etc.

The discussion around this will be recorded.

FEEDBACK TO STATEMENTS

In order to make CRAG members more familiar with various theories/perspectives on the topics of inclusion and children's voice, we will have a discussion on whether they believe a particular statement is 'Always True', 'Mostly True', 'Sometimes True', 'Rarely True' or 'Never True'.

On separate cards (large and laminated), theories will be written out relating to inclusion and children's voice in schools. CRAG members will put these theories into

one of the 'True' categories. Children will be reminded to try and think generally rather than just base their answers on their personal experience. There will be discussion with them before a final decision is made.

The important part of the activity is the discussion, not the final decision.

Example statements:

- It is the teacher who decides what activities children will carry out in the classroom.
- All children are able to take part in these activities.
- Children are invited to express opinions on school matters, but teachers have the final say.
- All children are seen as equal in school.
- Children are asked for their opinions about the quality of education that teachers offer.
- Children in school are allowed to initiate projects without teachers' intervention.
- Children are given enough information to understand why teachers make certain decisions in school.
- All children have the same opportunities to express their opinions and influence school decisions.
- Children have a say in what they learn in school.
- Children have a say and influence decisions about after-school activities.
- It is easy for all children to get around school.
- Sometimes the teacher needs to work differently with different children.
- All pupils in the school fit in well.

- Teachers are the only ones that plan what we do in school.
- All children are able to partake in all activities in school.
- Parents have a say about what happens in school.

BRAINSTORM: WHAT HELPS CHILDREN HAVE THEIR VOICES HEARD?

Referring back to the chart papers used in the first activity, return to the areas/contexts of the school that they already mentioned and pose the above question. Using post-its, write down the suggestions of children, and place the post-its beside the areas they refer to on the chart paper.

I, as facilitator, can also prompt using areas/contexts of the school that were not written on the chart paper in the first activity.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PROJECT AND METHODS

Now that students have an understanding of the broad concepts related to the research and are seeing some complexities around it, they will be given a more specific explanation of the project, why it is being done, and what is hoped to be gained from it.

I will also go over the data generation methods that will be used and the role the CRAG will play in influencing the student focus group questions.

QUESTIONS AND ARRANGEMENTS OF NEXT MEETING

MEETING 2:

Developing focus group questions/activities (approx. 45 mins)

BREAKDOWN OF ACTIVITIES

INTRODUCTIONS

- Greetings
- Overview of the meeting's goals.
- Reminder of research project and questions.
- Reminder of activities done during the last meeting (display on the wall).

CHILDREN'S FEEDBACK/ADVICE ON FOCUS GROUP DESIGN

(There will be a discussion and rationale about why they are making that suggestion, and discussion will be encouraged if there are opposing views.)

- Advice and feedback on focus group questions (researcher's draft questions will be supplied).
- Advice on focus group size (options will be given to choose from – opinions requested).
- Advice on age level of focus groups (options will be given to them – opinions requested).
- Advice on how to ask focus group questions and what hands-on activities might help children to better express their views on specific questions (options will be given to them).

- Advice on where to conduct focus groups in schools (examples will be given).
- Advice on how to ensure all students in the focus group contribute.
- Advice on what vocabulary terms should be covered at the beginning of the focus group meetings and how best to do this.
- Advice on what to look for in piece of artwork – *What does a happy, inclusive school look like?* What features do they think should be included?

Appendix B: Teacher Questionnaire



Staff Survey: The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools

Welcome!

Dear participant,

My name is Rosemarie Stynes and I am a Doctorate of Education student in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

As part of my work I am conducting research in the area of inclusive education. My research is under the supervision of Dr. Michael Shevlin and is entitled "*The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools*".

This project wishes to investigate the perspectives of inclusive education reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools. It proposes to investigate the effect of leadership on inclusive education and also if the voice of the child is heard as part of inclusive practice and if so, how?

It is anticipated that the questionnaire will normally take no longer than 15-20 minutes to complete. Each question is optional. Feel free to omit a response to any question; however I would be grateful if all questions are responded to.

I can foresee no risks being associated with participation in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life. The information gathered will be treated with the appropriate privacy and anonymity. No information about you as an individual will be identified in the research. All information will be stored safely with access only available to the research team and examiners. Data will be retained for no longer than is necessary. The anonymised results will be included in a thesis, and may be discussed at conferences or published in academic literature. I would envisage that this research could greatly help in how schools include children from a diversity of backgrounds and circumstances.

I am aware that this is a very busy time of year for you and your school. I also understand that schools are inundated with requests for research. However, I would greatly appreciate your assistance with this project.

Please note that you are under no obligation to participate in this study. If at any time you wish to withdraw from the study; you may do so, without having to give a reason and without prejudice.

If you have further questions regarding this research please feel free to get in touch using the email addresses listed below.

Finally I would like to thank you for taking the time to consider my research. Without your generous participation, conducting such research would be impossible.

Kind regards,
Rosemarie Stynes

Email: rstynes@tcd.ie
Student No.: 09183612

Supervisor Details:
Dr. Michael Shevlin
Email: mshevlin@tcd.ie



Staff Survey: The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools

General

1. Gender?

- ☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ I would prefer to not say.

2. Age group?

- ☐ Under 20
☐ 21 - 30
☐ 31 - 40
☐ 41 - 50
☐ 51 - 60
☐ Over 60

3. Education Level (Tick more than one if necessary)

- ☐ College student (at present)
☐ FETAC Level 5
☐ FETAC Level 6
☐ Bachelors Degree
☐ Other (please specify)
☐ Higher Diploma
☐ Post Graduate Diploma
☐ Masters
☐ Doctorate

4. What level band do you currently work with? (Tick more than one if necessary)

- ☐ Junior Infants / Senior Infants
☐ 1st Class / 2nd Class
☐ 3rd / 4th Class
☐ 5th / 6th Class

5. My school is

- ☐ Urban
☐ Rural

6. My school has a special needs outreach class attached.

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

7. How long have you been working in schools?

- ☐ <1 year
☐ 1-3 years
☐ 4-10 years
☐ 11-20 years
☐ 21+ years
☐ Prefer not to say

Other (please specify)

8. My current role in the school at the moment is

- ☐ Class Teacher
☐ SET Teacher
☐ SNA
☐ Other (please specify)



Staff Survey: The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools

Teachers

9. Have you received any training or taken part in any courses in Special Education?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

10. If so, was this part of your initial teacher training course?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ N/A

11. If this course/ training was not part of your initial teacher training course or was in addition, can you be specific as to the type of training you completed (e.g. name of course/s, level of course/s)

12. Do you currently have children with special educational needs in your class/group?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

13. If so, how many children with special educational needs are you teaching?

14. Do you currently have SNA support?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Comment:

15. How many children are you currently teaching?

- ☐ Support groups/One to one
☐ <20
☐ 21-25
☐ 26-35

16. What is your opinion on each of the following:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
All children should be educated in a mainstream class.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Both children with and without SEN can gain academic improvement because of inclusive education.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inclusive education is likely to have a positive effect on the social and	☐	☐	☐	☐

emotional development of children with SEN.				
The needs of children with SEN can be best served in special, separate settings.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inclusive education provides children with opportunities for mutual communication, thus promote students to understand and accept individual diversity.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Children with severe SEN should be educated in special, separate settings.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Special education teachers are trained to use different teaching methods to teach children with SEN more effectively.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel confident teaching children with SEN in my class.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Children who communicate in special ways (e.g., sign language) should be educated in special, separate settings.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Withdrawal from class has a negative effect on the social and emotional development of a child whose first language is not English.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inclusion sounds good in theory but does not work well in practice.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel supported in providing an inclusive education in my class.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have corresponding knowledge and skills to educate children with SEN.	☐	☐	☐	☐

Mainstream teachers' practice is enhanced by having children with SEN in the mainstream class.

☐
☐
☐
☐

I feel comfortable working with children with SEN and their parents.

☐
☐
☐
☐

Children with SEN should be given every opportunity to participate in the mainstream classroom setting, where possible.

☐
☐
☐
☐

The voice of the child is encouraged in my class.

☐
☐
☐
☐

I use effective differentiation to ensure the learning and social needs of each child is met in my class.

☐
☐
☐
☐

Is there anything you would like to provide further detail on?



The University of Dublin

Staff Survey: The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools

Understanding of Inclusive Education

17. What is your understanding of inclusive education?

18. What are the three most challenging aspects of providing inclusive education in your setting?

19. What are the three most rewarding aspects of providing inclusive education in your setting?

20. What aspect of inclusive education do you feel most supported in?

21. What aspect of inclusive education do you feel you need more support in?

22. Is there anything you would like to provide further detail on?

Appendix C: Board of Management Questionnaire



BOM Survey: The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools

Welcome!

Dear participant,

My name is Rosemarie Stynes and I am a Doctorate of Education student in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

As part of my work I am conducting research in the area of inclusive education. My research is under the supervision of Dr. Michael Shevlin and is entitled "*The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools*".

This project wishes to investigate the perspectives of inclusive education reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools. It proposes to investigate the effect of leadership on inclusive education and also if the voice of the child is heard as part of inclusive practice and if so, how?

It is anticipated that the questionnaire will normally take no longer than 15 minutes to complete. Each question is optional. Feel free to omit a response to any question; however I would be grateful if all questions are responded to.

I can foresee no risks being associated with participation in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life. The information gathered will be treated with the appropriate privacy and anonymity. No information about you as an individual will be identified in the research. All information will be stored safely with access only available to the research team and examiners. Data will be retained for no longer than is necessary. The anonymised results will be included in a thesis, and may be discussed at conferences or published in academic literature. I would envisage that this research could greatly help in how schools include children from a diversity of backgrounds and circumstances.

I am aware that this is a very busy time of year for you and your school. I also understand that schools are inundated with requests for research. However, I would greatly appreciate your assistance with this project.

Please note that you are under no obligation to participate in this study. If at any time you wish to withdraw from the study, you may do so, without having to give a reason and without prejudice.

If you have further questions regarding this research please feel free to get in touch using the email addresses listed below.

Finally I would like to thank you for taking the time to consider my research. Without your generous participation, conducting such research would be impossible.

Kind regards,
Rosemarie Stynes

Email: rstynes@tcd.ie
Student No.: 09183612

Supervisor Details:

Dr. Michael Shevlin
Email: mshevlin@tcd.ie



BOM Survey: The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools

1. What is your opinion on each of the following:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
I am familiar with the ethos of the school.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The Board discusses school events and ensures that they are welcoming to the whole school community, i.e. no parent or child should ever feel left out.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The physical environment of the school is safe.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Children have a sense of ownership within the school.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
As a Board member, I am familiar with the day-to-day running of the school.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The Board ensures that the school makes an effort to meet the educational and social needs of children with special needs.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The Board ensures that the school makes an effort to include all children in all play and	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

sporting activities,
outings and extra-
curricular activities.

The Board takes
account of the views
of parents before
taking important
decisions or
developing
important policies.

☐☐☐☐☐

The Board takes
account of the views
of pupils before
taking important
decisions or
developing
important policies.

☐☐☐☐☐

The Board takes
account of the views
of staff before
taking important
decisions or
developing
important policies

☐☐☐☐☐

2. As a member of the BOM what is your understanding of inclusive education?

3. If you would like to provide more information on why you answered as you did to the questions above, or add any further information you are invited to use the space below.

Appendix D: Focus Group Questions – Parents

1. Defining and Understanding Inclusion

- How would you define inclusion in the context of this school?
- Do you feel the school is accessible for your child? (Beyond physical access and environment)

2. Support Services & Resources

- Does your child have access to support from specialist resources (SLT/OT/CAMHS/VT)?
 - If so, do you feel this support is helping your child?
- Does your child have access to support from external agencies? (e.g., Dept. of Health and Children, Enable Ireland, St. Michael's House)
- Does your child have access to assistive technology?
 - If so, how appropriate and adequate is the technology?
 - Have you encountered any difficulties with this assistive technology?

3. School Collaboration & Support Planning

- Do you have experience of working with the SENO?
 - If so, how does the school work with the SENO?
 - How does the SENO work with you as a parent?
 - Do you have a relationship with the SENO?
- Does the school have Support Plans for pupils with SEN?

- Does the school have a Student Support Plan for your child?
- If so, are you involved in its development?
- Is your child involved in its development?

4. Curriculum & Learning Experience

- Do you feel the curriculum is differentiated to address your child's needs?
- How do you feel your child is doing in school?

5. Extra-Curricular Activities & Student Participation

- What extra-curricular activities are provided in the school?
 - How does your child access these activities?

6. Student Voice & Participation in Decision-Making

- Are the opinions of children taken into account in school life?
 - If so, in what areas?
- How are the opinions of children obtained?
- Do you think the school gives students an appropriate amount of input into school decisions? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that students' voices are valued equally in the school?
 - If yes, which types of students are listened to more/less?
- Do you think the students themselves feel valued in the school? Why do you say this?
- Are there any areas of the school or the classroom where you believe students' opinions should be taken into account, but currently are not?

- In your opinion, which direction do you feel the power of children's voices is going?
 - Are they gaining more influence, losing influence, or staying the same?

7. Future Aspirations

- If I came back to talk to you in 2 years' time, what would you hope would have developed or changed in the school? What would you definitely keep the same?

Appendix E: Focus Group Questions – Children

1. Inclusion & Accessibility

- Do all pupils in the school fit in well?
- Do you think there might be some pupils who don't fit into school and why?
- Is it easy for all children to participate in lessons?
- Is it easy for all children to get around the school?
- Are there things you find difficult in school?

2. Learning & Curriculum Planning

- Who plans for what you learn in school?
- If you need extra help, who plans for that?
- Do children get to contribute or help with the development of this plan?
- Who is involved in planning what you do in school each day?
- Do the teachers prepare work especially for you?

3. Support & Progress

- What support do you get to help you in school?
- Who helps you in school?
- Are you making good progress in school?

- How would you know if you are doing as well as everyone else at school?

4. School Environment & Activities

- Do you join in with school clubs and other activities?
- What things at school do you really enjoy?
- What are the best things the school does to help you?
- What things could the school do better to help you?

5. Success & Aspirations

- In your school work, what would mean that you are successful?
- In your friendships at school, what would mean that you are successful?
- If I came back to talk to you in 2 years' time, what would you hope would have changed in school? What would you definitely keep the same?

Appendix F: CRAG Analysis of Data

MEETING 3:

Analysis of focus group data (approx. 2 hours)

For every focus group question, each CRAG member will be provided with a print-out of selected excerpts of children's responses. Then, CRAG members will be asked the following reflective questions to instigate discussion:

- What are the children saying here?
- Why do you think they are saying this?
- Is there anything that surprises you?
- Anything that shocks you?
- Is there anything you agree/disagree with?
- Is there anything you would like to know more about?
- What else would you ask these children?
- Does anything confuse you?
- What do you think is most important? Why?
- What do you think is least important? Why?

The meeting will be recorded.

Appendix G: Sample Focus Group Field Notes

9th May.
School B - Parent Focus Group.
10 AM.

P#1 Arms crossed - nodding in agreement with others
- Sighs heavily

P#2 'Fighting every day' - Visibly emotional, mum offers
comfort, looking down. (P#3)

P#1 Visibly frustrated - lack of clear communication - SLT.

Appendix H: Sample Visual Depictions



Picture 1 - Junior Child - Ideal school



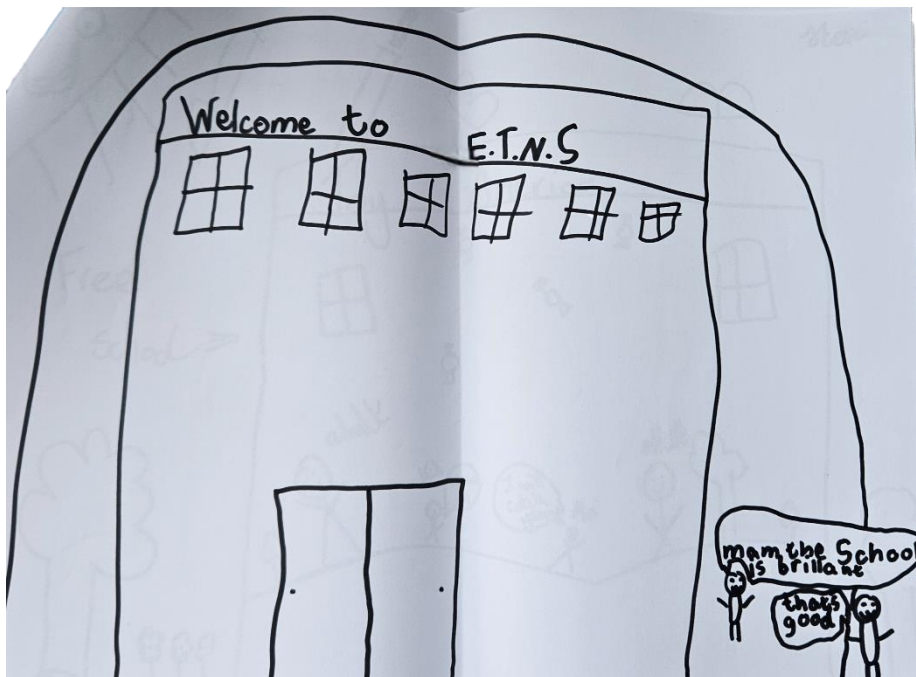
Picture 2 - Junior Child - Ideal school



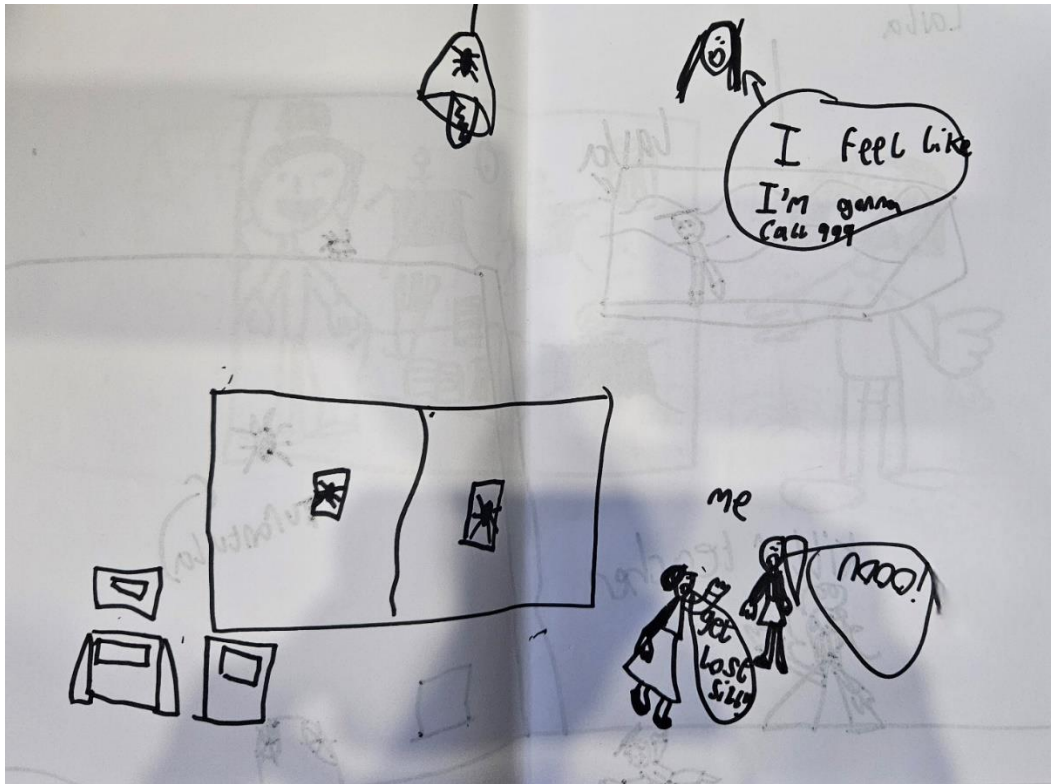
Picture 3 - Senior Child - Ideal school



Picture 4 - Senior Child - Ideal school



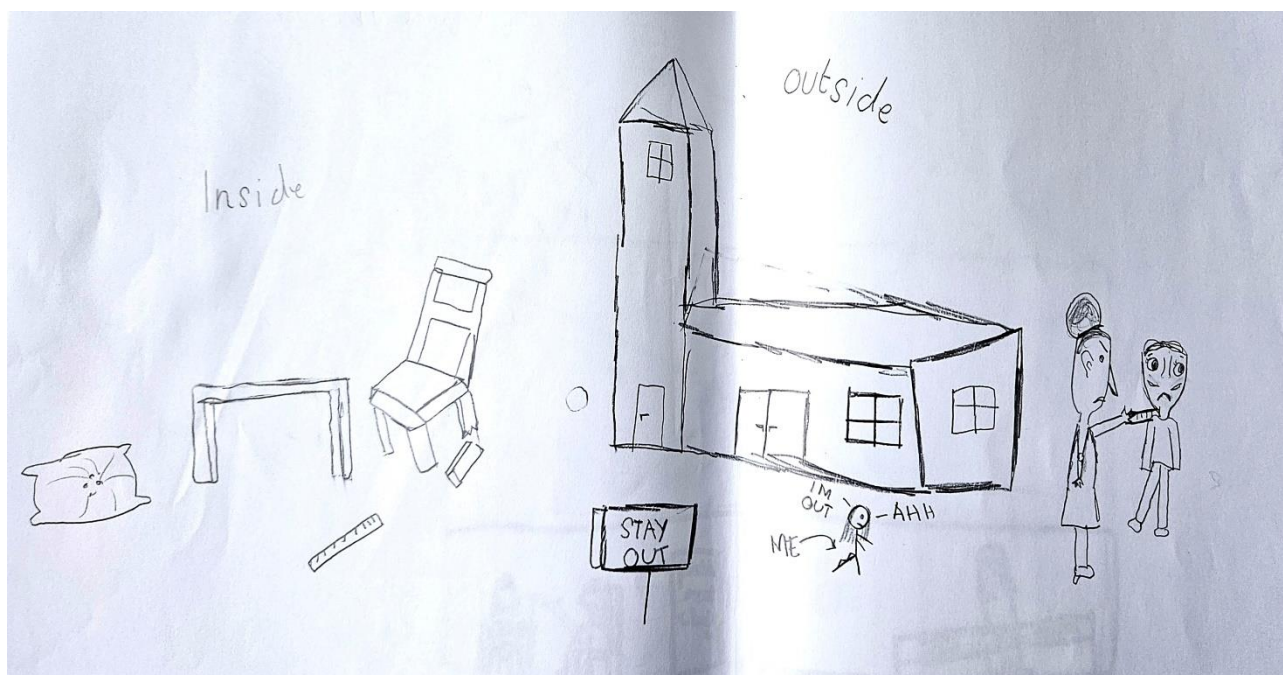
Picture 5 - Senior Child - Ideal school



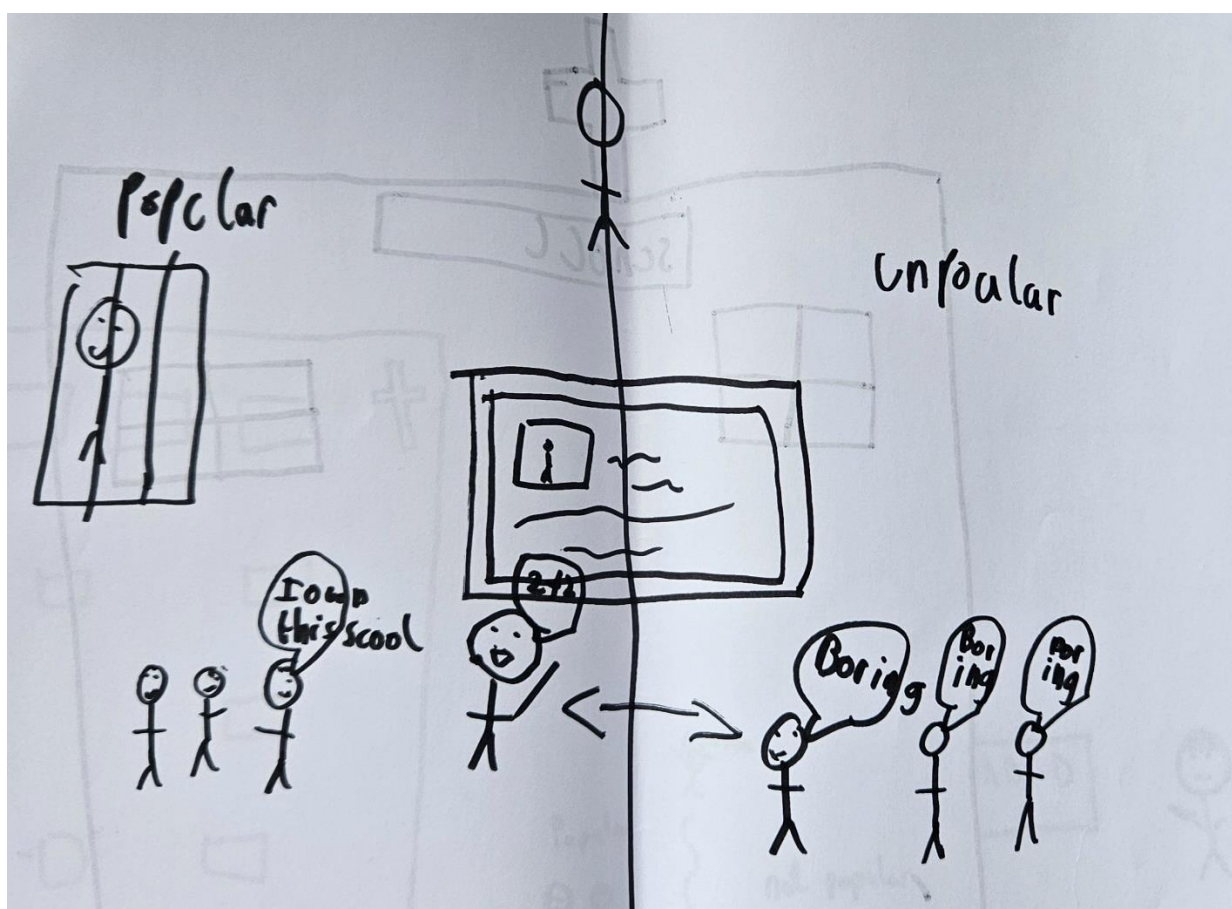
Picture 6 - Junior Child - Non-ideal school



Picture 7 - Senior Child - Non-ideal school



Picture 8 - Senior Child - Non-ideal school



Picture 9 - Senior child - Non-ideal school

Appendix I: Semi-Structured Interview Prompts - Principal

Section 1: Defining an Inclusive School

1. What traits do you consider essential for an inclusive school?
2. Would you consider your school to be inclusive? Why or why not?
3. Are there any changes you would like to make to improve inclusivity, but are unable to do so in your current context?
4. Do you feel there is a whole-school approach to supporting an inclusive model of education? How would you encourage such an approach?

Section 2: Policies and Practices for Inclusion

5. How does your school's admissions policy accommodate the admission and participation of children with additional needs?
6. Is your school's Code of Behaviour policy flexible enough to account for individual differences? Is it regularly reviewed to include children with additional needs?
7. What are your views on the new Special Education Teaching Allocation model?

8. Does your school use team teaching to meet the needs of children with additional needs?

Section 3: Roles and Responsibilities in Inclusion

9. What do you see as your role in supporting pupils with additional educational needs within the school?
10. What level of interaction do you have with the parents of children with additional needs?
11. Does your school actively promote parental involvement and communication?
How does this happen?
12. How do you support the work of your SEN team and SNAs?
13. How do you encourage further development and CPD regarding SEN education in your school?

Section 4: The Voice of the Child in Your School

14. How do you ensure the voice of the child is heard in your school, particularly children with additional educational needs?
15. In what areas of school life are children's opinions taken into account?
16. How are the opinions of children gathered?
17. What decisions are students involved in?
18. Do students have any influence over what they learn? Can you provide examples?

19. Do you think your school gives students an appropriate amount of input into school decisions? Why or why not?
20. Do you feel that students' voices are valued equally in your school? Are there certain types of students who are listened to more or less?
21. Do you think students feel valued in your school? Why do you say this?
22. Have students requested input on decisions that they currently have no influence over?
23. Are there areas of the school or classroom where students' opinions should be considered but currently are not?
24. In your opinion, how is the role of student voice evolving? Are students gaining more influence, losing influence, or remaining the same?

Section 5: Meeting Individual Student Needs

25. How do you ensure that the needs of individual children are met in the classroom?
26. Would you consider your school to offer an appropriate, safe, stimulating, and rewarding environment for every child?
27. How do you see your role in building an inclusive school? (If not answered already)

Section 6: External Support for Inclusion

28. Do you feel supported in your work by the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO)?

29. Do you feel supported in your work by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)?

30. What additional support would you like in relation to inclusion within your school?

Section 7: Personal Reflections on Working with Children with Additional Needs

31. What do you consider the most rewarding aspect of working with children with additional needs?

32. What is the most challenging or frustrating aspect of your work in relation to children with additional needs?

Appendix J: Semi-Structured Interview Prompts –

SENCo

Section 1: Defining an Inclusive School

1. What traits do you consider essential for an inclusive school?
2. Would you consider your school to be inclusive? Why or why not?
3. Are there any changes you would like to make to improve inclusivity but are unable to do so in your current context?
4. Do you feel there is a whole-school approach to supporting an inclusive model of education? How would you encourage such an approach?

Section 2: Policies and Practices for Inclusion

5. What are your views on the new Special Education Teaching Allocation model?
6. Does your school use team teaching to meet the needs of children with additional needs?

Section 3: Roles and Responsibilities in Inclusion

7. What do you see as your primary role regarding pupils with additional needs within the school?
8. How is parental involvement encouraged in your work? How do your interactions with parents inform your practice?

9. How does your work with outside agencies link to your role within the school?
(e.g., NEPS, HSE, CAMHS, etc.)
10. How do you support the work of the SEN team and SNAs?
11. Do you engage with further development and CPD regarding SEN education in your school?

Section 4: The Voice of the Child in Your School

12. When putting together Student Support Files, how do you ensure the voice of the child is heard?
13. How do you ensure the needs of the individual child are met in the classroom?
14. Would you consider your school to offer an appropriate, safe, stimulating, and rewarding environment for each child with additional needs?
15. In what areas of school life are the opinions of children taken into account?
16. In your opinion, how are the opinions of the children obtained?
17. What decisions are the students involved in?
18. Do your students have any influence on what they learn? Can you provide examples?
19. Do you think your school gives students an appropriate amount of input into school decisions? Why or why not?
20. Do you feel that students' voices are valued equally in your school? Are there certain types of students who are listened to more or less?

21. Do you think students feel valued in your school? Why do you say this?
22. Have students requested input on decisions that they currently have no influence over?
23. Are there areas of the school or classroom where students' opinions should be considered but currently are not?
24. In your opinion, how is the role of student voice evolving? Are students gaining more influence, losing influence, or remaining the same?

Section 5: External Support and Challenges in Inclusion

25. How do you see your role in building an inclusive school?
26. Do you feel supported in your work by the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO)?
27. Do you feel supported in your work by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)?
28. What additional support would you like in relation to inclusion within your school?

Section 6: Personal Reflections on Working with Children with Additional Needs

29. What do you consider the most rewarding aspect of working with children with additional needs?
30. What is the most challenging or frustrating aspect of your work in relation to children with additional needs?

Appendix K: Document Analysis

	School A	School B	School C
SEN Policy	✓	✓	✓
Code of Behaviour	✓	✓ (and discipline)	✓
EAL Policy	✓	X	✓
Inclusion Policy	X	X	X
Classroom Support Files	1st Class (x2)	1st & 3rd Class	6th Class
Student Support Files	4 th & 5th Class (Mixed group)	6th Class	2nd Class
Student Support Plus Files	Senior Infants, 3rd & 6th Class	3rd & 4th Class	Junior Infants

Appendix L: Rubric for Document Analysis

Criteria	4 - Excellent	3 – Good	2 - Fair	1 - Needs Improvement
1. Clarity of Purpose	The policy's purpose is explicitly stated, with clear and concise language.	The purpose is stated but could be more detailed or precise.	The purpose is vague or lacks detail, making it difficult to interpret.	The purpose is missing or entirely unclear.
2. Alignment with DE requirements	Fully aligned with DE requirements.	Mostly aligned, but minor details are unclear.	Some alignment, but there are noticeable gaps.	Lacks any alignment with DE requirements.
3. Inclusivity and Equity	Policies are inclusive, address diverse needs, and ensure equity for all stakeholders.	Policies are inclusive but do not fully address all stakeholders' needs.	Inclusivity is minimally addressed, with notable gaps.	No evidence of inclusivity or equity considerations.
4. Inclusion of the Voice of the Child	The policy explicitly incorporates children's perspectives, with clear mechanisms for their input.	The policy includes children's input but lacks specific or consistent mechanisms.	Minimal consideration of children's perspectives; mechanisms are unclear.	The policy excludes children's perspectives entirely.
5. Roles and Responsibilities	Clearly defines roles and responsibilities for all parties involved.	Defines most roles and responsibilities, but some areas lack clarity.	Roles and responsibilities are vaguely mentioned or incomplete.	Roles and responsibilities are unclear or absent.
6. Procedures and Implementation	Provides comprehensive procedures with clear implementation steps and timelines.	Procedures are outlined but lack some detail or clear timelines.	Procedures are mentioned, but details on implementation are sparse.	No procedures or implementation guidelines provided.

Criteria	4 - Excellent	3 – Good	2 - Fair	1 - Needs Improvement
7. Communication Plan	Describes a robust plan for communicating the policy to all stakeholders.	Provides a communication plan but lacks specific details or methods.	Mentions communication but does not provide a clear or actionable plan.	No communication plan included.
8. Review and Accountability	Includes a detailed plan for regular policy review, updates, and accountability measures.	Mentions review and accountability but lacks detail or frequency.	Briefly mentions review but does not specify how or when it will occur.	No plan for review or accountability is included.
9. Accessibility of Policy	Policy is written in an accessible format with clear language for all stakeholders.	Policy is accessible but may contain jargon or unclear sections.	Policy is somewhat accessible, but clarity is limited.	Policy is inaccessible or overly complex.

Scoring Guide

- Score each criterion:** Assign a score from 1 to 4 for each category.
- Total Score:** Add the scores for all criteria.
- Overall Assessment:**
 - 36–32:** Exemplary policy document.
 - 31–24:** Sufficient but needs minor improvements.
 - 23–16:** Inadequate in key areas; requires significant revision.
 - Below 16:** Requires a complete overhaul.

Appendix M: TCD Ethical Approval



Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
Trinity College Dublin
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

Approval Rosemarie Stynes

8th November 2018

Dear Rosemarie,

The School of Education's Ethics Committee has received and reviewed the amendments to your application for approval of your research project entitled 'The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools'.

It is the decision of the Committee that you may now proceed with your research on the condition that it is carried out as indicated on your application. Should there be a change in the design of your research project, you will need to re-apply again for approval from the School of Education's Ethics Committee.

If you have any queries regarding this decision, please contact the Chair of the School of Education's Ethics Committee and Director of Research, Dr Ann Devitt (devittan@tcd.ie).

We wish you all the very best with your research project.

Kind regards,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ann Devitt'.

Professor Ann Devitt

Director of Research

Scoil an Oideá Chais
3087 Foirgneamh,
Coláiste na Tríonóide,
Baile Átha Cliath,
Ollscoil Átha Cliath,
Baile Átha Cliath 2, Éire.

School of Education
3087 Arts Building,
Trinity College Dublin,
The University of Dublin,
Dublin 2, Ireland.

+353 1 896 3583
www.tcd.ie/education

Appendix N: BoM Information and Consent Form

(CRAG)

Dear Chairperson and members of the BoM,

As you are aware, I am currently undertaking a Doctorate in Education in association with Trinity College Dublin and under the supervision of Dr. Michael Shevlin. My research is entitled **“The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools”**. As part of my study, I am undertaking research on children’s ideas and attitudes towards inclusive education with a particular focus on the voice of the child being heard.

As part of my research, I am looking for permission to form a Children’s Research Advisory Groups (CRAG) within RMDS consisting of 10 children ranging from 3rd-6th Class.

A children’s rights-based approach to research places particular emphasis on the participation rights of children and young people in the research process and requires that children are assisted in both forming and expressing their views on all matters affecting them. This approach is applied in relation to children as research participants – where deliberate steps are taken to ensure that children are facilitated in forming views on the issues being researched.

The children’s capacity as co-researchers is enabled where Children’s Research Advisory Groups (CRAGs) are established to work alongside the adult researchers: advising on the research process; assisting with the analysis and

interpretation of the findings; providing insight on the main issues under investigation. Central to work with the CRAGs is the requirement to build the children's capacity as co-researchers in understanding the issues being researched in the project.

Informed consent will be sought from children and parents. Each group will take place after school for 30-40 minutes over 3-4 sessions. The children will help to design the research questions which will then be used in the children's focus groups in schools participating in the research. Each child will have the right to withdraw from the CRAG at any time.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This study will aim to inform the practice of inclusive education in primary schools.

I am available to answer any further questions.

Yours sincerely,

Rosemarie Stynes

Email: rstynes@tcd.ie Student No.: 09183612

Supervisor Details:

Dr. Michael Shevlin

Email: mshevlin@tcd.ie

Board of Management Consent:

I have read and understood the information sheet included with this consent form and I am happy for Rosemarie Stynes to conduct research in RMDS.

Chairperson's signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix O: Principal Information and Consent

Form

Dear Principal,

My name is Rosemarie Stynes and I am a Doctorate in Education student in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

As part of my work, I am conducting research in the area of inclusive education.

My research is under the supervision of Dr. Michael Shevlin and is entitled “**The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools**”.

This project wishes to investigate the perspectives of inclusive education reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools. It proposes to investigate the effect of leadership on inclusive education and also if the voice of the child is heard as part of inclusive practice and if so, how?

The data collection for the project includes:

- A semi-structured interview with yourself, as Principal
- A semi-structured interview with the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
- Questionnaires with staff members
- Questionnaires with the Board of Management
- Focus Groups
 - A focus group interview with 4 parents of children with special educational

needs

- Two focus groups; one with a group of 5 children from 1st-3rd Class
and one with a group of 5 children from 4th-6th Class

- Visual Images - Art work gathered from the children participating in the focus groups portraying their visual representation of a happy, inclusive school
- Document analysis of relevant documents pertaining to each school such as the SEN policy, Behaviour policy, EAL policy, Inclusion policy, a selection of IEPs and IPLPs

It is anticipated that the questionnaire will normally take no longer than 15-20 minutes to complete and that the interviews and focus groups will last between 30 minutes and one hour. I would anticipate the research being carried out in 4 half days over the academic year. However, in so far as possible I will fit in with the schedule and demands of the school.

As a school principal myself, I am aware that this is a very busy time of year for you and your school. I also understand that schools are inundated with requests for research. However, I would greatly appreciate your assistance with this project. I am willing to make a presentation to your Board of Management on my research if so required.

I can foresee no risks being associated with individual and school participation in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life. The information gathered will be treated with the appropriate privacy and anonymity. No information

about your school or the participants will be identified in the research. All information will be stored safely with access only available to the research team and examiners. Data will be retained for no longer than is necessary. All records where the participant can be identified (e.g. recordings, etc.) will be destroyed after all phases of data collection are complete and the data have been fully anonymised. If at any time a participant wishes to withdraw from the study, they may do so up to this point, without having to give a reason and without prejudice. After this point, the data can no longer be withdrawn from the study as it is no longer identifiable. The anonymised results will be included in a thesis and may be discussed at conferences or published in academic literature. As your school would be the site for data collection, a copy of the results can be made available to you. These key findings will be shared with the school community if you so wish. I would envisage that this research could greatly help in how schools include children from a diversity of backgrounds and circumstances.

Please note that your school or the pupils involved are under no obligation to participate in this study. If you have further questions regarding this research, please feel free to get in touch using the email addresses listed below.

Finally, I would like to thank you for taking the time to consider my research. Without your generous participation, conducting such research would be impossible.

Kind regards,

Rosemarie Stynes

Email: rstynes@tcd.ie

Student No.: 09183612

Supervisor Details:

Dr. Michael Shevlin

Email: mshevlin@tcd.ie

Principal's Consent

I have read and understood the information sheet included with this consent form and I am happy for Rosemarie Stynes to conduct research in [name school here].

Principal's signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix P: SENCo Information and Consent Form

Dear _____,

My name is Rosemarie Stynes and I am a Doctorate in Education student in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

As part of my work, I am conducting research in the area of inclusive education.

My research is under the supervision of Dr. Michael Shevlin and is entitled **“The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools”**.

This project wishes to investigate the perspectives of inclusive education reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools. It proposes to investigate the effect of leadership on inclusive education and also if the voice of the child is heard as part of inclusive practice and if so, how?

As part of my research, I would like to carry out a semi-structured interview with you as Special Education Needs Co-ordinator in the school.

It is anticipated that the interviews will last between 30 minutes and one hour.

I can foresee no risks being associated with participation in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed for further analysis. The information gathered will be treated with the appropriate privacy and anonymity. No information about you as an individual will be identified in the research. All information will be stored safely with access only available to the research team and examiners. Data will be

retained for no longer than is necessary. All records where you can be identified (e.g. recordings, etc.) will be destroyed after all phases of data collection are complete and the data has been fully anonymised. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time up to this point without having to give a reason and without prejudice. After this point, your data can no longer be withdrawn from the study as it is no longer identifiable.

I am aware that this is a very busy time of year for you and your school. I also understand that schools are inundated with requests for research. However, I would greatly appreciate your assistance with this project.

Please note that you are under no obligation to participate in this study. If you have further questions regarding this research, please feel free to get in touch using the email addresses listed below.

Finally, I would like to thank you for taking the time to consider my research. Without your generous participation, conducting such research would be impossible.

Kind regards,

Rosemarie Stynes

Email: rstynes@tcd.ie

Student No.: 09183612

Supervisor Details:

Dr. Michael Shevlin

Email: mshevlin@tcd.ie

SENCo Consent Form

Title of Project: The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools.

I am under **no** obligation to participate in this study. If I agree to participate, but at a later stage feel the need to withdraw, I am free to do so.

Yes No

Please answer *all* of the following (tick the appropriate box):

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| I have read and understood the subject information sheet. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I am fully aware of all of the procedures involved and of any risks and benefits associated with the study. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason. | ☐ | ☐ |
| I am aware that my results will be kept anonymous. | ☐ | ☐ |

I agree to participate in the above study.

Signature of Participant:

Date:

Signature of Researcher:

Date:

Appendix Q: Parent Participant Information and Consent Form

Dear _____,

My name is Rosemarie Stynes and I am a Doctorate in Education student in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

As part of my work, I am conducting research in the area of inclusive education.

My research is under the supervision of Dr. Michael Shevlin and is entitled **“The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools”**.

This project wishes to investigate the perspectives of inclusive education reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools. It proposes to investigate the effect of leadership on inclusive education and also if the voice of the child is heard as part of inclusive practice and if so, how?

As part of my research, I am planning on forming a focus group consisting of four parents. There will be a meeting of this group, in the school, at a suitable date.

This meeting will aim to be an informal discussion on parents’ perspectives of inclusive education in primary school. It is anticipated that the focus group will last between 30 – 40 minutes. No questions will be directed to you individually but instead will be posed to the group. You may choose to respond or not respond at any point during the discussion.

I can foresee no risks being associated with participation in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life. This focus group discussion will be audio-recorded and transcribed for further analysis. The information gathered will be treated with the appropriate privacy and anonymity. No information about you as an individual will be identified in the research. All information will be stored safely with access only available to the research team and examiners. Data will be retained for no longer than necessary. All participants will be completely anonymous and the highest levels of confidentiality will be maintained at all times. All records where you can be identified will be destroyed after all phases of data collection are complete and the data has been fully anonymised. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time up to this point without having to give a reason and without prejudice. After this point, your data can no longer be withdrawn from the study as it is no longer identifiable.

The anonymised results will be included in a thesis and may be discussed at conferences or published in academic literature. I would envisage that this research could greatly help in how schools include children from a diversity of backgrounds and circumstances.

Please note that you are under no obligation to participate in this study. If you have further questions regarding this research, please feel free to get in touch using the email addresses listed below.

Finally, I would like to thank you for taking the time to consider my research.

Without your generous participation, conducting such research would be impossible.

Kind regards,

Rosemarie Stynes

Email: rstynes@tcd.ie

Student No.: 09183612

Supervisor Details:

Dr. Michael Shevlin

Email: mshevlin@tcd.ie

Parent Participant Consent Form

Title of Project: The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools.

I am under **no** obligation to participate in this study. If I agree to participate, but at a later stage feel the need to withdraw, I am free to do so.

Yes No

Please answer *all* of the following (tick the appropriate box):

I have read and understood the subject information sheet. ☐ Yes ☐ No

I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for. ☐ Yes ☐ No

I am fully aware of all of the procedures involved and of any risks and benefits associated with the study. ☐ Yes ☐ No

I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason. ☐ Yes ☐ No

I am aware that my results will be kept anonymous. ☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to participate in the above study.

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix R: Questionnaire Information Sheet

Dear participant,

My name is Rosemarie Stynes and I am a Doctorate in Education student in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

As part of my work, I am conducting research in the area of inclusive education. My research is under the supervision of Dr. Michael Shevlin and is entitled **“The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools”**.

This project wishes to investigate the perspectives of inclusive education reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools. It proposes to investigate the effect of leadership on inclusive education and also if the voice of the child is heard as part of inclusive practice and if so, how?

It is anticipated that the questionnaire will normally take no longer than 15-20 minutes to complete. Each question is optional. Feel free to omit a response to any question; however, I would be grateful if all questions are responded to.

I can foresee no risks being associated with participation in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life. The information gathered will be treated with the appropriate privacy and anonymity. No information about you as an individual will be identified in the research. All information will be stored safely with access only available to the research team and examiners. Data will be retained for no longer than is necessary. The anonymised results will be included

in a thesis and may be discussed at conferences or published in academic literature. I would envisage that this research could greatly help in how schools include children from a diversity of backgrounds and circumstances.

I am aware that this is a very busy time of year for you and your school. I also understand that schools are inundated with requests for research. However, I would greatly appreciate your assistance with this project.

Please note that you are under no obligation to participate in this study. If at any time you wish to withdraw from the study, you may do so, without having to give a reason and without prejudice.

If you have further questions regarding this research, please feel free to get in touch using the email addresses listed below.

Finally, I would like to thank you for taking the time to consider my research. Without your generous participation, conducting such research would be impossible.

Kind regards,

Rosemarie Stynes

Email: rstynes@tcd.ie

Student No.: 09183612

Supervisor Details:

Dr. Michael Shevlin

Email: mshevlin@tcd.ie

Appendix S: Parent/Guardian Information and Consent Form for U18 (CRAG)

Dear Parents/Guardians,

As you may know, I am a Doctorate in Education student in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

As part of my work, I am conducting research in the area of inclusive education. My research is under the supervision of Dr. Michael Shevlin and is entitled **“The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools”**.

This project wishes to investigate the perspectives of inclusive education reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools. It proposes to investigate the effect of leadership on inclusive education and also if the voice of the child is heard as part of inclusive practice and if so, how?

A children’s rights-based approach to research places particular emphasis on the participation rights of children and young people in the research process and requires that children are assisted in both forming and expressing their views on all matters affecting them. As part of my research, I am planning on forming a Children’s Research Advisory Group (CRAG). This approach is applied in relation to children as research participants – where deliberate steps are taken to ensure that children are facilitated in forming views on the issues being researched. The children’s capacity as co-researchers is enabled where CRAGs

are established to work alongside the adult researchers: advising on the research process; assisting with the analysis and interpretation of the findings; providing insight into the main issues under investigation. Central to work with the CRAGs is the requirement to build the children's capacity as co-researchers in understanding the issues being researched in the project.

I am inviting your child to take part in this CRAG. Participation is entirely voluntary. If you and your child agree to take part your child will be part of a group of ten children, which form the Student Council for this term. There will be 3-4 meetings of this group, in the school, at suitable times over a three week period and then one final meeting to consult with the children once the data has been collected.

All data from this project will be retained for no longer than necessary. All participants will be completely anonymous and the highest levels of confidentiality will be maintained at all times. All records where your child can be identified will be destroyed after all phases of data collection are complete and the data has been fully anonymised. Your child will also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time up to this point. After this point, your child's data can no longer be withdrawn from the study as it is no longer identifiable.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This part of the study will aim to inform the research towards investigating the perspectives of children towards inclusion in primary schools and informing the practice of inclusive education. It will also aim to build and reinforce the strength of the

voice of the child in education.

You and your child's co-operation and help would be greatly appreciated. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Rosemarie Stynes

Email: rstynes@tcd.ie Student No.: 09183612

Supervisor Details:

Dr. Michael Shevlin

Email: mshevlin@tcd.ie

Parent/Guardian Consent Form for U18 (CRAG):

Title of Project: The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools.

Your child is under **no** obligation to participate in this study. If they agree to participate, but at a later stage feel the need to withdraw, they are free to do so. It will not affect them in any way.

Yes No

Please answer *all* of the following (tick the appropriate box):

I have read and understood the subject information sheet. ☐ ☐

I understand what the project is about, and what the results
will be used for. ☐ ☐

I am fully aware of all of the procedures involving my child
and of any risks and benefits associated with the study. ☐ ☐

I know that my child's participation is voluntary and that I can
withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason. ☐ ☐

I am aware that my child's results will be kept anonymous. ☐ ☐

I agree for my child to participate in the above study.

Signature of Parent/Guardian: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix T: Parent/Guardian Information and Consent Form for U18

Dear Parents/Guardians,

My name is Rosemarie Stynes and I am a Doctorate in Education student in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

As part of my work, I am conducting research in the area of inclusive education. My research is under the supervision of Dr. Michael Shevlin and is entitled **“The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools”**.

This project wishes to investigate the perspectives of inclusive education reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools. It proposes to investigate the effect of leadership on inclusive education and also if the voice of the child is heard as part of inclusive practice and if so, how?

As part of my research, I am planning on forming a focus group consisting of 5 children ranging from 1st-3rd Class/4th-6th Class *(to be deleted as appropriate)*. If you are willing to allow your child to be part of this study, they will be in one of two groups. There will be a meeting of this group, in the school, at a suitable date. This meeting will aim to be an informal discussion on children’s attitudes to inclusion in the school. The discussion will be designed and informed by children’s attitudes and opinions. The discussion will last no longer than 30-40 minutes. No questions will be

directed to your child individually but instead will be posed to the group. Your child may choose to respond or not respond at any point during the discussion. The focus group discussion will be audio-recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

Your child will also be asked to complete a piece of artwork creating an image of their ideal classroom.

Data will be retained for no longer than necessary. All participants will be completely anonymous and the highest levels of confidentiality will be maintained at all times. All records where your child can be identified will be destroyed after all phases of data collection are complete and the data has been fully anonymised. Your child will also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time up to this point. After this point, your child's data can no longer be withdrawn from the study as it is not identifiable.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This study will aim to inform the inclusion of children in primary schools. It will also aim to build and reinforce the strength of the voice of the child in education.

You and your child's co-operation and help would be greatly appreciated. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Rosemarie Stynes

Email: rstynes@tcd.ie

Student No.: 09183612

Supervisor Details:

Dr. Michael Shevlin

Email: mshevlin@tcd.ie

Parent/Guardian Consent Form for U18:

Title of Project: The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools.

Your child is under **no** obligation to participate in this study. If they agree to participate, but at a later stage feel the need to withdraw, they are free to do so. It will not affect them in any way.

Yes No

Please answer *all* of the following (tick the appropriate box):

I have read and understood the subject information sheet. ☐ ☐

I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for. ☐ ☐

I am fully aware of all of the procedures involving my child ☐ ☐
and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.

I know that my child's participation is voluntary and that I can ☐ ☐
withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason.

I am aware that my child's results will be kept anonymous. ☐ ☐

I agree for my child to participate in the above study.

Signature of Parent/Guardian: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix U: Children's Information and Assent

Form (CRAG)

Dear _____,

As you may know, I am a Doctorate in Education student in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. As part of my study, I am trying to find out what makes school a happy place where everyone feels included.

As part of my research, I am forming a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) which will work through some fun and engaging activities and discussion in order to involve you as a research helper working alongside me, as a researcher, advising on how we might find out about how children feel included in other schools. You will be helping me put together the questions to ask other children in three different schools and you will help me go through the results after that. I feel it is important that if I am working with children, I need advice from other children about the best way to do this.

You will be part of a group of ten children, which form the Student Council for this term. There will be 3-4 meetings of this group, in the school, at times that suit over three weeks at first and then one more meeting once all the results have been collected.



I will record our discussion so that I can listen to it later when I am putting all your ideas together. Nobody will know who you are and what you say will be used only for this study. If you decide that you do not want to take part, you can pull out at any time without saying why.

This kind of activity is used to learn new information. It will aim to help all children feel included in school. It will also aim to help teachers and parents learn more about how children feel about their school.

Your help would be a huge help to me. If you have any other questions, you can ask me at any time.

Ms. Stynes

Children's assent form (CRAG)

Title of Project: The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools.

You do not have to take part in this study. If you agree to take part, but at a later stage do not want to, you can change your mind.

Please answer *all* of the following (tick the appropriate box):



I have read and understood the sheet with all the information. ☐ ☐

I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for. ☐ ☐

I understand what is involved, and what is good and bad about the study. ☐ ☐

I know that I do not have to participate and that I can ☐ ☐

pull out from the project at any stage without giving any reason.

I know that no one reading the results will know who I am.

☐ ☐

I have read the information above. I have talked to my parents about the discussion group and I want to take part in this research study.

Signature of Child:

Date:

Signature of Researcher:

Date:

Appendix V: Children's Information and Assent

Form (Focus Group)

Dear _____,

My name is Rosemarie Stynes and I am a Doctorate in Education student in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. As part of my study, I am trying to find out what makes school a happy place where everyone feels included.

As part of my research, I will have a group discussion with 5 children. I will ask you some questions about your school. I will also ask you questions about how you learn best and how you think children can feel part of school. If you would like to take part, there will be a meeting with you in the school. Our discussion will last about 30-40 minutes. All the questions will be asked to the group and if you do not want to answer you do not have to. It is not scary and will be just like having a little chat. We will practice beforehand.



I will record our discussion so that I can listen to it later when I am putting all your ideas together. Nobody will know who you are and what you say will be used only for this study. If you decide that you

do not want to take part, you can pull out at any time without saying why.

I will also be asking you to complete a piece of artwork in your group.

This kind of activity is used to learn new information. It will aim to help all children feel included in school. It will also aim to help teachers and parents learn more about how children feel about their school.

Your help would be a huge help to me.

If you have any other questions, you can ask me at any time.

Rosemarie

Children's consent form

Title of Project: The opportunities and challenges of inclusive education as reflected in a sample of Irish primary schools.

You do not have to take part in this study. If you agree to take part, but at a later stage do not want to, you can change your mind.

Please answer *all* of the following (tick the appropriate box):



I have read and understood the sheet with all the information. ☐ ☐

I understand what the project is about, and what the results
will be used for. ☐ ☐

I understand what is involved, and what is good and bad about
the study. ☐ ☐

I know that I do not have to participate and that I can
pull out from the project at any stage without giving any reason. ☐ ☐

I know that no one reading the results will know who I am. ☐ ☐

**I have read the information above. I have talked to my parents about the
discussion group and I want to take part in this research study.**

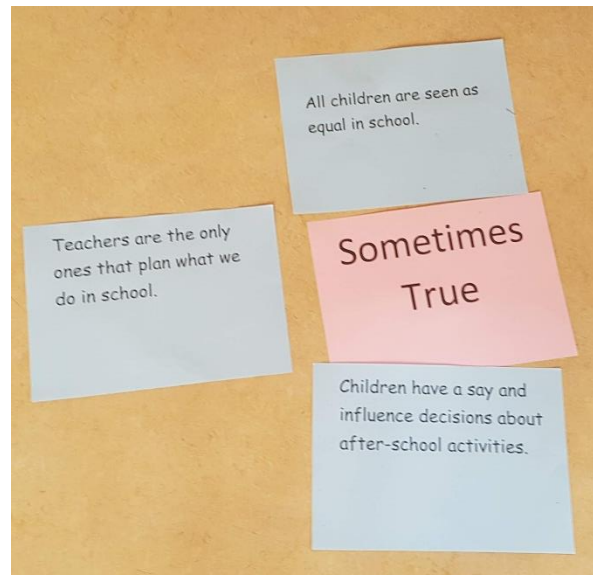
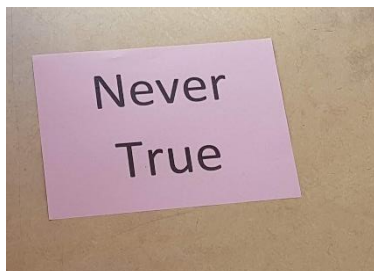
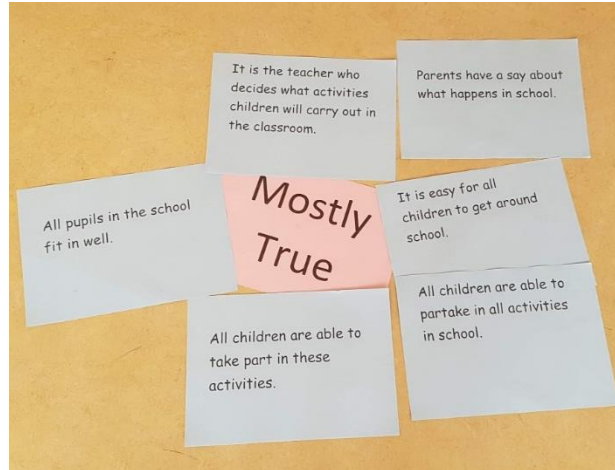
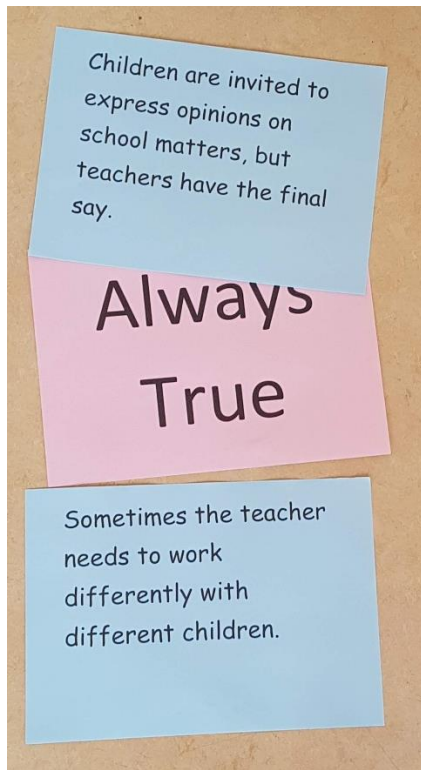
Signature of Child: _____

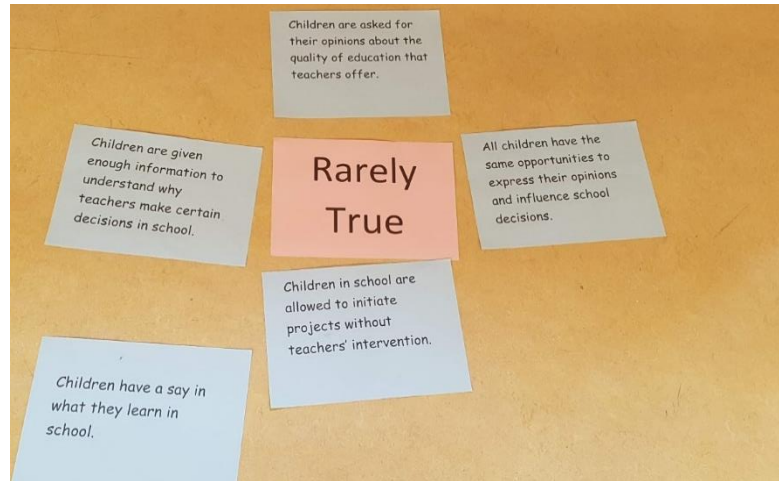
Date: _____

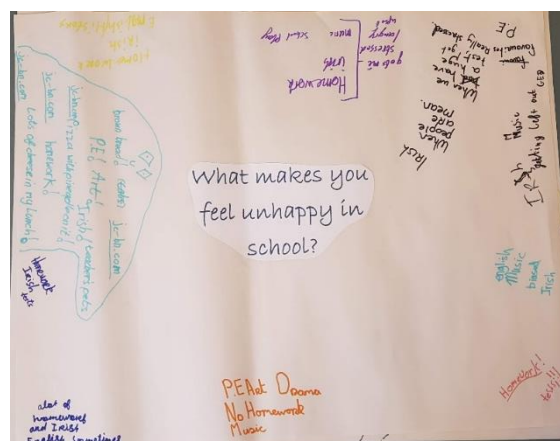
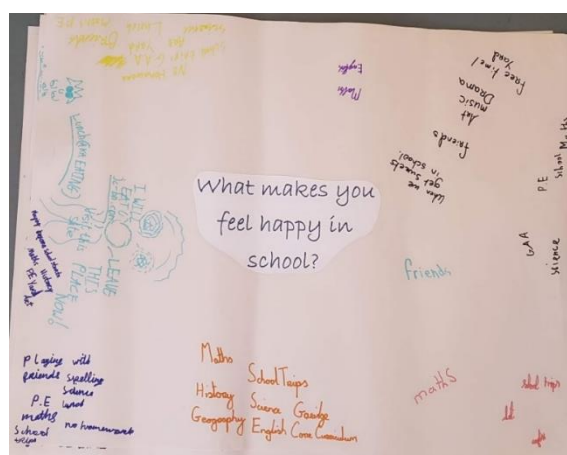
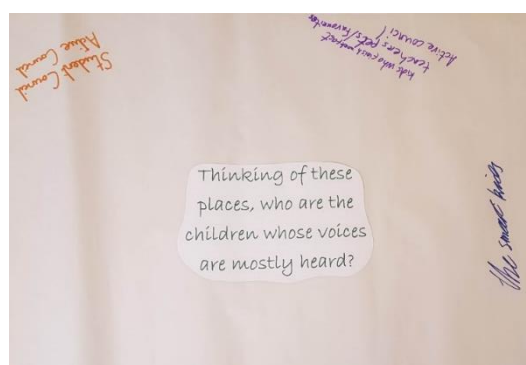
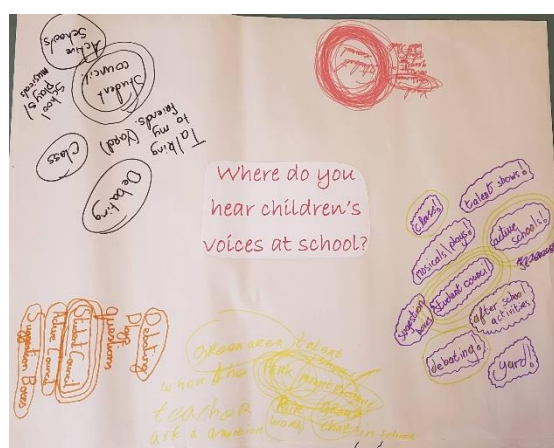
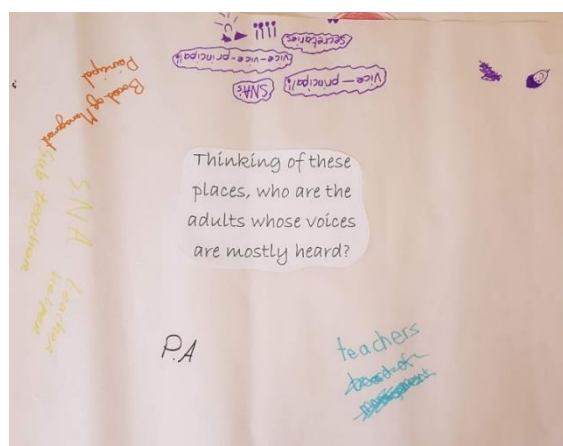
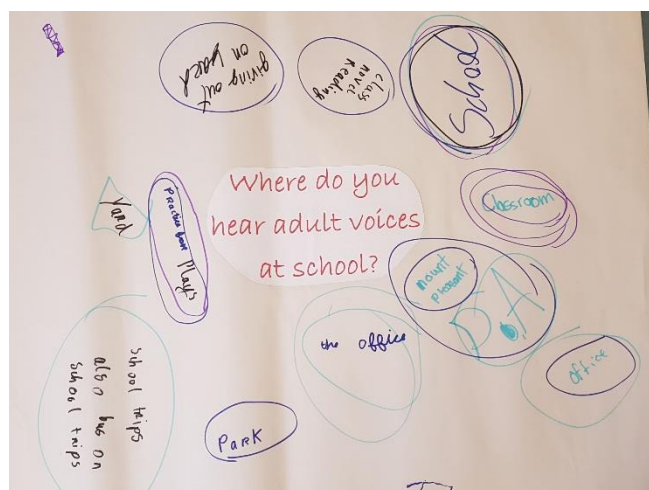
Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix W: Sample CRAG Feedback







Appendix X: My Thoughts About School Checklist



My Thoughts about School Checklist

My Thoughts About School...



NAME	CLASS	DATE
The things I like best at school are:		
The things I don't like about school are:		
The things that I am good at are:		
The things I find hard are:		
I am happy in class when:		
I am happy during break and lunch times when:		
My friends are:		
I need help with:		
Teachers in school can help me by:		
My teacher would describe me as:		
My parents would describe me as:		
My parents would describe me as:		

The following questions can be asked if children have an emotional and behavioural difficulty in school.

Adults I get on best with in school are:
I get into trouble in school when:
The things I do that make my teacher feel unhappy are:
The things my teacher does that make me feel unhappy are:
I make my teacher happy when:
The things my teacher does that make me feel happy are:
The class rules are:
If someone breaks the rules:
Rewards I like best are:
The things that I need to change are: