

**Curriculum, Accreditation and
Transition Pathways;
Pupils with Intellectual Disability in
Special Schools (Ireland)**

Doctorate in Education (D.Ed.)

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List of Acronyms

AfA	Achievement for All (UK)
AHEAD	Association for Higher Education Access & Disability
ASDAN	Award Scheme Development & Accreditation Network
CAO	Central Application Office
DES	Department of Education & Skills
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment DfE, 2001
DSP	Department of Social Protection
EADSNE	European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs in Inclusive Education
ETB	Education & Training Board
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Education Needs
EU	European Union
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council (now QQI)
GLD	General Learning Difficulties
GOI	Government of Ireland
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
HSE	Health Service Executive
ID	Intellectual Disabilities
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1997 (US)
IEP	Individual Education Plan
INDECON	Independent Economic Report Research Organisation
JCL1, 2, 3	Junior Cycle Level 1, 2, 3
JCSP	Junior Certificate Schools Programme
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LC	Leaving Certificate?
LCE	Leaving Certificate Established

LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
MGLD	Mild General Learning Disabilities
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum & Assessment
NCLB	No Child Left Behind Act, 2002 (US)
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDA	National Disability Authority
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NLN	National Learning Network
NTLS2	National Longitudinal Transition Study-2
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PLU	Priority Learning Unit
PPP	Personal Pupil Plan
PCESE	President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (US)
QQI	Quality & Qualifications Ireland (formerly FETAC)
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SEN	Special Education Needs
SEND	Special Education Needs & Disabilities (UK)
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
SESS	Special Education Support Service
SSWG	Special Schools Working Group (UK)
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF

United Nations Children's Fund

VEC

Vocational Education Committee

Summary

The focus of this study was to explore what curriculum is available for students with ID, at Senior Cycle, in special schools in Ireland? Secondly, what are the accreditation outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland? And thirdly, what are the transition pathways available to students with intellectual disabilities post school? The key themes of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways are interlinked and provide a picture of the educational outcomes for students with ID and the reality of policy and practice on the ground in special schools. This study aimed to address the dearth of research which currently prevails in the area of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with ID attending special schools in Ireland.

The cohort of this research were students with mild ID, in Senior Cycle, attending special schools in Ireland. Due to legislative changes, such as the EPSEN (2004), parental advocacy and international developments since the 1990's including the UNCRPD (2007), the policy of inclusive education has shaped the landscape for special education in Ireland. However, significant gaps remain, in existing Irish education policy, regarding curricular programmes and accreditation pathways in which students with ID can engage at Senior Cycle and in the transition pathways available to students with ID post school.

The research methodology was established around Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986, 1999, 2005) ecology system, which provided a space for elements of the research questions to inform policy and practice. Bronfenbrenner's ecology system highlights the interconnections between agencies who have influence on and are responsible for the child. The participation and inclusion of the voice of all stakeholders formed a significant aspect of the design and methodology of the research. All special schools in Ireland catering for students with ID were invited to participate in this research through a nationwide questionnaire (Phase One, n=77). Student (n=40) and parent (n=39) voice was captured through questionnaires in Phase Two and in-depth analysis of the key themes were

explored through case study in two special schools delivering senior cycle programmes.

The findings of this research indicate that the policy, promoted by the Department of Education of providing and developing an inclusive education system for all students and providing equal opportunities for engagement and participation for all students in special schools, can pose a significant challenge in practice for the Irish education system. This research suggests that special schools operate curriculum and accreditation programmes similar to mainstream schools. However, in practice these programmes are diluted and are implemented with degrees of modification including age of students completing programmes, range of curriculum offered, modified choice of subjects, varying degrees of access to specialized teachers, lack of progression curriculum to build on previous accreditation and lack of specialised guidance counsellors' support to assist with clear transition pathways and options post school. This research would suggest that there exists inequality of education provision for students with ID in special schools in comparison to mainstream education provision. Research findings indicated that most special schools offer a Senior Cycle programme for their students, which focuses on Junior Cycle Levels 2 and 3 and QQI Level 3 curricula and accreditation programmes.

The majority of students in this research transitioned to a HSE training programme and the subject choice curriculum or accreditation programmes, with which students engaged, rarely impacted on the post career trajectory of students. This research identified the need for a broadening of the curriculum, to include greater availability of programmes with a variety of accreditation pathways, moving more towards portfolio-based programmes and away from end of year final examinations. The lack of choice and options available post school, the lack of coherent transition pathways, the lack of targeted IEP planning for transition and the lack of Guidance Counsellors in special schools are hurdles which students with ID and their parents must contend with when trying to negotiate the challenging decision of post school transition pathways. The findings from this

research suggest that the policy of equal rights for all students in education may not be seen in practice for students with ID in special schools in Ireland. The findings of this research build upon previous research, and suggests a possible shift in existing curricular provision, educational support resources and accreditation programmes which could deliver a more improved, inclusive, balanced educational provision for students with ID in special schools in Ireland. This new knowledge may lead to more opportunities and choices for students with ID as they transition post school.

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Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

The landscape of special education provision in Ireland has seen dramatic shifts over the past several decades. The aim and objective of this research was to explore the curriculum and accreditation programmes students with intellectual disabilities (ID) engage with and participate in at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland and to examine the transition pathways available to students when they leave post primary education. The target population of this research were students with ID in Senior Cycle in post primary education in Irish special schools. The following chapter provides an overview of the research carried out. This chapter is divided into the following sections: (1) Rationale for Research (2) Research Aims and Objectives (3) Thesis Terminology (4) Research Cohort (5) The Researcher. The following section will provide an overview of the research and a breakdown of each chapter. Finally this chapter will conclude with outlining the contribution this study has made to the acquisition of new knowledge in this specialised field of education.

1.2 Rationale for Research

The consultation process with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009) flagged a gap in curriculum, assessment and certification provision at the Junior Cycle level for students within the mild to moderate range of general learning disabilities (Douglas et al. 2014). The National Council for Special Education (2006) highlighted the dilemma in describing and developing an education for those with special educational needs (SEN) that is strongly linked to the curriculum, which produces meaningful outcomes and which delivers benefits to those with SEN which are not separate from, nor devalued in any way relative to those available to their peers. Legislative and policy changes in the area of special education have served as the foundation for the drive towards inclusion and focused attention on the issue of equality and entitlement for students with SEN (NCCA, 2009). A major concern for inclusive education policy has been that

children's rights were compromised by special education which was segregated from their developing peers and the mainstream education curriculum and educational practices (Lindsay, 2007). The existing curriculum was deemed not fully appropriate by the NCCA for this group of students who needed greater support in personal, social, and vocational development. Cosgrove et al. (2014) in their analysis of the '*Growing up in Ireland Study*' reported that there was only limited evidence available which relates to the engagement, progress, and outcomes for pupils with SEN. In mainstream post-primary schools and in special schools all students can engage in the Junior and Senior Cycle programmes, although not universally available, but there is no identified automatic system for disaggregating results for students with SEN (Douglas et al. 2014). O'Mara et al. (2012) highlight the difficulty in ascertaining participation levels of students with SEN in the different types of certification options. There is evidence, however, of much information being collated at class and school level (Cosgrove et al, 2014). O'Mara et al. (2012) identified a major gap in the evidence from post-primary curriculum design/development and access to it for students with SEN. Robust studies that synthesize what is already known and evaluate the different methods and strategies for improving curriculum and access to it would be extremely useful for the international audience of educators (O'Mara et al. 2012).

This research seeks to identify the curriculum and accreditation programmes available to students with ID at Senior Cycle in Irish special schools. The NCSE (2006) recommended the need for further empirical research on pupil outcomes in the Irish context as the educational outcomes for these students with special educational needs (SEN) are not systematically reported or tracked in Ireland. Cosgrove et al. (2014) stated that there is no systematic information, in the Irish context, on the levels and types of progress (academic and non-academic) made by children with special educational needs. It is likely that teachers would find this information valuable in allowing them to adjust teaching and learning of individual children, as well as communicating with parents about their child's progress and how best to support their learning.

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

This research aims to address key questions in relation to curriculum, accreditation, and transition pathways for young people with ID in Irish special schools. The core research aims were reviewed under the following themes:

1. Curriculum Programmes
2. Accreditation Programmes
3. Transition Pathways

Similar themes were identified as core issues in Project Iris – Inclusive Research in Irish School (Rose et al. 2015) and the authors helped to establish a focus through which the research design was constructed. A review of pertinent Irish and International literature will inform the three core themes and will shape the framework for this research. The acquisition of new knowledge in this specialized field of education provision in Ireland is relevant and will help to fill a gap in the existing knowledge available regarding students with ID attending special schools in Ireland. The research will outline what curriculum and accreditation programmes students with ID engage and participate in at Senior Cycle and the transition pathways for students with ID after they leave post primary education.

1.4 Thesis Terminology

The terminology used to classify students with intellectual disabilities was complex. European Union countries do not have an agreed list of categories of special educational needs (SEN) (OECD, 2020). This research was concerned with investigating students with ID, which is a specific group within special educational needs classification. Throughout the comprehensive review of the literature it became very apparent that there is no one agreed definition of special educational needs (SEN) or intellectual disabilities (ID). Depending on the reports, the author and the country terms are used interchangeably. The NCSE (2014) define a general learning disability (GLD) as children who find it more difficult to learn, understand and do things than other children of the same age. A general learning disability can range from borderline mild, moderate, to severe/profound and this term is sometimes used in official government policies.

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) defines a special educational need as arising from physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability. The term intellectual disability refers to students who have a significant below average general intellectual functioning (NCSE, 2014). All these varying terms incorporate similar student profiles and cross similar boundaries. For the purposes of this research the term intellectual disability (ID) is used. This term refers to students who have a mild or moderate general learning disability. Students who attend special school must have a report from an educational psychologist stating that the student has been diagnosed with a mild or moderate learning disability. This research recognises that students with ID may have multiple disabilities in addition to a general learning disability. For the purposes of this research, the author will use whatever term is being referred to in the literature. The primary focus of this research is post primary senior cycle students with ID attending special schools in Ireland.

1.5 Research Cohort

This research focused on the curriculum and accreditation programmes which are available in special schools only. The research acknowledges that students with ID attend post primary mainstream schools which may provide different opportunities, programmes, supports and resources for those students. However, the focus of this research was to provide an overview of what curriculum and accreditation pathways students with ID could participate and engage with in special schools in Ireland.

The Department of Education Special School List 2017 (CSO, 2017) formed the framework for the data collection in this research. The Special School List (DES, 2017) identified 137 schools which provides education to cater for students with a wide variety of disabilities. These special schools include providing education for students with mild, moderate and severe general learning disabilities (GLD), autism, physical disabilities, schools for the deaf, schools for the blind, travellers' schools, rehabilitation units, high support units, youth psychiatric units, Irish

speaking child education and development education settings schools, students of pre-primary or primary age, hospital schools, schools for emotional behavioural disorders and early school leavers. This research was focused on special schools catering for students with intellectual disabilities (ID). The National Association of Boards of Management for Special Education (NABMSE) assisted in categorising the 137 special schools listed by the Department of Education and Skills (2017). A total of 77 special schools were viewed as pertinent to the research as they were schools catering for students with ID in post-primary education.

1.6 The Researcher

Clarke and Braun (2013) recognise that researchers bring their subjectivity, their views and perspectives, their frameworks for making sense of the world, their politics and their passions into the research process. This is seen as a strength rather than a weakness (Clarke and Braun, 2013). Finlay (2002) discusses the importance of reflexivity, which involves critical reflection on the research process and on one's own role as researcher. It was vital to identify the author's position within the research. The author was aware of positionality throughout the research. The author of this research brings her own unique perspectives to this study. These include the perspective of a teacher, a past student, a parent and an academic researcher.

The author is a teacher with 26 years' experience. The majority of this teaching has been carried out in the area of special education. The author comes from a place of knowledge of the day-to-day experiences in a special school. The demands of the classroom, the demands from students and parents and from school management provide a valuable perspective for the research. The research design focused on capturing valuable insightful evidence from all stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents and school management in special schools. Being aware of the unique classroom environment and the student cohort enabled the researcher to develop a trusting and meaningful relationship with these stakeholders which proved valuable when it came to getting their feedback.

As a past student in mainstream education, the researcher was aware of the demands of curriculum programmes, the stress and expectations of accreditation programmes and the overwhelming choice of avenues to pursue after post primary education. These choices and opportunities were afforded to the author by right, by the school she attended and by the resources and supports available in her mainstream school. However, these experiences are often not the case for students with ID attending special schools. Their right to education is similar but compromised and the opportunities not as many as those available to mainstream students in general.

As a parent, the author is aware of the worries, expectations, stress and aspirations parents have for their children in school. These concerns are exacerbated when children have special educational needs and attend a special school. Concerns are also heightened when children are at an age where they are leaving post primary education and becoming young adults.

Finally, as someone undertaking an academic study, the author needed to be aware of positionality to assess what they were bringing to the study. It was important and necessary to be able to reflect and evaluate through the different positions lens that the author holds. The author was a commentator during this process and although the author had a number of roles, it was necessary to be objective, aware of bias to allow the evidence and findings to reveal themselves. The author could not shape the data. Clarke and Braun (2013) encourage the researcher to develop a double-consciousness or an analytic 'eye' or 'ear' to ensure the researcher listens intently and critically reflects on what is said. This helps produce much better, more complex, richer data.

The author of this research was a teacher in a special school and brought a unique perspective to the research. Knowledge produced from the research reflects both the subjective experiences of the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2013).

It was important that the author was keenly aware of the potential bias to the research. It was vital during the research to critically reflect on one's own role in the research and to be aware of the position the author held, the personal experiences of the author and the worldview of the author. By being aware of these potentially influential factors the author was in a position to control them and conscious of the biases, values and experiences the author brings to the research. Based on some reflections the authors became more aware of what inclusion means for a student and their family who are traditionally and historically on the outer layers of the education system. The author had to reflect and review their own personal experiences of education and begin to view the education system through the lens of a student with ID and their family and their family and the opportunity and practices which exist for them in today's classrooms across the country.

1.7 Research Overview

This research explored, highlighted, and reflected on the scope and depth of the existing knowledge in the area of special education provision in Ireland and this was central to the research questions concerning curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland. The cohort of this research were students with mild ID in senior cycle attending special schools in Ireland. The research outlines the rationale for the research and the origins of the research questions, the literature review, the design of the research methodology, data analysis, discussion of the findings and conclusion. This study aimed to address the shortage of research that currently prevails in the area of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with ID attending special schools in Ireland. This research is divided into six chapters.

1.7.1 Chapter 1 - Rationale for Research

Chapter 1 details the rationale, aims and objectives for this study and posed the research questions which provided the framework for the entire research. The cohort of this research were students with ID in Senior Cycle attending special

schools in Ireland. The focus of this research was to explore the curriculum that students with ID can engage with, the accreditation outcomes for students with ID and the academic transition pathways available to students with ID upon completing their post-primary education. These three core themes established the framework for the study. Feedback from the consultation process of the NCCA (2009) guidelines flagged a gap in curriculum, assessment and certification provision at Junior Cycle for students within the mild to moderate range of general learning disabilities (Douglas et al. 2014). O'Mara et al. (2012) identified a major gap in the knowledge of post-primary curriculum design/development for students with intellectual disabilities. Synthesizing and evaluating what is already known about curriculum, accreditation and post schools transition pathways was seen as extremely useful and beneficial for informing how special schools define the education provision offered to their students. This research aimed to provide new data and knowledge in this specialized area and to begin to fill the gap in international literature in this specific educational area and add to the somewhat sparse knowledge of academic outcomes, accreditation programmes and transition pathways available for students with ID in special schools in Ireland.

1.7.2 Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Chapter 2 provides the context for the rationale behind the key research questions and a review of the current literature in the area of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with ID attending special schools in Ireland. The NCSE (2019) policy advice identified a changed educational landscape in special schools and classes over the previous decade. According to the NCSE (2019) significant changes from 2011 to 2019 have included increased government spending (by 7.5%), additional teaching posts (increased by 46%) and SNA allocation (increased by 51%), expanded provision of special classes (increased by 196%), increased numbers of students in special classes (155%), greater number of special schools (increased by 13%) and student enrolment (increased by 15%). Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework which formed the structure and design of this research. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986, 1999, 2005) ecology system is discussed and debated. The concept of inclusion, inclusive policies, inclusive education, and inclusive and special education are explored and analysed. Based on the themes of curriculum, accreditation, and transition pathways for students with ID in special schools, the literature review provided a wider and broader context of Irish educational policy in the area of special education and inclusive education. Chapter 2 outlined a review of the curricular programmes students with ID can participate in, the accreditation pathways they can engaged with at Senior Cycle in special schools and the transition pathways available to students with ID post school were examined and the current practices and experiences were explored. The three themes were investigated in the context of inclusion and the current relevant national and international research in the field of special education.

1.7.3 Chapter 3 - Research Design

Chapter 3 focused on exploring the design of the research methodology used to capture the data for this study. The study provided a way for principals, senior teachers, students and parents to voice their opinions and experience of special schools and existing practices currently employed. This is a particular strength of the research as, through the research design, the research allows a glimpse into

the daily classroom in terms of curriculum and accreditation programmes available in special schools. The participation and inclusion of the voice of key stakeholders including students, parents, principals and senior teachers, formed a significant aspect of design of the research. A variety of data gathering methods were used in this research including questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and case studies. By using a variety of data collection instruments triangulation was achieved. The research methodology was divided into three phases. Phase One involved the construction of a nationwide questionnaire which was distributed to principals/senior teachers of all schools on the Department of Education Special School List 2017. Phase Two focused on the student questionnaire and the parent questionnaire. Phase Three of the research design involved a case study of two special schools catering for students with intellectual disabilities in Ireland. The case study involved semi-structured interviews with principal and a senior cycle teacher and focus group semi-structured interviews with a sample of students in the senior cycle of their post primary special school. The culture within special schools was investigated to establish if schools encourage the participation levels of students with ID to achieve accreditation and whether all students are encouraged by their school to have high aspirations for their learning.

Ethical considerations were fundamental to the framework of the research design. The aim of the methodology was to generate new knowledge within an ethical research design based around care for the students with ID in special schools and establishing a relationship to 'do no harm' within the research. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that ethical issues range from the projects worthiness, your own competencies, informed consent, anticipated benefits and cost to those including harm and risk, your relationship with respondents, privacy/confidentiality/anonymity, intervention and finally research quality, data ownership and use of results. Ethical considerations of the research were given the utmost importance. They were considered at all stages of the research design. The welfare of the participants was always the priority of the research. Creswell (2009) emphasises the need not to put participants at risk and to respect vulnerable populations. The cohorts for this research were students with ID in their final year of post primary education, which are considered a vulnerable group.

The researcher was cognisant of this and informed consent for all participants was a prerequisite before any research commenced. The consent form acknowledged the participants right to withdraw from the research at any time during data collection without need for explanation and without prejudice.

1.7.4 Chapter 4 - Data Analysis

The findings from the research are presented in Chapter 4. A thematic approach was applied to the findings which produced some excellent insight into the three key research questions. The findings, explored the demographic and school context of special schools which were participating in the study. An in-depth investigation of the curriculum and accreditation programmes students with ID engaged with in special schools was explored. In addition, the research looked at the possible curriculum restrictions which occurred in special schools and whether students experienced barriers to participation in accreditation and curriculum programmes. The findings of the research also investigated the academic culture which existed with special schools and the aspirations of students. The impact of subject choice on post school transition options and the availability of real choices were evaluated. Finally, the findings focused on gathering data on the transition pathways available to students post schools and the decision making process regarding transition pathways. The research design was flexible with the objective of including the voices of students, parents, principals and senior teachers. These voices were invaluable and provided an insight and a greater authenticity to the findings.

1.7.5 Chapter 5 - Discussion

Chapter 5 provides a detailed discussion of the findings from the research. The discussion aims to reconcile the new knowledge from the research findings with existing literature in this specialized area of education in Ireland. Many findings of this research concur with existing international literature and the outcomes of this research has added to the body of knowledge in this area. A thematic approach was used in Chapter 5 to analyse the findings. This research identified the need

for a broadening of the curriculum to include greater availability of programmes with a variety of accreditation pathways, moving more towards portfolio-based programmes and away from end of year final examinations. The discussion in Chapter 5 identified the need for a balance between exam focused national post primary curriculum and a flexibility which focuses, instead, on student needs and ability. The lack of choice and options available post school, the lack of a coherent transition pathways, the lack of targeted IEP planning for transition and the lack of Guidance Counsellors in special schools are hurdles which students with ID and their parents must contend with when trying to negotiate the challenging decision of post school transition pathways.

1.7.6 Chapter 6 - Conclusion

Chapter 6 provides an overview of the entire research and reflects upon this new knowledge in respect of existing policy and practice. It explores how this new knowledge builds upon previous research and suggests a possible shift in existing curricular provision, educational support resources and accreditation programmes which could deliver a more improved, inclusive, balanced educational provision for students with ID in special schools in Ireland. This new knowledge may lead to more opportunities and choices for students with ID as they search for transition pathways post school. This chapter also reflects upon this new knowledge in terms of policy and practice in relation to curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with ID. It also reflects on the research in its entirety with emphasis on the new knowledge acquired from the findings of this study. In order to deliver a balanced critique of the findings reported in this research, the strengths and limitations of the research are also discussed. The findings from the research will be positioned within current and prevailing literature, theory, and in the broader context of the provision for policy and practice for special schools in Ireland.

1.8 Contribution to the Acquisition of New Knowledge

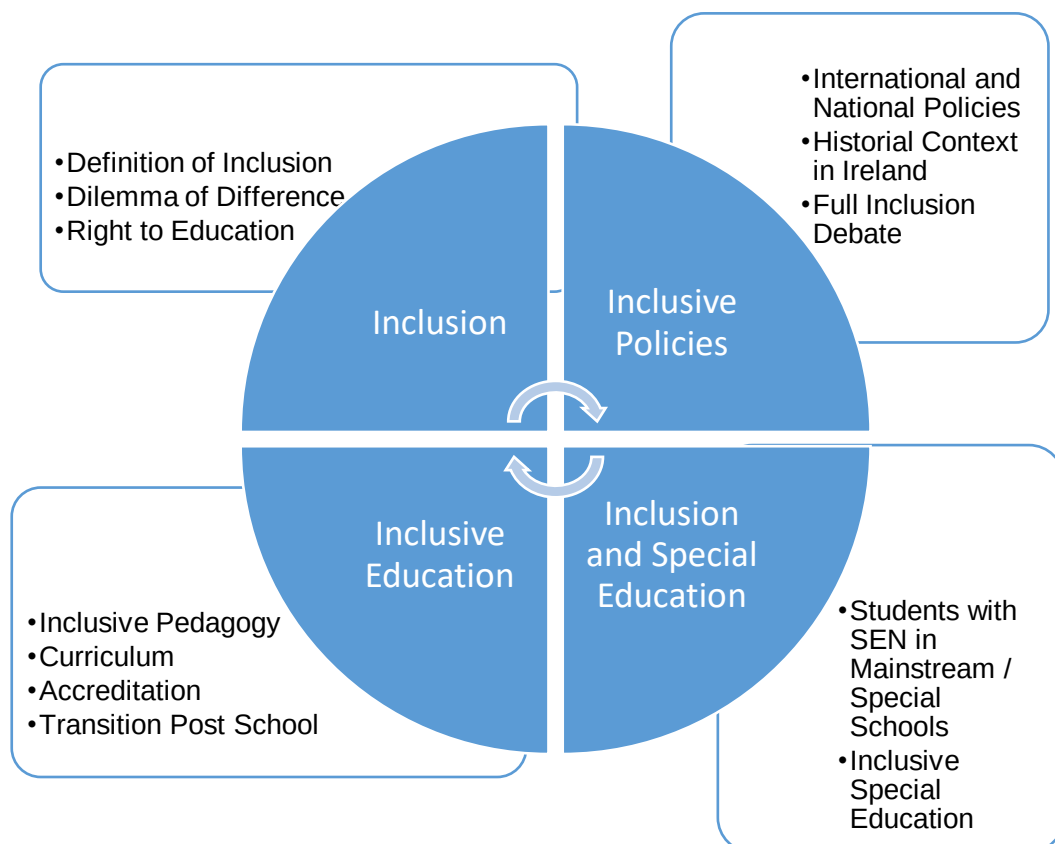
Many findings in this research are in agreement with national and international research in the field of the provision of education for students with ID in special schools. The contribution this study makes to the existing field of knowledge is that it provides rich data on the practices which are occurring in special schools in Ireland. This research provides an overview of what is happening in the classroom and highlights the experiences students have in school of curriculum and the accreditation programmes students with ID can participate in and engage with in special schools. The findings from this research provides detailed and integrated overview of the transition pathways student with ID avail of post school. In addition, the study has explored the real-life options available to students when they leave their post primary education and provides a detailed overview of the transition pathways students with ID transition to when they leave schools. It is hoped that the design of this research and the resultant findings can make a meaningful contribution to the debate on special education provision. This new knowledge provides a more transparent, detailed overview on the provision of education in special schools and can help to inform practice and future policy within the Irish education system.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the current landscape special education holds today within the education system. To fully understand the present situation special education finds itself in today, it is necessary to take a broader view of educating students with intellectual disabilities in Ireland and delve into the inclusion debate. The literature review will identify, explore and contextualise the current debates surrounding special education and the policies and good practice which are relevant to educating students with intellectual disabilities. Figure 1 outlines the key themes which will be explored in this chapter and how they provide a context to the current debates in the special education field.

Figure 1: Outline of Literature Review



Inclusive education is a political aspiration and an educational strategy (Slee et al. 2019). The current focus of debates surrounding special education centres on inclusive education, social justice, the rights of people with disabilities and how special education and inclusion have perpetuated an education system which actually facilitates exclusion (Florian et al. 2017). The complex and undefined definition of inclusion will be outlined and the contextual background to inclusion will be investigated by considering a broader educational, social and historical framework of inclusion both internationally and nationally in Ireland. The international and national policies which have developed over the past three decades regarding educating students with disabilities / special educational needs / intellectual difficulties will be explored. A parallel system of special needs education has the challenge of providing an equitable education for diverse groups of learners (Florian, 2019). This chapter will explore how inclusion and special educational needs have become interchangeable terms and how, ironically, special educational provision may contribute towards excluding students for the education system. This research is focused specifically on students with intellectual disabilities in special schools. This chapter will investigate the educational options students with intellectual disabilities have available to them in special schools and whether the education provision in Ireland is equitable and inclusive to all learners.

2.2 Terminology

This research is focused on students with special educational needs / intellectual disabilities. Florian (2019) highlights how different terminology is used in different national contexts. It is helpful to use Florian's (2019) guide as a definition. Florian (2019) outlines how a child or young person is commonly considered to have 'special needs' if they have a learning difficulty and / or a disability that requires additional supports that is different to what is ordinarily available to others of similar age. Following a review of international and national literature, there are various definitions of the term learning difficulty and intellectual disability. However all terms refers to some kind of barrier to learning which can sometimes lead to the categorisation of special needs. The concept of special needs is broad and can

seem confusing and many countries use categorical descriptions of disability to determine eligibility for special needs education (Florian, 2019).

Within the cohort of special educational needs (SEN) is a specific group of students with intellectual disabilities (ID) which this research is concerned with investigating. Rix et al. (2013) reported that no two countries shared a view about who needs support, the nature of the support provided or the nature of an appropriate curriculum. No two countries had the same mechanism for assessment, resource distribution, in-class supports or support service provision (Rix et al. 2013). The lack of explicit education relating to inclusion and special educational needs was evident across all countries (Rix et al. 2013). There is no universal agreement as to how students with special educational needs (SEN) should be referred to, how they should be defined and to what, if any, categories they should be classified. Also, these differences interact to determine differences in the structure and function of special education services to students and how they are funded (Mitchell, 2010). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2005) obtained agreement across countries to re-allocate their national categories into three types for the purpose of obtaining data for international comparisons. Table 1 outlines these three categories: Category A – Disabilities: Category B – Difficulties: Category C – Disadvantage.

Table 1: OECD – Categories of Special Educational Needs

Category A: Disabilities	Students with disabilities or impairments viewed in medical terms as organic disorders attributed to organic pathologies (e.g. in relation to sensory, motor or neurological defects).
Category B: Difficulties	Students with behavioural or emotional disorders, or specific difficulties with learning
Category C: Disadvantages	Students with disadvantages arising primarily from socio-economic, cultural and/or linguistic factors

The OECD (2005) noted that most countries found it easiest to contribute data in relation to Category A (Disabilities) while many found it less easy to contribute data in relation to Categories B (Difficulties) and C (Disadvantage) (OECD, 2005).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

2.3.1 Introduction

The literature review focuses on providing an analytical review of the relevant current literature for this research. For this purpose it is necessary and appropriate to provide a theoretical framework in which to guide and structure the research and its findings. All quality and confident research needs to create a context to help develop and understand the topics of concern of the research and to place the evolving research questions within a theoretical framework. Different theories highlight and emphasise different viewpoints and understandings of the human condition. A theoretical framework provides an approach for organising, synthesising and understanding all the information that needs to be considered in relation to a child within a particular environment (McGuckin and Minton, 1994). Education systems are not machines but socio-cultural systems made up of people and their experiences (Schueika et al. 2022). Implementing a theoretical framework which can capture the developments and influences on students helps construct more robust research. Why a theoretical framework was adopted and the need to provide an analysis of relevant theories will be explored in the next section. This exploration will guide the research and help frame the research questions and research design.

The focus of this research is students with intellectual disabilities attending post primary special schools in Ireland. As humans we do not exist in a vacuum or in isolation. We exist and develop with varying degrees of interaction and engagement between different social environments. Given the social nature of inclusive education, any attempt to study either the construct as a whole, or aspects of it, must consider the relationships between various people and societal systems involved in its creation, from the individuals being 'included' to the national and global contexts within which it is situated (Anderson et al. 2014). Theorists have often been criticised in the past for presenting a decontextualised view of human psychological functioning, one which fails to locate the human being in his or her social, political and historical context (Greene and Moane, 2000), and the important relationship the child has with other people, policies, and systems in their

immediate and wider environment (McGuckin and Minton, 1994). Research on inclusion is inevitably about social justice and such research should be able to capture individual differences and multiple interpretations (Lawson et al. 2006). By recognising the relevance of individual differences within students with intellectual disabilities, it seems imperative that research should avoid approaches that assume a shared understanding of complex concepts (like special educational needs) and an objective understanding of complex phenomena (like inclusion), and leave little room for different perspectives and interpretations (Lawson et al. 2006). It is impossible to attempt to generalise by using large numbers of research participants and standardised measuring instruments in research on populations with special educational needs and disabilities that are small and heterogeneous (Kamenopoulou, 2016).

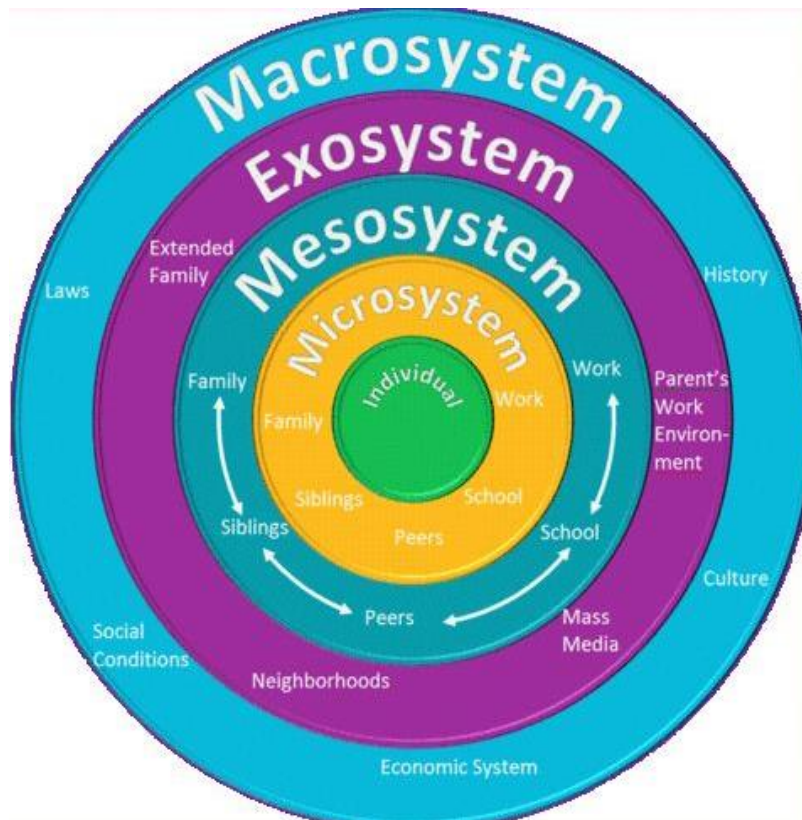
2.3.2 Rationale for Theoretical Framework

In depth consideration was given to the rationale for the conceptual framework which would underpin this entire research design. It was necessary for the conceptual framework of this research to explore the inclusion of student's with intellectual disabilities, in education, in post primary special schools. The importance of the relationship between the child, their development and the environment (ecology) they grow up in cannot be underestimated. It is crucially important and relevant to consider the role of individual differences of students with intellectual disabilities to inclusion research. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical framework was adopted in this research as it pertains that human development depends on the complex interactive processes between numerous systemic or contextual factors. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model helps the researcher to focus on the crucial interplay between the individual and the context in which the individual is embedded (Kamenopoulou, 2016). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model was considered the most appropriate theoretical framework for research on inclusion and students with intellectual disabilities, however, other approaches which were considered will be outlined and challenged in this section.

2.3.4 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986, 1999, 2005) offers a conceptualisation of the child's ecology as a multi-layered set of nested and interconnecting environmental systems, all of which influence the developing child but with varying degrees of directness. Within Bronfenbrenner's ecology models, human development is defined as an evolving conception of the person's ecological environment and their relationship to it. This places the emphasis on a person's changing and subjective understandings and interpretations of different contexts and systems (Kamenopoulou, 2016). Bronfenbrenner's ecology model represented graphically as a series of concentric rings surrounding the developing child. Bronfenbrenner's '*Ecological Systems*' theory, provides a structure to identify and organise the influencing factors that sit within different environments, and to study the relationships and interconnections between them (Anderson et al. 2014). Within Bronfenbrenner's theoretical approach there are five interconnected systems that form the larger ecological model of child development – microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem, which are all wrapped around the individual child (Schuelka et al. 2022). The main advantage of adopting Bronfenbrenner's ecology system as a theoretical framework for this research was the focus on the interaction between factors both internal and external to the individual (Kamenopoulou, 2016). The different members of a system (parents, teachers, schools, government, society) can affect developmental outcomes for the individual. Figure 2 illustrates Bronfenbrenner's ecology system.

Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's Ecology System



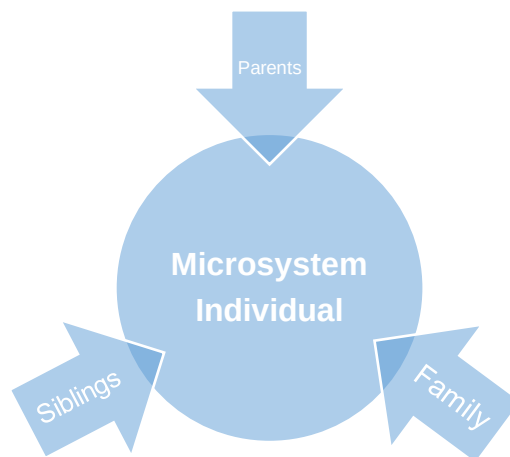
Ref: Diagram cited by McGuckin and Quirke in Conference paper. *Career Guidance Needs to Learn from 'Disability' if it is to Embrace an Uncertain Future*. European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) 'Educational Research (Re) Connecting Communities' University of Glasgow. Glasgow, Scotland, 24th-28th August, 2020

Bronfenbrenner's ecology system consists of four 'nested' environmental systems – microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1989) later extended this to include a fifth layer: the chronosystem. Bronfenbrenner's ecology system allowed for the consideration of factors beyond the immediate settings in which young people were embedded. Thus if adopted for the exploration of inclusion, the ecology systems can capture a multiplicity of factors, and can help explore the influence between individuals and contextual characteristics, which include those of the immediate context or those of contexts such as the macro-system and the exosystem, which the researcher may not be able to directly access (Kamenopoulou, 2016). The following section will explore the Bronfenbrenner's ecology system in detail.

2.3.4.1 The Microsystem

The individual is at the centre of Bronfenbrenner's ecology system and is surrounded by the microsystem. This layer is closest to the individual and consists of child's family – parents and siblings. These individuals have face-to-face, direct interactions with the individual and are very influential on the individual's development. The microsystem has the most immediate and earliest influences on the child. Figure 3 illustrates the influences on the child in the microsystem.

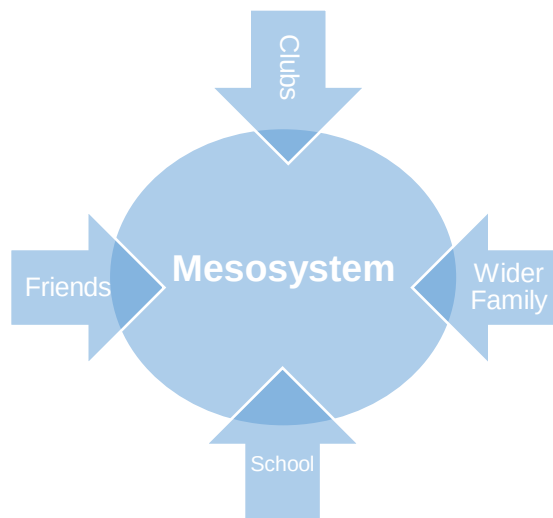
Figure 3: Bronfenbrenner's Microsystem



2.3.4.2 The Mesosystem

The mesosystem is the second layer of Bronfenbrenner's ecology system and shows the relationships between the different variables in the microsystem. These consist of interrelationships among home, school, friends and clubs etc. Figure 4 illustrates the influences on the child in the mesosystem.

Figure 4: Bronfenbrenner's Mesosystem

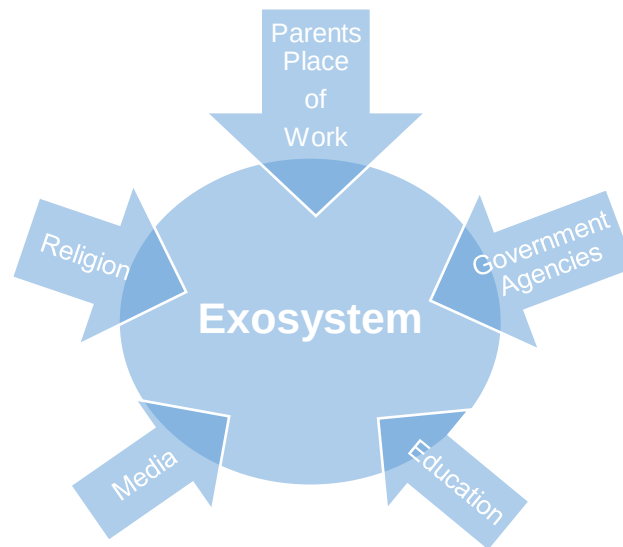


The quality of the relationships between these variables impacts on the development of the individual. For example, if parents value education and have had a positive experience of interacting with teachers and the school, this will effect positively on the development of the individual and their experiences of school. The nature of the relationship between important people and institutions in the child's life is considered to have important implications for the child (Greene and Moane, 2000). The more interconnections and shared goals there are between elements of the microsystem and the mesosystem, the more stable the child's world (Greene and Moane, 2000).

2.3.4.3 The Exosystem

The next layer within the Bronfenbrenner ecology system is the exosystem which represents the experiences of systems in a social setting in which the child is not directly involved, but which has an indirect influence upon the child's life. Figure 5 illustrates the influences on the child's development in the exosystem.

Figure 5: Bronfenbrenner's Exosystem

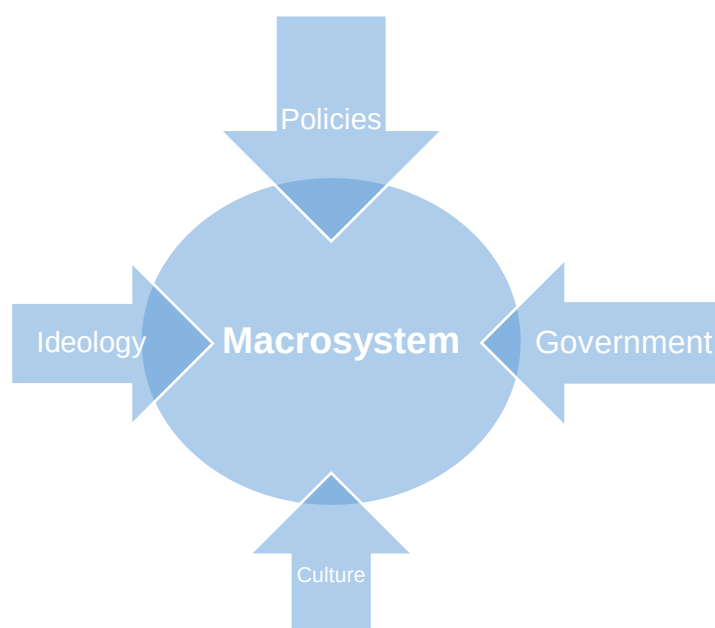


This layer includes the parent's place of work, government agencies, political systems, education, media and religion. The individual does not have any influence on a parents work hours, the school they attend or the education policy a government is implementing. However, these variables influence the development of the individual and the experiences they have. For example, indirect influences on the individual and their education can arise, if due to economic and financial pressures, a parent has to work long hours outside the home, if a school does not have the resources to fund additional educational support for students with intellectual disabilities and if government policy is not progressively implementing an inclusion policy which can be seen on the ground in classrooms. These variables indirectly have an influence on the individual at the exosystem level.

2.3.4.4 The Macrosystem

The fourth layer in Bronfenbrenner's ecology system is the macrosystem. This layer is regarded as the blueprint for interlocking social forces and their interrelationships in shaping human development. Figure 6 illustrates the influences on the child's life.

Figure 6: Bronfenbrenner's Macrosystem



The macrosystem provides the broad ideological and organisational patterns within the other systems - the microsystem, the mesosystem and the exosystem. The macrosystem represents the cultural, attitudinal and ideological contexts in which the child lives. The macrosystem layer is fluid and dynamic and changes over time. For example over the last few decades there has been a change in the way society views children with disabilities. There has been a move away from the traditional medical model of disability, which places the deficit within the individual, and towards a social justice and inclusion model (Frederickson and Cline, 2009). The macrosystem exerts an indirect influence on the individual. For example the ideology of social inclusion and the right to an education is a cultural development beyond the individual but which impacts upon them. Students with intellectual disabilities and their right to an education is seen under the umbrella of social justice and equity for all. This international and national ideological movement of governments towards a social justice model for inclusion and education for all, has an impact on the life and opportunities of students with intellectual disabilities. Analysis of factors which influence inclusion and social justice at the macrosystem provides an important context which influences the individuals development and opportunities in their daily lives in school and with their families within the meso and micro systems.

2.3.4.5 The Chronosystem

In 1989, Bronfenbrenner added a fifth layer to his ecology system called the chronosystem. This final layer represents environmental events which effect the individual over their lives. This layer is dynamic and focuses on the level of influence of events in a child life over time - for example, the influence of a parent's divorce on a child and their development. The effect of a divorce within a family on a child's life is very different on a child who is 10 and on the same child who is 30 years old. Recently, Covid 19 has been an influence on the development of individuals and has had a direct effect on the lives of students. This impact is fluid and its effects will be critically analysed over time by6 academics as to the extent to which Covid 19 has impacted on the lives and education of students with intellectual disabilities.

Bronfenbrenner's ecology system represents some of the most expansive and integrated systems that allows thinking about the development of a child in terms of multiple levels of influence at the same time and over time (McGuckin and Minton, 1994). Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights how 'children live their lives in families, schools and neighbourhoods but the quality of their daily experience is influenced by the political, legal, educational and social welfare systems put in place in their society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p134). These systems reflect the values and views of their society (Greene and Moane, 2000).

2.3.5 Why use Bronfenbrenner as a Theoretical Framework?

Placing the development of children within context has been an important challenge for social researchers. Bronfenbrenner's ecology system presents researchers with the challenge of setting up a multidimensional research design in order to explore multiple systemic factors (Kamenopoulou, 2016). Context is not only social but political, cultural and historical (Green and Moane, 2000). The theoretical framework developed by Bronfenbrenner, who was a constructivist as well as a contextualist, centred on a revolutionary idea to conceptualise human

development as a nested series of influential factors (McGuckin and Minton, 1994). This research considered the most appropriate theoretical framework to structure research on students with intellectual disabilities. Bronfenbrenner was selected as an appropriate and relevant theoretical framework to utilise as it helped to focus on the context of the phenomenon in question which was inclusion. With its focus on the continuous interactions between individual and systemic factors, Bronfenbrenner's ecological system is aligned more with the sociological position of students with special educational needs and less with the psychological position (Barton, 1988). Bronfenbrenner's ecological system helps emphasise the interaction between individual and contextual factors, because it permits analysis of outcomes as a joint function of the environment and the person (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000). The analysis of factors influencing social inclusion pointed to the role of the individual, but at the same time, the context also emerged as important (Kamenopoulou, 2016). This research considers Bronfenbrenner's theoretical approach as the most suitable for the exploration of inclusion in education, because it permits the consideration of multiple interconnected and interdependent factors directly or indirectly related to the individual, which may influence their inclusion (Kamenopoulou, 2016). This research and the implementation of the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner has added to the existing knowledge of conducting research on students with intellectual disabilities which are a distinct cohort within the education system.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system informed the literature review and the research design by firstly, using the guiding framework for the critical review of existing research on inclusion and students with intellectual disabilities attending post primary special schools in Ireland and secondly for the consolidation of findings from previous studies into a coherent summary for review. This research focuses on the experiences of students with intellectual disabilities in post primary special schools in Ireland. The experiences of a student depends upon the context in which they live and go to school (Squires et al. 2016). Bronfenbrenner's model of the child's ecology provides a ready-made framework for examining the ecology of children in Ireland (Greene and Moane, 2000). This research aimed to explore

multiple perspectives and contexts in line with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model which stresses the role of subjectivity and the need to include the perspectives of different people (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

2.3.6 What Other Theoretical Approaches were Considered?

Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework was considered the most appropriate approach to use for this research as it recognises the development of the child within a series of five dynamic and fluid layers of social interactions and experiences. However, other theoretical approaches were considered and challenged for this research. Classical psychological theories of childhood development were investigated for this research, however they rarely pay heed to the environmental context of the child's development (McGuckin and Minton, 1994). Classical theorists like Piaget, neglected the importance of the social world of the child. It is possible that Piaget underestimated childhood cognitive development by focusing solely on cognitive development to the exclusion of the child's social world (McGuckin and Minton, 1994). A core criticism of the early research of classical theories was that experiments were often artificial and removed from real life, thus limiting the validity of conclusions drawn by the theorist (McGuckin and Minton, 2014).

Social ecological theory, developed in the early 1900s by academics at the University of Chicago, recognised that individuals sit within larger societal systems and provided a loose framework to describe and study the factors that sit within these various systems (Anderson et al. 2014). The Social Constructivist model places the individual as part of a social group with interactions within their community. A child's cognitive growth is motivated by and fostered in his or her close personal relationships and as a function of the social transmission of culture which is encoded primarily in language (Greene, 1994). This research wanted to investigate inclusion at the individual level (microsystem) and also at a systemic level (macrosystem) and how ideological and cultural movements in society influence the classroom experiences of students with intellectual disabilities.

The Bildung-Psychology (Spiel et al. 2008) approach was reviewed. This alternative theoretical perspective illustrates how the wider environment of a young person

can be conceptualised and understood in an ecosystem manner (McGuckin and Minton, 2014). The Bildung-Psychology approach centres on a three dimensional model which has a strong focus on life-long learning and is concerned with all educational processes contributing to the development of individuals and conditions and measures which influence these processes. The three dimensions model contains the Bildung career, functional areas and different levels of activity. The Bildung-Psychology approach as a theoretical framework is a complementary approach to the Bronfenbrenner's ecological system, however there have been no previous direct applications of the Bildung-Psychology approach within Ireland (McGuckin and Minton, 2014). Therefore this research favoured implementing Bronfenbrenner's ecological system as traditionally it has previously been used in Irish research.

Bronfenbrenner's ecology system has evolved and developed into the Process – Person - Context - Time (PPCT) model. The development of this theory shows how individual characteristics, in conjunction with aspects of the context, both spatial and temporal, influence what Bronfenbrenner now calls proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Bronfenbrenner emphasized the role played by the person in his or her own development by means of proximal processes (Rosa and Tudge, 2013). Proximal processes involve relationships among people and also relations between people and the objects and symbols with which they come into contact (Rosa and Tudge, 2013). This development and maturity of Bronfenbrenner's model was investigated by this research as a consideration for the theoretical framework. However, Bronfenbrenner's ecology system was seen as the most appropriate theoretical approach to use in an Irish research context. Historically, large scale Irish research projects, such as the Growing Up In Ireland longitudinal study have followed the Bronfenbrenner ecology system and this research deemed it appropriate and justifiable to follow a similar framework.

2.3.7 Why Bronfenbrenner and not another Theoretical Framework?

Bronfenbrenner was seen as a constructivist since he emphasised the need to view the developing person as 'growing, dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures the environment in which it resides (Greene and Moane, 2000, p21). The NCSE (2016) completed a '*Study of the Experiences of Post Primary Students with Special Educational Needs*' which based the experiences of students within the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner and his revolutionary idea of conceptualising human development as an ecology system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1999, 2005). The Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) – National Longitudinal Study of Children Qualitative Study (2011) explores the current status and the development over time of children in Ireland and how they are developing in the current social, economic and cultural environment (Greene and Harris, 2011). The conceptual framework adopted by the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) longitudinal study emphasises children's connectedness to the world in which they live (Greene and Harris, 2011). Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecology system was the key tool in operationalising this perspective. Bronfenbrenner's ecology system highlights the importance of considering the multi-faceted and multi-layered nature of the influences on development over the life course (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1999, 2005). The GUI study embraces the whole-child perspective in approaching the design of their study, and an attempt was made to see each child as a person, not just as an aggregate of variables and outcomes (Greene and Harris, 2011). The National Council for Special Education, Project Iris report (2016) adopted the Bronfenbrenner framework and were mindful in their research of the different layers of the Bronfenbrenner ecology system.

As Bronfenbrenner's model has proved useful for other Irish studies, the researcher felt confident in applying the theory to their research as it was an extremely useful, robust and productive means of organising the framework for the literature review and the research design. This research is focused on capturing the experiences of students with intellectual disabilities and the theoretical

framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecology system locates the child within their environment and focuses on five interconnected environmental systems which influence the child and their development.

2.3.8 Does Bronfenbrenner fit with this Research?

This research regarded Bronfenbrenner's ecology system as the most appropriate theoretical framework to build and construct the literature review and the research design. In this model, different components can be assigned to different levels with each wider level impacting on the inner levels (Squires et al. 2016). The individual experiences of students will be determined by the combination of effects from each of these layers (Squires et al. 2016). This research adopted Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework as it allows the researcher to record the different factors in each level that contribute to the experiences of students with intellectual disabilities in post primary special schools in Ireland.

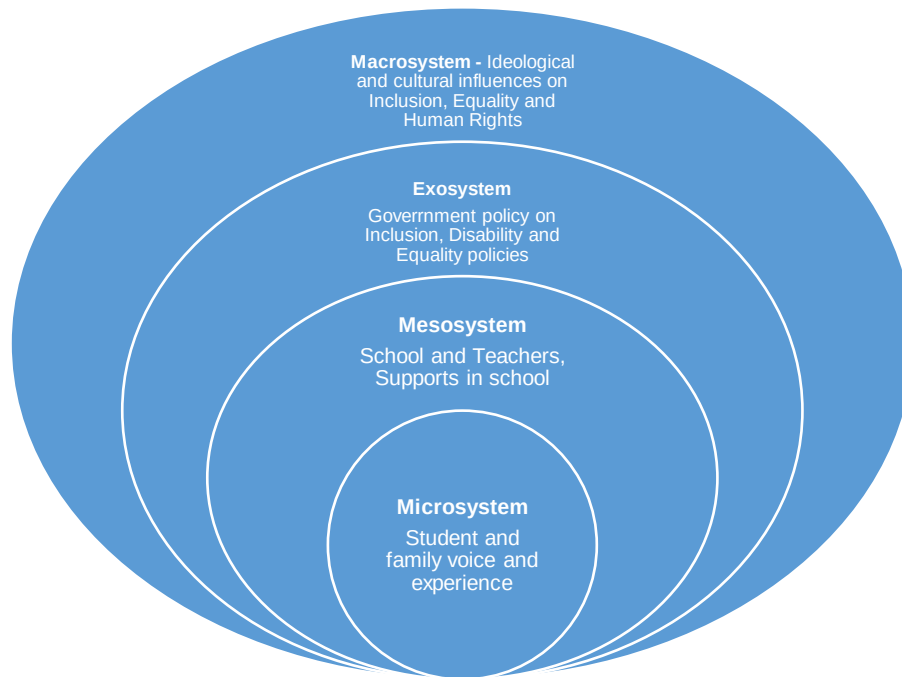
By adopting the Bronfenbrenner theoretical framework, this allowed the research to offer a conceptualisation of the child's environment, or ecology, as a multi-layered set of nested and interconnected environmental systems which influence the child to varying degrees. This framework enabled the literature review to consider influences at the micro and mesosystem, which have direct contact with the child, such as family, schools, teachers and also more indirect influences at the exo and macrosystem level such as government policies, culture, societal attitudes, the right to education, societal and cultural views of students with intellectual disabilities, inclusion, and international policies. The theoretical framework implemented in this research promotes a fluid process of the influence on the students experiences of education in practice. Bronfenbrenner's ecology system offers an invaluable framework to organise the environmental factors and understand their influence on inclusivity by placing the learner at the centre and each contributory factor is located in relation to the learner's educational ecosystem (Anderson et al. 2014). Bronfenbrenner's ecology system is compatible with qualitative methodologies since it stresses the need to focus on interactions

between various factors and within different contexts, and is particularly in line with the case study approach that aims for a close scrutiny of the complex factors relating to the phenomenon studied (Yin, 2003).

The experiences of the students in this research are central to this study. At the macro level, the nationally and internationally educational policies students are experiencing are another important layer of influence on their educational provision. The micro and mesosystem has the most direct impact on the child. In this research the students, families and schools and their experiences are at the centre of this research. Bronfenbrenner's ecology system states that it would be an omission not to seek the young people's views, as they play a substantial part in interactions which shape their experiences of inclusion (Kamenopoulou, 2016).

This theoretical framework approach adopted by this research study reflected the different levels of the societal and educational systems that might impinge upon student experience in their educational setting. Figure 7 outlines the direct and indirect influences on students with intellectual disabilities in post primary special schools in Ireland.

Figure 7: Theoretical Framework for Research



This theoretical framework enabled the research to develop themes within the ecological system and the research design. The discussion chapter also followed this framework. This enabled the research to progress with continuity, within a structured framework which was relevant and ensured students with intellectual disabilities and their families had a voice.

As the foundations for this research have been outlined, it is now time to construct the research around the ecological systems. The next step is the literature review. The literature review will highlight and analysis the pertinent literature on the education provision for students with intellectual disabilities in post primary special schools in Ireland. This literature review will be mindful of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems surrounding a student and will use these layers as a guide to outline their influence on the education students with ID participate and engage in at post primary level. The literature review will outline the significant changes which have occurred in the past three decades and which have seen a shift in the cultural and societal view of students with intellectual disabilities (macrosystem).

Bronfenbrenner's ecology framework is fluid and dynamic and shows the influences, direct and indirect, on education provision for students with intellectual disabilities. Their education and lives have been effected due to the dramatic changes internationally and nationally. These shifts in societal and cultural views on disability have emphasised the fundamental right to education for all children. A more equitable system of education has developed. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986, 1999, 2005) highlighted how student experiences are always at the centre of the system (the microsystem) while the Irish Education system and international policies are at the outer edge of the system (the macrosystem). Bronfenbrenner's ecology system highlights the interconnections between agencies who have influence on and are responsible for the child. The literature review will explore the shared goals, priorities and interconnections between the child, school, national agencies and international and national policies which have a direct and indirect influence over the child experience in school.

2.4 Inclusion

2.4.1 Contextualising the Inclusion Debate

Before we can debate inclusion it is necessary to investigate how inclusion has been conceptualised. Inclusivity was not always the guiding ethos within education (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). Initially disability was understood through a medical lens and the disability was seen within the child. This following section will outline the context to the development of an ethos of inclusion within the education of young people with special educational needs.

Florian et al. (2017) highlighted how it was not until the 1970s in Britain that educational inclusion could ever be a realisable goal and grant all children and young people the right to attend school. Prior to this, some children were assessed as being 'ineducable', and many such children were categorised as being 'severely educationally sub-normal' (Florian et al. 2017). This situation extended to segregated provisions - one for children who are considered to be 'ordinary' and another for those who are not (Florian et al, 2017). International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) defines special needs education as that which is designed 'to facilitate learning by individuals who, for a wide variety of reasons, require additional support and adaptive pedagogical methods in order to participate and meet learning objectives in an education programme' (UNESCO, 2016, 10).

2.4.2 The Evolution of the Inclusion Debate

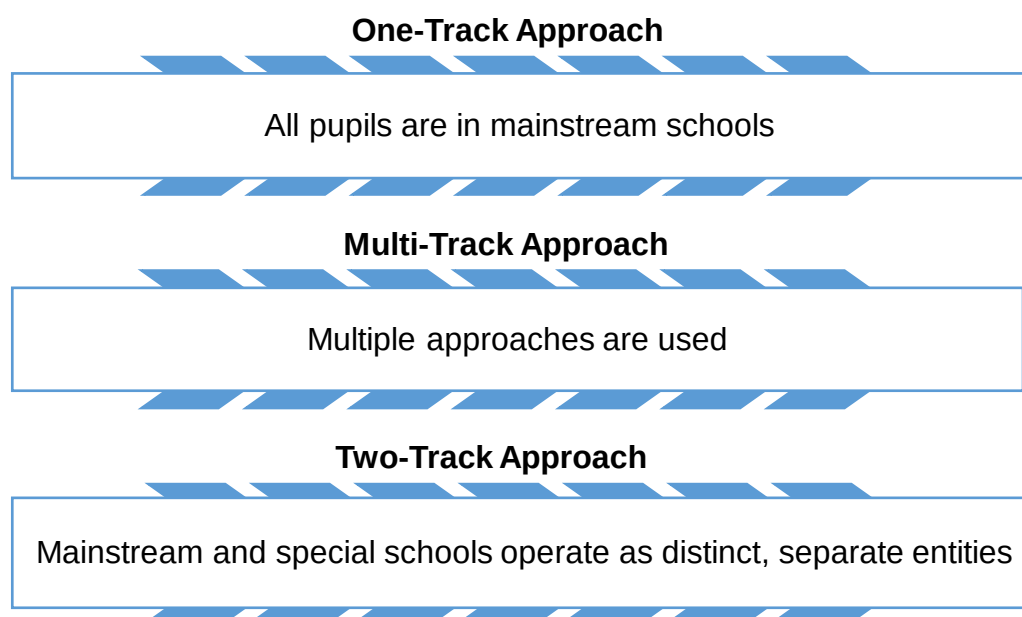
The original concept of inclusion as a meaningful and effective involvement of an individual in a mainstream setting has shifted considerably over the years (Rix, 2011). The broad range of definitions has been seen as ranging from 'full inclusion to an incomplete position' (Norwich, 2008). The philosophy of inclusive education has superseded integration (Banks and McCoy, 2011). This has required the shift of the attribution frame of disabilities from the individual to the environment

(Kinsella and Senior, 2009). Definitions of inclusion often distinguish between a school adjusting to include children (inclusion) and children having to change or fit in with unchanged school (integration) (Mittler, 2000). For many, inclusion is associated with special educational needs (SEN) rather than the learning needs of all (Hodgkinson 2006, Macbeath et al. 2006). Research increasingly stress that inclusion means each child can be educated to the fullest extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend, regardless of the severity of their disability (Banks and McCoy, 2011).

2.4.3 Education Provision for Students with Special Educational Needs

Meijer (2003) conducted a review in 28 European countries and described three different approaches used to provide education for students with special educational needs (SEN). The first is the one-track approach, where all pupils are in mainstream schools. The second approach is the multi-track, where multiple approaches are used. The third approach is the two-track, where mainstream and special schools operate as distinct entities. Figure 8 illustrates the different approaches which European countries use to describe their education provision for students with SEN.

Figure 8: Approaches to Education Provision for Students with SEN



Rose et al. (2015) stated that the medical model of disability dominates these categorisations. Children placed in the same category do not necessarily have the same learning needs and there is a risk that, as an unintended consequence, incentives are given to identify greater numbers of children, to attract higher levels of resources (Rose et al. 2015). Rix et al. (2013) stated that there was a lack of consensus about what constituted 'special' in special education. It seemed evident that no two countries dealt with the issue of support for pupils with SEN in the same way.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2015) now takes a broader view of what it means as education for all. Inclusion and equity in and through education is the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda, and we therefore commit to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes. (UNESCO, 2015, iv). Florian et al. (2017) highlight how this position is fundamental to equity in education. Inclusive education has increasingly been understood as encompassing all learners, particularly those seen as

marginalised or more vulnerable to exclusion (NCSE, 2018). Current and prevailing inclusion debates focuses on inclusive education being understood in relation to social justice more broadly (NCSE, 2018). The European Agency for Inclusive Education and Special Educational Needs (2015) position on inclusive education has moved away from the UNESCO (2008) broad definition which stated that inclusive education is an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination (UNESCO, 2008, p. 3). EASNIE (2015) now views inclusive education as provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities for all learners in their local community, alongside their friends and peers.

Florian (2019) emphasises that inclusive education assumes that the mainstream is a good place. This is driven by the belief that exclusion from or segregation within systems of education are not appropriate because they discriminate between different types of learners. But it must also be recognised that inconsistencies in practice raise important questions about the nature and quality of provision in schools (Florian, 2019). Inclusion policies have not been smooth sailing and there are disagreements about how to provide for everyone in an inclusive education system (Florian, 2019). As an alternative approach to a placement in special needs education, inclusive education was described as process of increasing participation and decreasing exclusion from the culture, community and curricula of mainstream schools' (Booth and Ainscow 2002). The structure of special needs education can exclude those who receive it from the educational opportunities available to others of similar age, the ideal of an inclusive educational system where everyone belongs and no one is excluded has had wide appeal within a narrow education community concerned with issues of special needs education (Florian. 2019).

2.4.4 The Right to Education

The concept of the term inclusion can encompass concepts such as access, quality, equity, diversity, social justice, democracy, equal opportunity of involvement (Norwich, 2013). The focus of this next section is to look at inclusion through the lens of the right to education for students with special educational needs. The philosophy of inclusion is based on the fundamental principles of human rights and equal opportunities for everyone (Merrigan and Senior, 2021). Inclusion is central to the education of students with special educational needs in an inclusive education system (Merrigan and Senior, 2021). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) has impacted significantly on international developments in supporting persons with disabilities to participate fully in society. Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) is concerned specifically with education, and it gives further impetus to inclusive education stating, for example, that the State shall ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system based on disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, based on disability (UN, 2006).

As a rights-based notion, inclusive education is linked to the idea of education as a human right of intrinsic value to individuals (Florian, 2019). Access to education is a basic human right for all children and young people (OECD, 2017). Inclusive education has evolved to become a broad rights-based concept that encompasses anyone who might be excluded from or have limited access to the educational system within a country (Florian et al. 2017). Inclusion in education is both the means for, and a consequence of, school systems attempting to address issues of inequality by widening access and participation (Florian et al. 2017). Inclusion refers to the removal of barriers to the presence, participation and achievement of all learners (Ainscow, 2007). Supporting achievement and inclusion is about being equitable towards all learners (Slee, 2019).

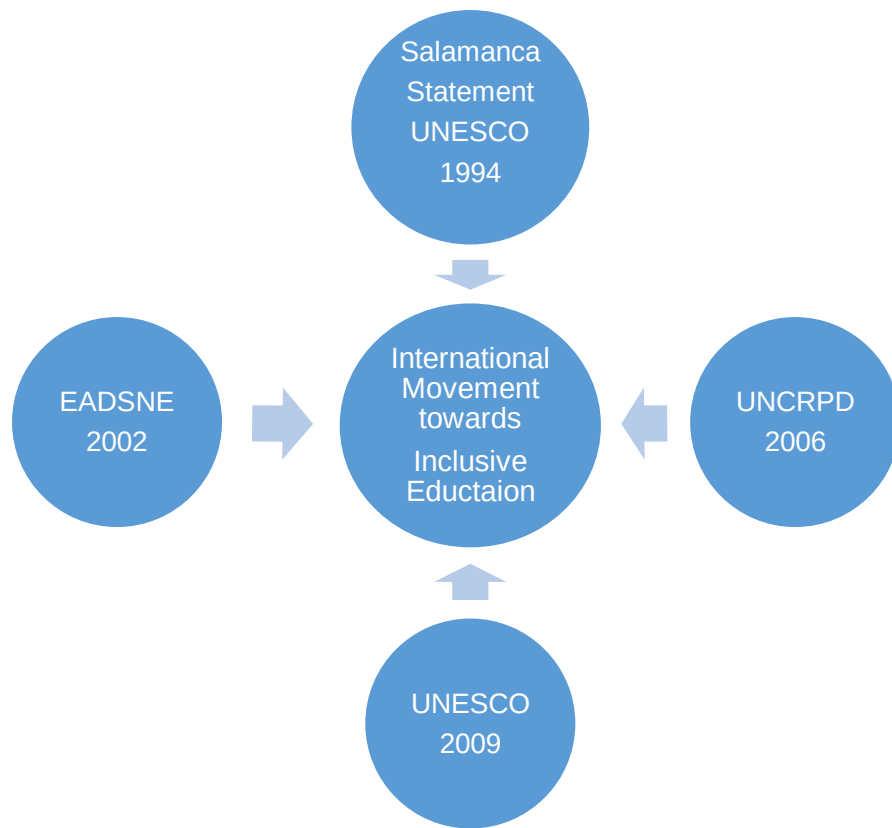
Slee (2019) states that inclusive education has developed and established itself as a distinct field of educational research, policy and practice in a relatively short period of time. Inclusive education seeks to identify and dismantle barriers to education for all children so that they have access to, are present and participate in and achieve optimal academic and social outcomes from school (Slee, 2019). Within inclusive education, the emphasis has shifted from the deficit model where the problem is with the individual child to a more social model which focuses on the environment, the school curriculum and school climate more generally (Kinsella and Senior, 2009). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2009) states that an inclusive school must offer possibilities and opportunities for a range of working methods and individual treatment to ensure that no child is excluded from companionship and participation in the school. This implies the development of rights-based, child-friendly schools. The focus on inclusion is often debated on the grounds of a rights-based, rather than a needs-based agenda (Ainscow, 1997) and is therefore ideologically, but not necessarily pragmatically grounded (Ware et al. 2009).

Kinsella and Senior (2009) suggest that a cultural shift, moving away from deficits within the individual, is required. According to Rose et al. (2015) this move away from viewing deficits within the individual would address environmental changes rather than forcing individuals to adapt to life within existing structures. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2010) highlights that whether in health, in education, or in material well-being, some children will always fall behind the average. The European Agency for Development of Special Needs in Education (EADSNE) (2002) asks the critical question – how far behind the average will some children fall? Is there a point beyond which falling behind is not inevitable but policy susceptible, not unavoidable but unacceptable, not inequality but inequity? (EADSNE, 2002).

2.4.5 International Policies to Promote Inclusion

It is necessary to provide an international context on how inclusion have evolved and developed within the international education arena. The following section will explore the policies which have affected the promotion of inclusive education for students with special educational needs and how education is now viewed through the lens of inclusion, equity and a rights-based stance. Globally and in Europe, there has been a clear move towards inclusive practice in education and wide agreement on the key principle first encompassed in the Salamanca Statement and the accompanying Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca Conference (1994) proclaimed that: *'regular schools with [an] inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system'* (p. ix). This statement, to which the Irish government is a signatory, focuses on the development of inclusive school in relation to the international goal of achieving education for all (Rose et al. 2015). Figure 9 illustrates the global movement towards the recognition of the rights to education for all students, including students with SEN and the development of an inclusive era in education.

Figure 9: International Movement towards Inclusive Education



Policy developments around the globe have put inclusive education on the worldwide reform agenda. The right to education dates back to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) (United Nations, 1948). The UNDHR was an attempt to ensure that vulnerable populations, including students with disabilities, realise their right to an education. Inclusion as a term was introduced into policy debates in the 1990s (NCSE, 2018). The ‘Education for All’ (EFA) movement launched at the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand recognised that it was necessary and urgent to provide education for all children with special educational needs within the regular education system. The term ‘Education for All’ represents an aspiration, which seems to be universally accepted and yet in practice is fraught with complications (Florian et al. 2017). Emerging from the ‘Education for All’ movement in 1990, the World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Salamanca, Spain, in 1994

concluded with what is now commonly known as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994). The Salamanca Statement called upon governments and the international community to endorse and prioritise inclusive education policy and practice and to work together to support and expand provision (UNESCO 1994). The Salamanca Statement promoted a rights-based, anti-discriminatory stance (Florian, 2019). The UNESCO Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) was influential and led to many countries adopting local legislation relating to both social and educational inclusion, as well as further developments in international policy such as the UN Conventions on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006).

Education systems worldwide have undergone considerable change with the introduction of inclusive policies and the requirements for providing for pupils with special educational needs (Rose et al. 2015). Such change has also been in response to international demands and agreements which have led to significant government responses in individual educational jurisdictions (Rose et al. 2015). The United Nations member states are obliged to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and life-long learning and to provide access to an inclusive, quality, free primary education and secondary education (United Nations (UN), 2006). The European Union (EU), however, has limited competence in the area of education and each member state has responsibility for its own education system and content of teaching (UN, 2006). The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) collects data from European countries every 2 years. The data collection focuses on developing procedures, indicators and outputs that provide individual countries, comparative and aggregated data to inform countries on issues relating to all learner's access to inclusive education (EASNIE, 2018). EASNIE (2018) recognises that all participating countries have very different policy and practice situations for inclusive education. European Union countries do not have an agreed list of special educational needs (SEN) or share common operational definitions of SEN (OECD, 2020). In order for individual country data to be comparable two definitions need to be identified and agreed. Agreement needs to be reached between countries on, firstly, an official decision of

special educational need and secondly an official decision on an inclusive setting (EASNIE, 2018).

The United States Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1997 (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act, (2002) have played influential roles globally in promulgating the principles of inclusive education worldwide and promoting students' access to the general curriculum and to the assessment regime in their home country/ states (Mitchell, 2010). Having access to the general education classroom means that students' educational programmes are based on high expectations that acknowledge each student's potential and their ultimate contribution to society' and that students with disabilities are provided with the supports necessary to allow them to benefit from instruction (Nolet and McLaughlin, 2005).

The rights and needs of people with a disability traverse many policy areas. United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006) Article 24 obliges states to ensure that people with disabilities are not discriminated against in education. The objectives and direction of the UNCRPD are fully reflected in policies within Europe (NCSE, 2021). These measures put people with disabilities on an equal level as per requirements of the UNCRPD to ensure that people with disabilities are not discriminated against in education (NCSE, 2021). The Council of Europe Disability Action Plan (2006-15) recognises the need for a broad spectrum of public policy to support participation of this group and provide a reference point for policy makers in member states during design, implementation and evaluation of disability policies and strategies (NCSE, 2021). Further policies such as the EU Disability Strategy (2010-20) of the European Commission, reinforced member states' work on disability policy (NCSE, 2021).

The Incheon Declaration agreed at the World Forum on Education in May 2015 leads the way for the publication of the Education 2030 Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2015). This emphasises inclusion and equity as laying the foundations for quality education (Messiou and Ainscow, 2021). Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the Education for All movement press governments for more inclusive futures for marginalised and excluded populations (UNESCO, 2017). The United Nation's Education for All (EFA) movement has worked to make quality basic education available to all learners (Messiou and Ainscow, 2021). Slee (2019) highlights how the Education for All (EFA) movement has progressively chronicled cohorts of excluded students and mobilised governments, education authorities, non-government organisations and civil society to advance inclusive education. The EU Disability Strategy (2010-20) of the European Commission, focuses on reinforcing member states' work on disability policy. In relation to education and training, the European Commission undertakes to increase knowledge on levels of education and opportunities for people with disabilities by facilitating participation in the Lifelong Learning Programme.

The essence of these international policies were to ensure disabled people could seek a place in mainstream education by encouraging relevant authorities to develop educational provision to meet the need of their disabled population. UNSECO (2008) refers to inclusion as an ongoing process. Inclusive education demands access, presence, participation and success for all students (Slee et al. 2019). Schools as diverse problem-solving organisations where policies and practices are dynamic rather than static are recommended (Florian et al. 2017). Rix (2020) argues that in order to achieve a genuine desire for the goal of inclusion that the education system can begin again or set up a new system that runs alongside the old or refocus the whole so that an inclusive approach creates the space for the traditional. Florian (2019) refers to inclusive education as signalling a response to exclusion from or within education, distinctions between special and inclusive education remain inextricably linked to concerns about disability.

2.4.6 Inclusion in Ireland

After exploring the international context on inclusive provision and the significant international policies which have commandeered reform it is now pertinent to review where Ireland sits in the inclusion debate. The following section will provide an overview of the evolution of inclusion reform in Ireland. Inclusive education and Ireland has a distinct and complex history regarding the education of students with SEN and its approach to inclusion (Kenny and Mihut, 2020). The system of special education has undergone dramatic changes in the last twenty years (McCoy et al. 2012). These changes have occurred due to government reports, changes to legalisation and a global trend towards a policy of inclusion. Historically in Ireland, there was a widespread belief that children and young people with SEN were qualitatively different from their peers and that their social and learning needs were significantly dissimilar to other children so that they required separate education away from their mainstream peers (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). In 1992 Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) which led to a fundamental shift in Irish policy and legislative precedent. There was movement towards a rights-based perspective regarding the education of people with special educational needs (Kenny and Mihut, 2020).

2.4.6.1 Historical Context of Special Education in Ireland

Significant changes in special education provision have been sparked by several interrelated developments, including a system-wide educational review, a series of ground-breaking government reports, influential court cases challenging inadequate educational provision for children with disabilities and a burgeoning interest in equality issues (Shevlin et al. 2008). A series of legal challenges in the 1990s had a profound impact on the direction of special education in Ireland: most notably *O'Donoghue v Minister for Health* (1993). The case centred on the right to a primary education for an eight-year-old boy with severe disabilities. The ruling stated that the education system had discriminated against this boy and ordered that the curriculum should be modified to ensure the boy had access to an education at his level. The shift in special education policy towards an inclusion

policy means that children with disabilities and special educational needs are increasingly educated alongside their peers in mainstream schools (Banks and McCoy, 2011).

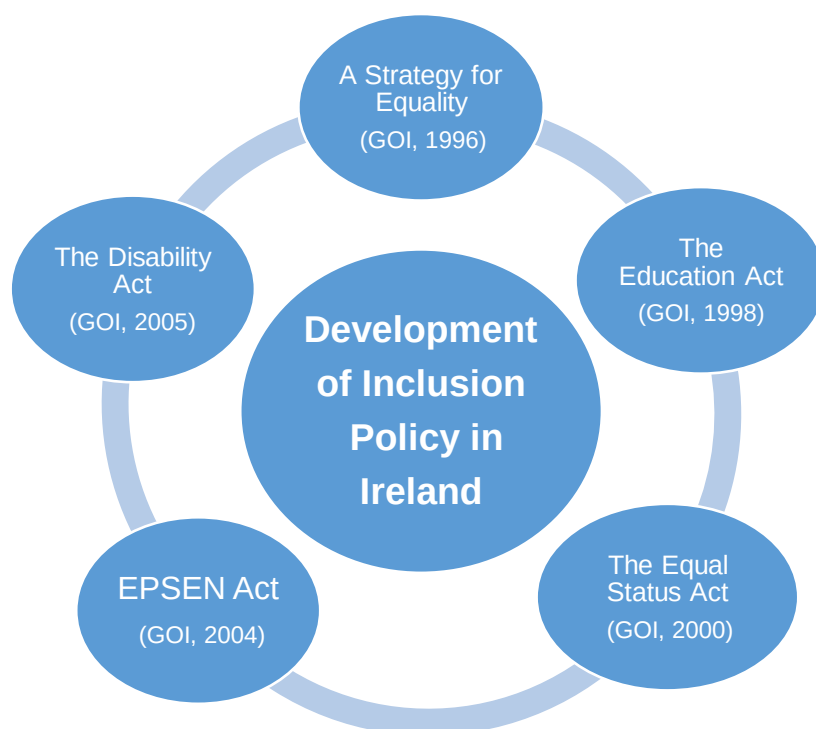
In 1991, the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) was established by the Minister for Education to report and make recommendations on educational provision for learners with special educational needs (NCSE, 2013). The SERC Report was published in 1993 and continues to provide a basis for special education policy and practice. The Special Education Review Committee, 1993 (SERC) adopted a broad definition for special educational needs and, while supportive of moves towards inclusion, identified the need to maintain some specialist and separate provision. The SERC first introduced the concept of a continuum of education provision for students with SEN and recommended that students with SEN should be integrated in mainstream schools and participate in school activities with other students where possible (Department of Education and Skills, 1993). SERC (1993) was fundamental in shifting the focus towards a rights-based approach to education for students with SEN and changing the perspective towards an inclusion model (Kenny and Mihut, 2020). The provision for the education of students with SEN has operated on a continuum of need, in conjunction with a continuum of provision, which has included special schools, special classes within mainstream and supported integrated placement within mainstream schools (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011).

In Ireland the mission of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) is to provide for 'a well-educated, skilled and motivated population which contributes to economic progress, promote greater equality and social inclusion in our society, as well as enhancing Ireland's international reputation'. (DES, 2014, p.1). Ireland, like other countries, has begun to shift provision for students with SEN from segregated to mainstream provision (McCoy et al. 2019). Inclusive education means

encouraging each child to take part in the everyday activity of the school, helping every child to achieve the most from school and ensuring that the system adjusts to meet children's needs, rather than expecting children to 'fit' into the system (NCSE, 2014). Shevlin and Banks (2021) highlight the discernible shift in government policy on educational provision for specific categories of disabled children toward a more inclusive approach to educating children with SEN within mainstream schools.

The movement toward developing and implementing an inclusion policy within the Irish education system can be seen by the ratification of some of the significant policy documents in Ireland. Within the Irish legislative system the right to education is protected by a number of laws including Article 42 of the Irish Constitution, A Strategy to Equality (GOI, 1996), The Education Act (GOI, 1998), The Equal Status Act (GOI, 2000), The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (GOI, 2004) and The Disability Act (GOI, 2005). Since 2000, under Irish disability and equality law, educational establishments are legally obliged to ensure that students with disabilities are not discriminated against in either their application for admission to an educational programme or their experience while on an education or training programme (NCSE, 2021). These national policy developments were ratified in the context of an international shift towards inclusion and education being a right on a global level. Figure 10 highlights the progression Ireland has made over the last two decades with the implementation of key policy documents.

Figure 10: Development of Inclusion Policy in Ireland



In Ireland, the term 'inclusive education' is not defined in either the Education Act 1998 or the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004). Consequently, it is a difficult concept to define sufficiently (Ware et al. 2009). The Education Act (1998) reflected a divergence for the first time in Government policy, away from a health-dominated view of young people with SEN. The Education Act (1998) provided a legislative basis, relating to the education provision for young people with SEN, equal to that of their non-disabled peers while the Equal Status Act (GOI, 2000) prohibited discrimination, including in education, on the grounds of disability.

In Ireland The Equal Status Act (2000) requires providers of goods and services such as education to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities by making

reasonable adjustments in their provision or by putting in place specific supports or facilities (NCSE, 2021). At a broad level, people with disabilities in Ireland are covered by the Equal Status Act. This relates mainly to service provision, including in education, and prohibits discrimination on nine grounds, disability being one. Under the Disability Act (2005) people with disabilities are entitled to have their health and educational needs assessed and individual service statements drawn up, setting out what services they should get (NCSE, 2021). The recently published National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-21 (NDIS) is a four-year action plan designed to support Irish citizens living with different kinds of disabilities in their daily lives. Persons with disabilities are encouraged to participate in mainstream vocational education and equality legislation obliges providers to facilitate them through reasonable accommodation (NCSE, 2021). These measures are necessary to put people with disabilities on an equal level as per requirements of the UNCRPD to ensure that people with disabilities are not discriminated against in education and promote the realisation of the right to work (NCSE, 2021). The Disability Act (2005) placed a statutory obligation on the state to provide access to services and facilities for people with disabilities.

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN, 2004) marked a milestone in the development of education legislation for children and young people with SEN as it set out the framework and infrastructure to support the establishment of inclusive learning environments, although some aspects of legislation, such as assessments, individual education planning and appeals have been delayed due to economic constraints (Shevlin et al. 2008). The EPSEN Act (2004) states that students with special educational needs should be educated in an inclusive environment with students who do not have such needs. Education shall, whenever possible, take place in an inclusive environment with those who do not have such needs, to provide that people with SEN shall have the same rights to avail of and benefit from appropriate education as do their peers who do not have such needs (EPSEN Act, 2004). Every school is legally obliged to develop and publish its policy on responding to children who have SEN in their

local community (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). The EPSEN Act (2004) provides for assessment of children's educational needs and the allocation of resources to meet those needs, with an emphasis on integrating children into mainstream education where appropriate (NCSE, 2021).

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) acknowledges that special schools should continue to play a role in the continuum of educational provision for students with special educational needs. The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) marked another significant milestone in establishing sustainable educational provision for this population (Banks and Shevlin, 2021). Unfortunately, critical aspects of the EPSEN Act (2004) remain to be implemented as the State refused to progress through the implementation of all the Act's provisions citing the economic recession (Banks and Shevlin, 2021). The EPSEN has to date not been fully implemented and is currently under review. The NCSE (2019) has consistently recommended a flexible and fluid approach to educational provision for students with SEN and has acknowledged that special schools should continue to play a role on the continuum of educational provision, in line with the commitment of the EPSEN Act (2004) to inclusion (Merrigan and Senior, 2021). Consequently, Ireland now faces the fundamental question about whether it wishes to on how inclusive learning environments can be established as envisaged in the EPSEN Act (2004).

2.4.7 Special Education and Mainstream Education

Special education and mainstream education, while connected, have largely developed in parallel, but separately (Kenny, 2020). Special education occupies little presence in general education decision-making and policy development and often appears to be fragmented and lacking coordination and vision (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011; McCoy et al. 2016). It is evident that the impetus towards inclusion in mainstream settings has gathered momentum, though the capacity of schools to respond appropriately remains open to question (Shevlin et al. 2008). Government reports and evaluations, in addition to legislative changes, have

resulted in more students with SEN attending mainstream school (Banks and McCoy, 2011).

Inclusive education within the Irish context refers to 'effective and meaningful involvement within educational settings of children, with and without SEN (Rix et al. 2013). Shevlin et al. (2008) states that there was strong agreement, across all sectors of participants, that inclusion in mainstream schools promotes socialisation skills and enables children with disabilities and/or SEN to develop relationships with children their own age and in their own geographical region. Inclusive education is also endorsed as being good for mainstream children, enabling them to experience the variety in their community (Shevlin et al. 2008). The Department of Education and Skills provides three main types of education provision for post-primary pupils with SEN (NCSE, 2014). These are:

1. A mainstream class in post-primary school, where the student can access additional teaching support from a learning support or resource teacher.
2. A special class for children in a mainstream school, which has a lower pupil/teacher ratio.
3. A special school where there is low pupil/teacher ratio, specified according to the disability.

Ireland is considered to have a multi-track approach to the provision of education for students with SEN (McCoy et al. 2019). Shevlin et al. (2021) acknowledge that there has been a significant policy shift from parallel systems of special and mainstream education towards provision underpinned by enabling legislation with a presumption for inclusion. Shevlin et al. (2021) further state that the educational provision for children and young people with special educational needs is in a transition phase as inclusion policy and practice has yet to become firmly embedded in Irish schools. The framework for existing government policy has resulted in the implementation of special education grafted onto the general education system (Shevlin et al. 2021). Special education seems to hold the

position of an afterthought when it comes to policy. Special education is made to 'fit' into the general education system, which may not value the education of students with ID in the same light as students in mainstream education.

2.4.8 Inclusion and Society

As outlined in detail in the chapter, Bronfenbrenner's ecology system provides the framework for this research. The outer system of the model is the macrosystem, which pertains to ideology, cultural and attitudinal beliefs and views held by a society in which the individual lives and these influences on the experiences of an individual. It is appropriate to explore societies views on inclusion and disability and how society regards and values the education provision for students with intellectual disabilities in Ireland today.

Societal attitudes towards people with disabilities have evolved considerably in recent decades and progress has been significant in developing more inclusive policies and provision for this population (NCSE, 2021). The progress of inclusion has not been uniform internationally with significant regional variations and even variations within countries (Flynn, 2011). International and national policies have encouraged development of inclusive environments to promote the active participation of people with disabilities within society, however, implementing the principles underpinning these policies has not been straightforward (NCSE, 2021). Community, diversity and inclusion are prominent in official educational policy discourse (Slee, 2019). Over the last 30 years there have been major international efforts to encourage inclusive educational developments (Messiou and Ainscow, 2021). Slee (2006) explores how there is often a gap between expectations for progress in inclusive education and the reality of both policy and practice. Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) consider the impetus to address such gaps as being located in the value systems adopted within a school, and thus their approach is both practically orientated and values driven. Society has historically held a deficit locked assumptions that binds our thinking about equity and justice in education

and registers “unfortunate others” as the targets for change in order to boost their educational achievement (Slee et al. 2022). In terms of policy and practice there is a move away internationally from deficit-based and discriminatory approaches to considering learning difficulties, special educational needs and diversity (NCSE, 2018).

2.4.9 Inclusion and Diversity

The UNCRPD has widened the evolving and ongoing international debate about how students with disabilities and/or additional learning needs should best be educated and what is understood by inclusive education (Banks and Shevlin, 2021). Inclusive education is a relatively recent advance in the thinking about schooling and pedagogy, it is a rapidly expanding movement within both local and global contexts (Graham and Slee, 2008). Florian et al. (2017) refers to inclusive education as not about providing something ‘special’ or ‘different ‘ for some, it is about providing meaningful education for all. Inclusive education is based on the principle that local schools should provide for all children, however there are different interpretations of what this means in practice (Florian, 2017).

For a range of historical, cultural, social and financial reasons, inclusive education has been unevenly implemented across the world (Mitchell, 2010). Change in the provision of education for students with SEN has been in response to international demands and agreements which has led to significant government responses in individual educational jurisdictions (Rose et al. 2015). As mentioned earlier, the Salamanca Statement (1994) on inclusion policy and practice was informed by sociological critiques of disability and special educational needs (NCSE, 2018). There is awareness within policy and practice framework of the dangers of labelling and categorisation and being sensitive to diversity and difference (NCSE, 2018).

Minow (1990) outlines the debate surrounding treating people differently. This treatment can emphasise a student's differences and stigmatises or hinder them (Minow, 1990). However, Minow (1990) suggests that if we treat people the same we can become insensitive to their difference and likely to stigmatise or hinder them also. The view we have of difference or being different can arise from a negative perspective, whereby it is synonymous with lower status and less value, or from a positive perspective whereby it reflects the recognition of individuality, an individual's needs and interests (Ware et al. 2009) therefore requiring a confrontation with 'dilemmas of difference' (Norwich, 2002). The general pattern of suggested resolutions was for commonality strategies, what would be broadly called 'inclusive strategies' (Norwich, 2010). Commonality represents egalitarian and solidarity traditions, while differentiation represents individualist traditions (Norwich, 2010). Cigman (2007a) refers to the basic value position that underlies current inclusion debate - this is the value of unconditional respect (Cigman, 2007a). This means finding ways to combine appropriate responses to individual differences, while not labelling some in stigmatising terms nor humiliating them (Cigman, 2007b). Hornby (2015) highlights how inclusive education is regarded as being preferable to special education as it avoids the practice of identifying and labelling students with special educational needs. which can stigmatising students and therefore should be avoided. Norwich (2013) refers to the 'dilemma of difference' which explains the entwined process of when students are identified as having special educational needs, there is a risk of negative labelling and stigma, while if they are *not* identified, there is a risk that they will not get required, specialised teaching.

Ensuring that policies of inclusive education are implemented in ways that support the social and academic well-being and progress of all students is necessary work but it is hard work (Florian, 2019). Seeing some learners as 'problems' or 'extra work' undermines the dignity of these learners and those who teach them (Florian, 2019). Florian (2019) asks the question, how can all learners receive the support they need without perpetuating the problem of marginalisation that can occur by treating them differently to others of similar age? Where special needs education

is characterised as an individualised response to difference that includes targeting differentiated responses to individual difficulty for some, inclusive education represents a rights-based approach to education that aims to ensure that: ‘those in vulnerable situations, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, those in remote rural areas, ethnic minorities, the poor, women and girls, migrants, refugees, and displaced persons whether as a result of conflict or natural disaster’ (UNESCO, 2018, p2).

Florian (2019) argues that equity within education demands that differentiated approaches are needed to accommodate individual differences between learners, however, such approaches can create problems which reinforce school structures that are designed for ‘most’ students on the grounds that something different can be available to ‘some’. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) is an independent body funded by EU member countries’ Ministries of Education and supported by the EU Commission. EASNIE (2018) reviewed over 200 academic papers from 1990 onwards to investigate the link between inclusive education and social inclusion of people with disabilities. EASNIE reported that inclusive education systems will ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities both academically and for social achievements (NCSE, 2021). In many countries, the drive for inclusion has been allied to policy statements about teachers having a responsibility for all the students within their class, while at the same time they are expected to deliver the traditional educational skills and qualifications, frequently set within a framework of national curricula, standards and inspections. (Rix, 2020). Early inclusion efforts to include students with disabilities in mainstream classes focused on preparing them to fit into an unchanged education system (Florian, 2017). Florian (2017) highlights that this proved a limited success, subsequent efforts sought to change the mainstream by shifting focus from the problem of the child to the problem of the school, and researchers began to focus on the influence of school factors in learning and in student outcomes.

The idea of inclusive education for everyone embraces diversity as an imperative of practice rather than a secondary consideration to be dealt with separately (Florian, 2019). Diversity awareness is critical in creating an inclusive culture through restructuring cultures, policies and practices in settings to respond to the diversity of pupils. This can promote equality of educational access and participation of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream settings. At the heart of inclusion lies the principle and practices of belonging (Slee, 2019). Inclusive education remind us of the importance of belonging for all and an often-unrecognised fact of inclusion, suggests that the beneficiaries are not just those who have been the objects of separation (Slee, 2019).

2.4.10 Inclusion and School Culture

NCSE (2019) highlighted conflicting views from stakeholders about whether full inclusion, as required by the UNCRPD, in mainstream was desirable. If full inclusion in mainstream, were to be achieved, it would require a fundamental change of school culture (NCSE, 2019). Schools serve very different communities and changing conceptualisations of inclusion is essential if all children are to have the opportunity to participate fully in education (Florian et al. 2017). Florian et al. (2017) considers the challenge of raising achievement for all students while safeguarding the inclusion of those who are more vulnerable to processes of exclusion from mainstream schools. School culture needs to be based on the acceptance that all students rightfully belonged in their local school and this right is not dependent on the generosity or willingness of individual boards of management to enrol a student with complex special educational needs (NCSE, 2019). There is also concern that students with special educational needs, by attending school outside their own local areas, were losing connections to their own community (NCSE, 2019).

The NCSE (2019) identified reasons why students attended special schools. Stakeholders in the consultation process of the NCSE report (2019), stated that mainstream schools are not able to cope with the level of student's medical, behavioural and / or care needs. Further reasons for students to attend special schools included students who didn't progress in mainstream or felt very isolated. Most stakeholders found it extremely difficult to imagine how the 2 per cent of students, currently educated in special schools or special classes, could ever be included in mainstream classes, given the level and complexity of their difficulties. In addition clustering students with more complex needs in one setting is more economic and practical (NCSE, 2019).

Some groups in their consultation process, expressed concern that the inclusion of all students would have a negative impact on the education of their peers without disabilities (NCSE, 2019). Stakeholders were concerned that educating a child in a separate specialist setting can have life-long consequences for a child and there is clear evidence that once placed there, children rarely leave this setting. Although student progress is regularly reviewed, the NCSE were deeply concerned that specialist educational placements appear to be only rarely, if ever reviewed, given the life-long implications of being educated in a special setting placement (NCSE, 2019). Mixed views were identified surrounding the desirability or feasibility for all students to be educated together in fully inclusive classrooms. There was strong agreement that there was absolutely no reason why a special school should be housed in a separate building or located on a separate site (NCSE, 2019). There was agreement that all students should be educated together on the one school campus. Banks and `Shevlin (2021) highlighted that there is some evidence that students with disabilities in mainstream classes are more likely to achieve better academic results and qualifications than those in special class settings and that they are also more likely to develop the social skills which will be valuable to them in later life. Other debates argue that students with disabilities in special classes benefit from having small class sizes, specially trained teachers, individual attention, and an emphasis on teaching functional skills (Banks and Shevlin, 2021).

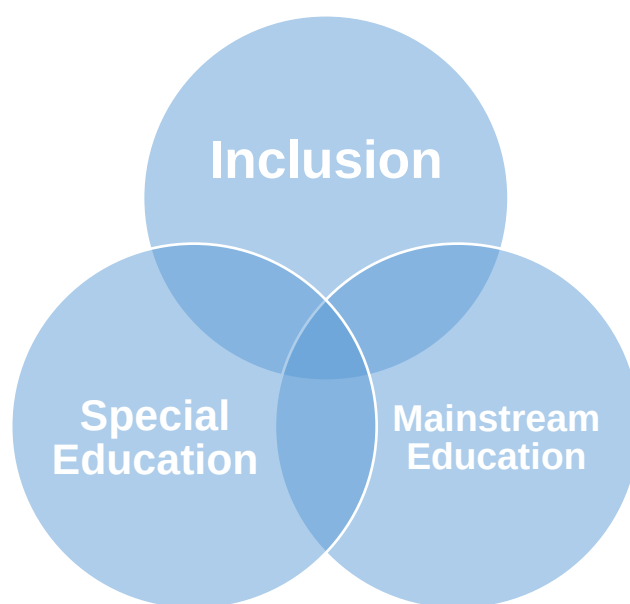
2.4.11 Inclusion and Special Education

Special needs education is defined as providing something ‘additional to or different from that which is otherwise available in school, inclusive education focuses on extending what is otherwise available to others of similar age (Florian et al. 2017). Florian (2014) notes that special education’s policy framework, which is intended to ensure the right to education for those who would otherwise be excluded from schooling, has paradoxically created problems of inequality within education. Florian (2014) debates whether the primary purpose of special schools and classes is to protect the educational rights of the most vulnerable children by providing suitable learning experiences in appropriate settings? Or, are they intended to protect the educational rights of the majority of children in mainstream schools, so that their learning is not disrupted by the presence of children whose identified SEN are considered to be especially demanding. Additional supports is a hallmark of special needs education and it positions special needs education as a resource based response that is provided when individual learners require something different from or additional to what is on offer to everyone else (Florian, 2019). This understanding came about in part because additional support is defined by what is not generally available to all (Florian, 2019). This distinction represents an important way of reconceptualising provision so that differences between learners can be seen as professional challenges for teaching and learning, rather than problems of learners (Florian et al. 2017).

Over the past 20 years, special education has become a major component of the mainstream Irish education system, with students with special educational needs (SEN) educated in mainstream class settings, in special classes within mainstream schools and in special school settings (NCSE, 2014). The Irish Government ratified the UNCRPD in 2018. Article 24 (2) of the UNCRPD obliges States, to ensure that children can access an inclusive, quality and free education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live (UNCRPD, 2018). The UNCRPD obliges policymakers to avoid segregation and educate all pupils together in mainstream classes (Banks and Shevlin, 2021). Given the significant

changes that have taken place over the past number of years the NCSE maintains that it is now timely to review whether special schools and classes should continue to be offered as part of the continuum of educational provision for students with special educational or whether greater inclusion in mainstream classes offers a better way forward. Banks and Shevlin (2021) describe Ireland as having currently a hybrid model, with students educated in mainstream schools, special classes in mainstream schools or special schools. Special education and inclusion are now at a crossroad (Banks and Shevlin 2021). Currently there is much debate surrounding where special education fits within the inclusion debate. Figure 11 illustrate the complex intertwining of inclusion, mainstream and special education.

Figure 11 : Inclusion, Mainstream and Special Education



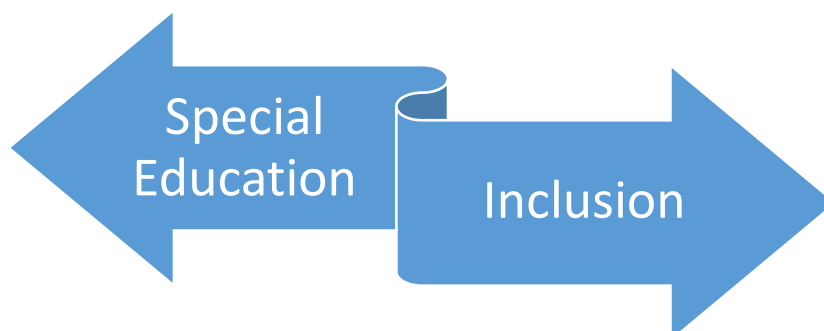
The development of the distinction between inclusion and special educational needs can also be seen through how the UNESCO (2009) guidelines, which help equip the education system manage diversity, through recommending flexible teaching and learning methods which can be adapted to different needs and learning styles and a flexible curriculum to be responsive to diverse needs and not overloaded with academic content. These policy guidelines do not now sit with the policy of inclusion which centres on teaching and learning for all in the classroom where no student feels their learning experience inferior nor diluted to that of their peers. This policy of inclusive practice does not equate with the recent debate surrounding how special educational needs and inclusion have become intertwined. Special educational needs and inclusion are not one in the same terms which can be interrelated. The term inclusion can be fluid and relate specifically to special educational needs and disability, or, is understood more broadly in terms of how society considers and relates to difference in general (NCSE, 2018).

The idea of inclusive education has challenged traditional systems of special education, but the development of inclusive practice has been uneven (Slee,

2019). Since the Salamanca Statement inclusive education has been extended from the focus on learners with disabilities to anyone who may be excluded or marginalised from education. Rix (2020) states that contradictory policies of inclusion and special education can be seen to underlie the tensions and contradictions in how the education community frame their responses and solutions to the challenges of a diverse classroom population. Inclusive education has moved on from the initial focus on disability or special educational needs, to encompass all learners, with particular attention to those who may be subject to exclusion or marginalisation from education (NCSE, 2018).

Inclusive education and special education are based on different philosophies and provide alternative views of education for children with special educational needs and disabilities and they are increasingly regarded as diametrically opposed in their approaches (Hornby, 2015). Figure 12 illustrates how Hornby sees the current debates on inclusion and special education. Implementing a policy where there is special education provision is not compatible with achieving inclusion in schools.

Figure 12 : Hornby's view on Inclusion and Special Education



Hornby (2015) interprets the aim of inclusive education is to provide facilitative and constructive focus for improving the education of children with special educational

needs. This current debate explores the value and purpose of special schools in inclusive education at a critical time in Irish education (Merrigan and Senior, 2021). Following from the UNCRPD (2018) there are international concerns surrounding special schools and where they fit within the current educational system which is centred on promoting full inclusion. Hornby (2015) suggests that at the moment the most controversial issue regarding the education of children with special educational needs is inclusion. Hornby (2015) puts forward the argument that it is now widely recognised that the policy of 'full inclusion', with its vision of all children being educated in mainstream classrooms for all or most of their time at school is impossible to achieve in practice. Florian (2014) notes that special education is intended to ensure the right to education for those who would otherwise be excluded from schooling, has paradoxically created problems of inequality within education. These questions are complex and challenge our view of full inclusion. Inclusion in education is both the means for, and a consequence of, school systems attempting to address issues of inequality by widening access and participation (Florian, 2014). Florian (2019) sees the central debate focusing on whether an inclusive education can be provided for everyone. Inclusion now involves considerations of how all students might be meaningfully included in national curricula and system of assessment and how their participation might be judged (Florian et al. 2017). Hornby's view is a direct contradiction to that of Florian, Slee and Rose. This research is attempting to review these debates and analyses the connections between inclusion, special education, curriculum and accreditation. Reconciling the right to education for all learners, with the drive and momentum towards implementing inclusion in our education provision for students with ID is complex and needs to overcome many barriers if full inclusion is to become a reality in Irish schools.

2.4.12 Inclusive Special Education

Inclusion is about high quality educational opportunities for everyone (Florian et al. 2017). OFSTED (2006) argues that it is the quality of provision rather than whether it takes place in a mainstream or a special school that really matters. Merrigan and Senior (2021) state inclusion should be defined as a human right of a child to have equal opportunity and access to learning and education, regardless of the educational setting where it occurs. Hornby (2015) suggests that the vision of full inclusion is unachievable and a new vision for the education of children with special educational needs is needed to replace inclusive education and special education. Hornby (2015) proposes that this will best be achieved by developing a theory of inclusive special education. This new theory of inclusive special education would synthesises philosophies, policies and practices from both special education and inclusive education in order to present a clear vision of effective education for all students with special education needs (Hornby, 2015).

The definition of inclusive special education encompasses educating children with special education needs in the most inclusive settings in which their special educational needs can be met effectively (Hornby, 2015). This involves a process of ongoing whole-school organisation and development to assist mainstream schools in using effective instructional strategies to educate students with special education needs (Hornby, 2015). Hornby (2015) sees inclusive special education as ensuring that special schools, resource rooms and special class teachers assist mainstream schools in implementing effective education for children with SEND, while at the same time effectively providing for those children with higher levels of SEND who need to be educated in these special education settings. Inclusive special education strives to achieve the right balance for each student with special educational needs between an academic or developmental curriculum, which is focused on the needs of the majority of children and a functional curriculum tailored to specific individual student and their needs (Hornby, 2019). Within Irish special education there is a strong emphasis on creating inclusive learning environments that can cater for pupil diversity (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). Humphrey et al. (2012)

highlighted that, for students with SEN, being part of a more inclusive school is certainly conducive to their academic achievement. Higher levels of diversity can drive achievement (Humphrey et al. 2012). Students who are situated in more 'cosmopolitan' educational environments made greater gains in their social studies grades (Blau et al. 2001).

The argument for full inclusion, under the UNCRPD, is centred on the premise that it is a basic human right of all children to be educated alongside their mainstream peers and to segregate children for any reason is considered by many supporters of inclusion to be a denial of their human rights (Hornby, 2015). Hornby (2015) states students with special educational needs are more comfortable with peers who have similar interests to themselves. It is important for students with special educational needs to be with peers with shared interests and similar abilities or disabilities to themselves, than peers of the same chronological age (Hornby, 2015). Merrigan and Senior (2021) view special schools as being the essence of inclusive practice as they educate and include students with a wide variety of abilities and needs. By adopting this perspective the location of student educational placement becomes less significant in the inclusion debate with special schools being viewed as an inclusive options on the continuum of provision (Merrigan and Senior, 2021). Hornby (2015) sees inclusive special education as a new theory intended to help generate a new vision which combines the key aspects of inclusive education and special education. This combination would ensure that all students with special educational needs receive the best possible education and are prepared for living successful and fulfilled lives after they leave school (Hornby, 2015).

2.4.13 Implications of Inclusion Policy in Ireland

The recent findings of the NCSE (2019) report are very pertinent to this research and provides a up to date policy document to analyse from the perspective of inclusion and special education. The NCSE (2019) refers to the UNCRPD as the most significant external influence exerted on the future development of policy on special schools and classes. The UNCRPD Committee's interpretation of Article 24 states that having a mainstream education system and a separate special education system is not compatible with its view of inclusion and that parallel systems are not considered inclusive. The move towards the inclusion of all students in mainstream classes in mainstream schools requires very careful consideration (NCSE, 2019). The UNCRPD's focus on all students being educated together, highlights the debate around whether this is feasible or even desirable for all students, particularly those with the most serious medical needs or those with the most severe behavioural needs. The move in the direction of full inclusion for all learners is the dominant educational policy, however there is much debate surrounding how this can be a realistic educational provision for students with special educational needs.

Recent changes within Irish education policy have seen substantive improvements in the wider system of supports for students with special educational needs and provides a movement towards what would constitute full inclusion in Ireland. In 2018, the Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh, T.D. requested the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to advise on the educational provision that should be in place for students in special schools and classes and to make recommendations on the provision required to enable them achieve better outcomes (NCSE, 2019). In 2017 the allocation of additional special education teaching supports to mainstream schools based on school profile rather than individual diagnosis of disability shows a movement towards a more equitable system of supports for students with special educational needs. Further improvements in supports for students with special educational needs can be seen with the introduction of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act (2018) which

enables the Minister to compel a school to open a special class. The School Inclusion Model (SIM), which was implemented in 2019 focuses on building schools' capacity to include students with additional education and care needs and to provide other supports for students (NCSE, 2019). Also in 2019, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) introduced learning programmes at Levels 1 and 2 on the National Framework of Qualifications for students in mainstream and special schools. These changes show a willingness at policy level to review, improve, and support special education provision and provide a more inclusive equitable model of education for all learners. Florian et al. (2017) identified equal opportunity as a fundamental structural problem which lies at the heart of a system where those considered capable of high achievements are encouraged to stay at school, while those who struggle, because their learning needs are not properly addressed may be marginalised in school or leave education at the earliest opportunity.

The Irish government have been described as a '*latecomer to inclusion*' (MacGiolla, 2007, p.289). The economic considerations of developing an inclusion policy within educational provision served to delay the Irish education system adopting a policy of inclusion for students with SEN (MacGiolla, 2007). The NCSE (2019) announced the pilot of a new integrated model for supporting inclusive education in mainstream and secondary education – the School Inclusion Model (NCSE, 2019). The aim of this model is for total inclusion of all students in mainstream education and to build capacity and supports within schools to include students with SEN (NCSE, 2019). This new model is a move away from separate mainstream and special education provisions which are not compatible with the view of inclusion under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2018). Parallel systems are not considered inclusive (NCSE, 2019).

2.4.14 Full Inclusion Debate – New Brunswick Model

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) Committee interprets inclusive education as educating all children together in mainstream classes within their local school (NCSE, 2019). The ratification of the UNCRPD by Ireland highlights a disparity in the existing multitrack approach to education which Ireland presently follows and towards the necessary full inclusion model as proposed by the UNCRPD. NCSE (2019) reported on the experiences of a ‘full inclusion policy’ in New Brunswick, Canada. In New Brunswick, the term ‘inclusion’ is used to refer to all students including socially disadvantaged, First Nation, newcomers, those with a disability or additional learning needs and those with exceptional ability (Shevlin and Banks 2021). Full inclusion is seen as a fundamental human right principle underpinning the education system, where Inclusion is seen as both possible and realistic (NCSE, 2019). There are no special schools or special classes in New Brunswick. NCSE (2019) observed that schools were very committed to the task of full inclusion as demonstrated by strong leadership, teacher confidence in including all students, parental support and a pro-active approach to addressing any issues that arise. Full inclusion has brought about a transformation in how schools and education are conceived in New Brunswick. Shevlin and Banks (2021) commented that the full inclusion ‘New Brunswick’ model is being seriously considered by Irish policymakers for the first time. This has challenged the traditional mind-set that promoted special schools and special settings within mainstream schools for students with additional needs (Shevlin and Banks, 2021).

The NCSE (2019) suggested it was timely, considering the full inclusion debate and current inclusion policies, whether special schools and classes should be continued to be offered as an option or whether greater inclusion in mainstream offers a better way forward. The UNCRPD increased obligations and responsibilities for countries to promote full inclusion is igniting a debate surrounding education provision for students with special educational needs and intellectual disabilities. According to recent reports for the National Council for

Special Education to date, we cannot draw definitive conclusions, from the literature, that one type of educational placement is better than another for children and young people with special educational needs (NCSE, 2019). The NCSE (2019) further reported that full inclusion in mainstream, while it could be achieved, would require a fundamental change of school culture where every child in the community is welcomed and educated, irrespective of need or ability. School culture would need to be based on the acceptance that all students rightfully belonged in their local school and this right was not dependent on the generosity or willingness of individual boards of management to enrol a student with complex special educational need (NCSE, 2019).

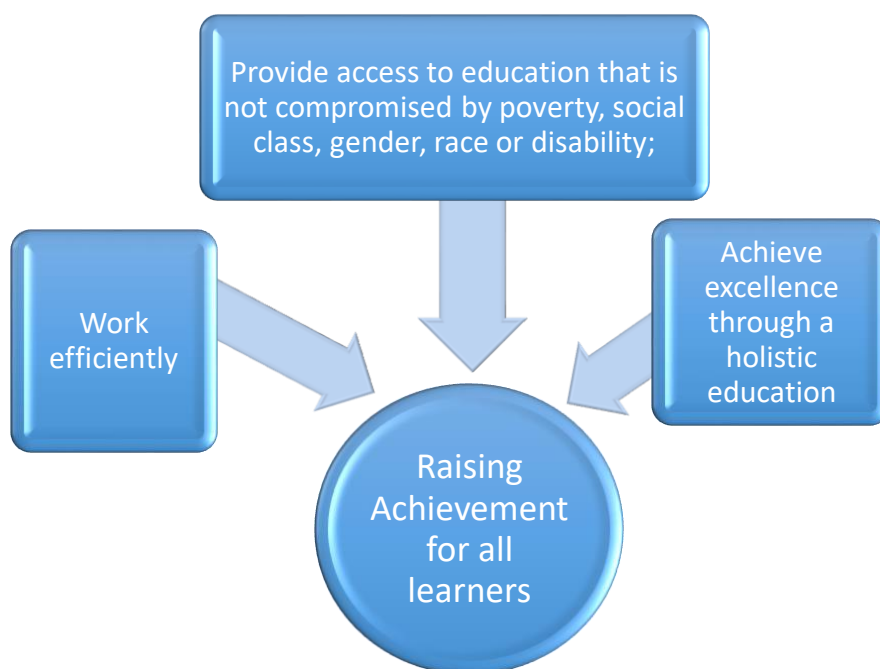
2.4.15 Challenges to Implementing Inclusive Education

Both nationally and internationally, the challenges of implementing inclusive education policies have been recognised (Rose et al. 2015). Ireland is not unique, among the OECD countries, in facing the challenge of developing inclusive learning environments against the backdrop of rapidly changing educational and societal landscapes (Rose et al. 2015). The UK strategy document 'Removing Barriers to Achievement' acknowledges that schools encounter more problems including children with certain types of SEN, particularly those who have behavioural difficulties (Department for Education, 2004b). Barriers to inclusion can be lowered through active collaboration among policymakers, education personnel and other stakeholders, including the active involvement of members of the local community, such as political and religious leaders, local education officials and the media (UNESCO, 2009).

Dyson et al. (2004) state that 'solutions', which lead to initiatives that are simply overlaid or bolted on to an inherently unfair system, will inevitably fail. Perry and Francis (2010) similarly found that, despite the development of various positive interventions, the literature shows doubts as to whether the 'grafting' of

interventions onto a fundamentally unequal education system can significantly address inequality. Although policymakers are intent on closing the gap in educational achievement, recent strategies aiming to achieve this, either by raising aspirations or diversifying the market, are significantly flawed (EADSNE, 2002). *'Raising Achievement for All Learners'* is an ethical imperative which has been given a priority at European level and has been identified as a key issue for all member countries of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE, 2002). Rather than revisiting definitions of inclusive education or justifying a move to more inclusive approaches, policy-makers, school leaders and teachers should collaborate to ensure equity by providing access to education that is not compromised by poverty, social class, gender, race or disability (EADSNE, 2002). Finally, all stakeholders should strive to achieve excellence through a holistic education which will improve the lives of all young people (EADSNE, 2002). Figure 13 illustrates how collaboration can ensure equity and access to education for all learners.

Figure 13: Raising Achievement for All Learners



The provision for the education of students with SEN creates a range of questions related to governance, curriculum, detection and placement (Norwich, 2008). Frequently, students are placed upon a continuum of need (Rix, 2011; Martin, 2009) supported within a continuum of provision (Lynch, 2007) and by a continuum of services (DeLorenzo, 2008). This interlocking continuum constitutes a major governance challenge (Rix et al. 2013). Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2003 (OFSTED) report found that more mainstream schools saw themselves as inclusive, but only a minority met special educational needs very well. Effective inclusion was frustrated by rigid timetabling, inflexible staffing and lack of inventiveness in some schools (OFSTED, 2003). The admission of pupils with behavioural difficulties proved to be the greatest test for the inclusion framework. Their inclusion created difficulties in reconciling the school's duty to meet individual needs and yet ensure the efficient education of other children. Adapting the curriculum and teaching methods remained the perennial challenge for schools and teachers (OFSTED, 2003).

Research suggests that access to primary school is fraught with difficulties for children with an intellectual disability and/or developmental disability (Flatman Watson, 2004). Schools believed they were incapable of accommodating this cohort of children. School leaders and school staff defended their stance by highlighting the waiting time for assessments to be carried out, for additional resources to be sanctioned, and deficiencies within the school, such as lack of resources or trained staff, and the belief that the child's perceived 'care' needs or behavioural difficulties could not be accommodated within the school (Shevlin et al. 2011). Costello (1999) concluded that school policy on the provision for pupils with SEN has been dominated by organisational and administrative concerns. Shevlin et al. (2013) questioned the ability of schools to translate policy into credible practice and recognised the importance of the school's ethos as a starting point for the development of inclusive provision. It is important to distinguish here between needs and requirements at an administrative level e.g., for funding levels

and at a pedagogic-curriculum level, what is to be learned and how to be taught (Norwich, 2010).

Since the early 1990s the main thrust of disability policy internationally has been a move away from segregation towards supporting people with disabilities to live their lives independently in the community (NCSE, 2021). The Salamanca Statement (1994) focused the world's attention on the many ways in which children identified as having special educational needs have been historically and, in some places, legally excluded from mainstream or regular education systems. (Florian, 2019). Florian (2019) argues that by recognising that all children should be educated within an inclusive education system, Salamanca challenged the idea that different forms of provision for different types of learners were needed as the way to provide for all. The conceptualisation of inclusive education has been broadened by policies to encompass anyone who might be excluded from or have limited access to the general educational system within a country (Florian, 2019).

Inclusion in the broader sense means breaking down barriers facing students, extending opportunities and networks to young people and ensuring that schools are welcoming and educationally effective (EASNIE, 2016). The European Agency for Special Needs in Inclusive Education refers to young people with a disability and/or special educational need being more likely to bear a particular risk of early school leaving. Early school leaving can be closely related to limitation in education opportunities, participation and achievements. EASNIE (2016) highlighted the importance of understanding whether inclusive provision protects young people with SEN against risks for early school leaving or increases those risks. Combatting risks from early school leaving among young people identified as having SEN and/or disability involves ensuring that these young people have an appropriately high level of support, that their transitions are carefully planned, that

their families are involved and that there are appropriate high quality, upper secondary opportunities available to them.

Slee et al. (2019) states that essentially inclusive education is a response to the longstanding tradition of educational exclusion. Inclusive education in its inception registers an unequivocal protest against educational exclusion that is symptomatic of and sustenance for social exclusion. Exclusion is contingent and experienced differently in different contexts including disability and or educational exclusion (Slee et al. 2019). Inclusive education embraced a commitment to dismantling exclusions that formed the foundations for the oppression of vulnerable individuals and population cohorts (Slee, 2019). Florian (2019) highlights that special needs education reproduces exclusion because it is positioned at the margin of education's normative centre. It is only when what is generally available to most learners does not meet the needs of some, that special needs arise, and additional support is thought to be needed (Florian, 2019). Slee (2010) highlights that such targeted responses to individual difference, such as special needs provision, where differentiated forms of provision for some can results in a repetition of exclusion within schools. UNESCO (2018) refers to inclusive education as a process because of the ubiquity and resilience of exclusion as a social and educational phenomenon. Exclusion is a stubborn foe that has long been a part of schooling's institutional and cultural DNA (Slee et al. 2022).

2.4.16 Inclusion and Pedagogy

Inclusion and inclusive education reform have been on the international and national agenda for the past few decades. This chapter has outlined the debates and policies surrounding the education provision for student with special educational needs. Using the Bronfenbrenner's ecology model, this research has explored the macrosystem, which has focused on the ideological, cultural and attitudinal shifts which have occurred in society and the relevant discourse surrounding the education of students with special educational needs. The teaching of students with special educational needs, inclusive pedagogy and the supports required in the learning environment for diverse learners will be explored in the following section. In addition the Universal Design for Learning Framework will be explored.

Messiou and Ainscow (2021) refers to inclusion as being an interconnected processes which involves talking about diversity; learning from experiences; developing inclusive practices and engaging with students' views. This indicates that inclusion is less about the introduction of particular techniques, or new organizational arrangements, and much more about processes of social learning within particular contexts (Messiou and Ainscow, 2021). Florian and Beaton (2017) refers to inclusive pedagogy as a pedagogical response to individual differences between pupils that avoids the marginalisation that can occur with differentiation strategies that are designed only with individual needs in mind. Pro-inclusion policies in school are staffed by teachers whose pedagogical practices are based on beliefs that all children can learn and they accept the responsibility for educating all children in the classes they teach (Florian, 2019).

Inclusive teaching pedagogy approaches the classroom as a group of individuals in a common educational practice. Inclusive pedagogy focuses on how teachers are able to include everyone without marginalising some (Florian and Beaton, 2017). Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) explain how the alternative inclusive

pedagogical approach that has emerged in recent years helps to overcome the barriers to inclusion that are embedded in the traditional individual needs approach to inclusive education. Florian (2015) acknowledges that the process of providing for all pupils by differentiating for some on the basis of individual need can be problematic when it calls attention to differences between learners. Slee (2010) refers to the 'repetition of exclusion' whereby learners are included in the classroom but excluded from opportunities to participate in collaborative or group activities. The classwork students are given is differentiated to such an extent that they end up isolated from the classroom community even though they may be physically present (Slee, 2010). A key challenge for many teachers is not simply learning to listen to pupils but using what they have learned from listening to inform future practice. Florian and Beaton (2017) highlighted from their research how pupils will trust teachers are listening to them when their competence is communicated both in word and deed, and then will choose to engage and participate in activities that are genuine and meaningful to them as learners. This illustrates the true meaning of the concept of inclusion (Florian and Beaton, 2017).

The NCSE Framework on Inclusive Practice (2011) describes how management and staff engage in curriculum planning as a core component of inclusive teaching and learning. The NCSE (2016) published guidelines, 'Planning for Life after School', which reported that in schools where there are ASD-specific classes and children are included in mainstream classes, there needs to be collaboration and consultation between the class teachers and the teacher in the ASD-specific class to optimise the child's curriculum access. Teacher professional learning is crucial for promoting inclusion (Messiou & Ainscow, 2015). Florian (2017) recognises the shift on inclusive education research has moved away from traditional approaches that focus on individual differences and the idea that differentiated teaching for 'some' towards including 'all' students in teaching and learning.

Supporting class teachers to extend what is generally available to everybody rather than including all students by differentiating for some, can avoid the negative

effects of treating some students as different (Florian, 2019). The NCSE Framework on Inclusive Practice (2011) describes how staff are trained in the use of specialist equipment and strategies, and actively engaged in the curriculum planning as a core component of inclusive teaching and learning. Teaching should involve the use of suitable teaching and learning methodologies, materials and arrangements (NCSE, 2011). All teaching staff should focus on creating learning experiences that are positive, success-oriented and foster learning. This can be done through authentic learning activities which promote cooperative teaching, differentiation and the promotion of positive classroom relationships (NCSE, 2011). Teaching should be planned and informed by whole-school planning to enable pupils with special educational needs to access the curriculum in a meaningful manner (NCSE, 2011).

Florian and Spratt (2013) highlights that too often inclusive education has been interpreted as educating all students in the same building, while continuing to provide those identified as having 'special needs' with an educational experience that is different from that which is available to others within the class. Differentiation of education based on 'ability' and 'needs' creates a dual track model of additional or special education. This highlights and exacerbates the marginalisation and isolation of these students and contributes to the social construction of disability (Grenier, 2010). Inclusive pedagogical approach seeks to provide appropriate support while avoiding the stigma of marking certain students as different (Florian and Spratt, 2013). Florian and Spratt (2013) explain how inclusive pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that supports teachers to respond to individual differences between learners but avoids the marginalisation that can occur when some students are treated differently. Florian and Spratt (2013) refers to inclusion as not being viewed as passive, being 'done to' a certain group of students, but as a dynamic process that involves all children in the life and learning of school.

Teacher professional learning is crucial for promoting inclusion (Messiou and Ainscow, 2015). Inclusive pedagogy demands that class teachers take

responsibility for all learners, including those who are experiencing difficulties (Florian and Spratt, 2013). Florian and Spratt (2013) suggest that class teachers are encouraged to view difficulty in learning as dilemmas for themselves as teachers, rather than deficits in students, and to seek new approaches to support students. Inclusive pedagogy advocates an approach where by the teachers provides a range of options that are available to everybody in the class rather than a set differentiated options only for some. This pedagogical approach acknowledges human diversity as a strength and fosters an open-ended view of each student's potential to learn (Florian and Spratt, 2013).

2.4.16.1 Universal Design for Learning

Inclusive pedagogy is a cornerstone of inclusive education. How students with special educational needs are educated in the classroom by their teachers and how teachers can respond to student diversity is a debate which will provide important insight into the full inclusion debate. Following the Bronfenbrenner theoretical framework, there are dynamic and fluid influences at the mesosystem between teachers / classroom environment / other class students and the individual with special educational needs. The following section will provide a detailed outline of the framework for Universal Design for Learning (UDL) which will explore how UDL can be used to create equitable, inclusive classroom for all learners.

The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (2007) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2020) stress the need to provide equitable and inclusive education for everyone (Flood and Banks 2021). Over the past two decades, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework has become a key pedagogical framework which seeks to address the traditional 'one size fits all' curriculum that exists in many countries (Meyer et al. 2014) and seeks to promote inclusive and equitable education in response to student diversity (Flood and Banks, 2021). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a set of principles and guidelines that aim to support all learners by using a variety of teaching methods to reduce barriers to learning (AHEAD, 2021). UDL is a philosophy and practice

that seeks to design for the greatest diversity of people (Rose and Meyers, 2002) and which provides for an inclusive and equitable education for everyone (Flood and Banks, 2021). The concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is key to inclusion because it increases access to equal learning opportunities within the mainstream teaching environment, including learners with disabilities (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). Recent education debates have begun to focus on moving towards more equitable systems of education and the use of innovative pedagogies such as UDL which enhance the school experiences of every student (NCSE, 2019). The Universal Design for Learning perspective recognises that every learner is different, that learning or training needs to be adaptable and responsive and, that there is no such thing as the average learner (Burgstahler, 2009). UDL share the same common goal of universal access (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020).

The UDL approach lends itself to the Bronfenbrenner ecosystem model (Quirke et al. 2021). The relationship between the students and teacher has its own ecology and empowers the student with disability, their experiences and gives them a voice (Quirke and McGuckin, 2021). UDL is a framework, based on scientific insights into how humans learn to improve and optimise teaching and learning for all people (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). UDL assumes diversity in the student population and provides guidelines where they have flexibility and choices around how they learn and how they can share what they have learned (Flood and Banks, 2021). Until recently, differentiation has been the method of choice in Ireland for teachers wishing to include students with special educational needs. However, Meyer et al. (2014) highlight that many argue that the disability is within the curriculum, in addition to the learning and teaching environment, not the student. In recent years, education debates have begun to focus on moving towards more equitable systems of education and the use of innovative pedagogies such as UDL to enhance the school experiences of every student (NCSE, 2019).

UDL promotes the engagement and independence of students as it ensures a variety of pathways through choice and flexibility (Meyer et al. 2014). These pathways provide for understanding content where goals are clear and specific to the expected outcome. Also student assessment is flexibly designed to enable learners to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and skills in a variety of ways (Meyer et al. 2014). At the core of UDL are three principles that teachers are required to provide. Principle One: Engagement - focuses on providing multiple ways for students to engage in their learning; Principle Two: Representation focuses multiple means of representation to provide students with equitable access to the learning content; and Principle Three: Action and Expression centres on multiple ways for students to demonstrate and express their knowledge, understanding, and skills (Meyer et al. 2014). By presenting information in multiple ways to students, teachers reduce barriers to accessing learning, therefore creating an inclusive learning experience for every student (Flood and Banks, 2021). The UDL approach is for all learners - not just those who have a disability and learners that require differing levels of support (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020).

2.4.16.2 Universal Design for Learning in Ireland

Universal Design for Learning is a relatively new concept in Ireland. In addition to the ratification of various international conventions and the introduction of national policies that promote inclusive education, the potential benefits of UDL are beginning to appear in policy documents at both further and higher education levels (Flood and Banks, 2022). Ireland has witnessed substantial developments in how we think about, and respond to, issues related to equality, disability, and active inclusion in educational settings (Rose et al. 2010). Inclusion demands major changes within society itself and it is essential to recognise that what happens within all aspects of education and training is integral to achieving authentic inclusive education and practice (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). Focus has turned to whether instructional practices, or pedagogy, can increase access and engagement with the curriculum for every student (DES, 2015). In recent years there has been growing diversity in the profile of the learner population across the Irish education system (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). There is a desire to uphold

the rights of learners who have a disability to an education that is appropriate to their needs (Quirke et al. 2018). Whilst Quirke and McCarthy (2020) consider this a positive trend, it also generates challenges for everyone involved in education and necessitates that environments are created that can support active inclusion (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). This requires a multi-tiered approach that involves leadership, teaching and learning, assessment and a Universal Design for Learning approach (Quirke et al. 2018). Active inclusion, a European and Irish Government priority, is a core aspect of SOLAS' Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019.

2.4.16.3 UDL at Higher and Further Education

Active inclusion enables every citizen, notably the most disadvantaged, to fully participate in society, including having a job (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). Active inclusion was a key goal of the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy (2014-2019), which highlights how the sector seeks to increase the levels of active inclusion through the provision of high quality, more accessible and flexible education and training programmes and supports which are more suited to the identified needs of the individual. Until recently UDL in Ireland has traditionally focused in the higher education sector with little discussion about the role UDL can play at primary and second-level education to achieve inclusion (Flood and Banks, 2021). The Further Education and Training Authority announced guidelines for the implementation of UDL for their further education and training programmes. This marks a positive step forward in creating inclusive environments post schools for students with ID. An important factor to acknowledge when considering inclusive education and training are concerns with respect to fairness to all learners, including learners with a disability, and the maintenance of QA standards (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). A UDL approach may change how education and training is delivered, quality is maintained and the learning experience is often enhanced by the implementation of such an approach (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). Although empirical studies specifically focusing on the impact of UDL on student outcomes are limited, those available indicate UDL's potential to improve student outcomes (Flood and Banks, 2021).

2.4.16.4 UDL at Junior Cycle

The philosophy of UDL has been associated with the recent review of the lower secondary curriculum and introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle in 2015 (DES, 2015). For the first time in Ireland, there is explicit mention of UDL in curriculum design in the Framework for Junior Cycle which was specifically designed with the intention of having one curriculum for every student (Flood and Banks, 2021). This development in design aligns with the UDL inclusive mind-set of multiple means of engagement and provides greater access to learning for every student (Flood and Banks, 2021). The UDL approach to curricular provision and accreditation is reflected by the ongoing developments associated with the work of the NCCA (Hick et al. 2018). The Junior Cycle framework has had a significant impact on meaningful engagement in learning for students with intellectual disabilities. Ongoing developments include the creation of a continuum of accreditation across level 1-3 which include students of all abilities who attend mainstream and special schools (Hick et al. 2018). The new revised Junior Cycle Framework (2015) introduced for the first time an assessment procedure included choices for students with the provision of options of Level 1 Learning Programmes (L1LPs) and Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LPs). Depending on pathway choices, students undertake a combination of formative assessments including Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs) throughout the Junior Cycle, and state examinations (DES, 2014). The nature of CBAs and other formative assessments embodies UDL's multiple means of action and expression as they allow teachers and students the autonomy to co-design the assessment brief and activity (Flood and Banks, 2021).

2.4.16.5 UDL at Senior Cycle

Senior cycle is currently under review in Ireland. Following extensive research and consultation by the NCCA, its review findings in an advisory report to the Minister for Education in 2021 indicate an appetite among students, parents, and teachers for greater flexibility in subject and programme choices and more learner-centred approaches in teaching, learning, and assessment at senior cycle (NCCA, 2019).

Consultation with stakeholders for this review highlighted that many believe that the current senior cycle provision is too narrowly focused on students' academic ability. This means many students, including those with special educational needs are left without pathways (NCCA, 2019). The NCCA review findings shows that there is a keen focus on flexible pathways and assessment in a future curriculum design (NCCA, 2019).

2.4.16.6 Inclusion Summary

Inclusion is a driving force behind government and international educational policy. It is difficult to see how inclusion policy and inclusive practices in the school setting can co-exist if students with special educational needs are educated in a separate building and follow an individualised and/or developmental curriculum. It is difficult to align this debate with the idea of inclusion. Recent nationally and international policy and education debates has focused on inclusion, including concepts such as access, quality, equity, plurality, diversity, social justice, democracy, equal opportunity of involvement, and to some extent of outcomes (Norwich, 2013). Inclusion is about high-quality educational opportunity for everyone and not about providing something 'special' or 'different' for some; it is about providing a meaningful education for all (Florian et al. 2017).

Inclusion is not viewed as passive, being 'done to' certain groups of children, but as a dynamic process that involves all children in the life and learning of the school (Florian and Spratt, 2013). Florian (2019) argues that the idea of each learner as unique dissolves the bell-curve barrier between 'most' and 'some', enabling the problem of difference to be replaced by thinking about human diversity as a fundamental element of one's unique individuality and shared humanity. The acknowledgment that there will be many differences between different learner groups because each and every individual is unique must replace dissatisfaction with special needs education as a response to difference. (Florian, 2019). The

NCSE (2019) stated that following the current debates surrounding inclusion, it is now the necessary to test the conventional thinking that student's outcomes are so much better in such schools that it justifies them being put on buses to and from individual campuses with little opportunity to mix with children who do not have special educational needs. It is appropriate and timely to consider the educational journey of students who attend special schools and to investigate the programmes and outcomes students experiences.

There has been progress towards developing more inclusive policies with transformational change evident in policy and service provision affecting the lives of people with disabilities (NCSE, 2021). Included in this progress was a shift from medicalised to social models of support and an increasing focus on the life course of pupils with SEN (NCSE, 2021). The exploration of recent curriculum developments in Ireland indicates a shift in mindset towards UDL as a framework for inclusive education in Irish schools. UDL is more than just a practice, it is a philosophy and an ethos that is continually evolving (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). Ensuring a high standard of inclusive teaching and learning is a vision that requires, not just an understanding of how to accommodate a diversity of learners, but also the openness to adopt and adapt the best pedagogical approaches available (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). There is little evidence that UDL is part of programmes of Initial Teacher Education in Ireland where student teachers could gain an understanding of UDL as part of their preparation for learning and teaching in primary and second-level classrooms (Reynor, 2020). The position teachers take and how they approach teaching is a critical factor in successfully enacting any initiative to improve inclusive education (Flood and Banks, 2021). Following UDL principles means that inclusive teaching and learning approaches are composed at the design stage of the teaching to ensure accessibility, variability and flexibility for all learners regardless of their strengths and needs. The following section will explore the area of curriculum and accreditation in Ireland for students with ID in post primary special schools.

2.5 Curriculum

2.5.1 Introduction

The quality and strength of learning, teaching and assessment, leadership, and curriculum in schools is dependent on the vision, commitment, and capacity of the teachers who bring the curriculum to life (Flood and Banks, 2021). As outlined previously Universal Design for Learning are beginning to surface across the curriculum principles that espouse engagement, participation and relevance, partnership, and choice and flexibility, from primary to senior cycle. The following section will explore what curriculum is available to students with intellectual disabilities at post primary level in Ireland.

Florian et al. (2017) emphasised how high levels of inclusion can be entirely compatible with high levels of achievement and, furthermore, that combining the two is not only possible but essential if all children are to have the opportunity to participate fully in education. Debates about inclusion now involve considerations of how all children and young people might be meaningfully included in national curricula and systems of assessment and how their participation might be judged (Florian et al. 2017). Slee (2020) debates that in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) there was mention of the need for a continuum of support to match the continuum of need, but this was within every school, rather than across schools; and there was discussion of a curriculum to suit different abilities and interests, but it was clearly stated that this should not be a different curriculum. Farrell (2010) identifies as a priority for student with special educational needs must be that they have access to curricula appropriate for them and to ensure they are not simply fitted into a national curriculum which was designed for the mainstream population.

The curriculum essentially sets out what is to be taught, how it is to be taught and how learning is to be assessed (O'Mara et al. 2012). An inclusive curriculum must

consider the different abilities and needs of all students and be adapted to be accessible and flexible so that those diverse needs are met (O'Mara et al. 2012). With the advent of inclusive education policies and practices, many countries are addressing the need for students with SEN to have access to the general curriculum. Ware et al. (2011) reported that, if inclusive education is to become reality, a curriculum needs to be in place which can set suitable learning challenges for the diversity of learners (including those with SEN). Teachers need to be equipped to respond to pupils' diverse learning needs. Potential barriers to learning and assessment need to be overcome so that students with SEN can access the breadth of the curriculum at a level which meets their learning needs (Ware et al. 2011).

O'Mara et al. (2012) outlined the curriculum dilemma which focuses on the range of subjects and activities for which students with SEN might be included or excluded. Students with SEN may be excluded from certain activities which teachers feel cannot be modified sufficiently to include them, in particular science and sports (O'Mara, 2012). However, students with lower academic abilities can be excluded from full access to more academic aspects of the curriculum. There is a real risk that students with SEN could be excluded from a substantial proportion of the curriculum for these different reasons. This is more likely at post-primary level where such decisions are more in the control of individual subject teachers with limited overview of the education being received by each student (O'Mara et al. 2012).

Mitchell (2010) in a review of education provision in New Zealand, reports that some schools are resisting the inclusion of pupils with SEN on the grounds that the teachers lack the training to manage them in the regular classroom. In Canada, Timmons (2006) in her review of the establishment of inclusive learning environments, finds teachers to be supportive of inclusion, in principle, but

overwhelmed by the scope of the change that inclusion requires when they consider the organisational and pedagogical issues involved (Rose et al. 2015). An adapted special or individualised curriculum was frequently mentioned in international policies but whilst in some countries, such as Japan, this had to be consistent with the regular curriculum, in others, such as Italy, it was flexible with a broad focus upon developing various competencies, abilities, skills and knowledge (Rix et al. 2013). In Norway, it was evident how easily individualised programmes separate and segregate the pupils from their peers (Rix et al. 2013). In the United States, the IDEA (1997, 2004) and the 'No Child Left Behind Act' (2002) specified that all students, including those with significant cognitive disabilities, must have opportunities to participate and progress in the general curriculum (Mitchell, 2010). Though not all students with learning disabilities are perceived to be appropriately placed, virtually all students with learning disabilities (99%) in general academic classes are expected to keep up with others in their class. However, just over three-quarters (78%) are reported by their teachers to do so (National Longitudinal Transition Study - 2, 2006). To help them to keep up, almost all students with learning disabilities are reported to require some type of accommodation support or learning aid (NLTS-2, 2006). Curriculum flexibility is considered important, to accommodate students with special educational needs, but the curriculum for these students can be too narrow (Alberta Education 2009). Scotland seeks to ensure that students with SEN can access the common curriculum framework, while at the same time, ensuring appropriate and targeted support (Riddell et al. 2006).

Riddell et al. (2006) identified five strategies for customising the curriculum: differentiation, adaptation, enhancement, enrichment and elaboration to enable teachers to plan a suitable curriculum for individual students, while ensuring that their learning is framed by the national curriculum guidelines. Tomlinson (2001) reported that pupils with SEN follow a narrow curriculum, which has consequences for achieving certification. It is generally agreed that providing access to a full curriculum for many students with SEN requires a degree of modification of what

is taught and how it is delivered and assessed. But the degree to which this happens in practice is variable (Newman, 2006). Meegan and MacPhail (2006) highlighted that the general acceptance of the right to schooling of individuals with disabilities had not been matched by a right to full educational access to all aspects of the curriculum. In a wide-ranging analysis of what should constitute an appropriate curriculum for students with disabilities, Browder et al. (2011) recognised that the content of instruction has been one of the most controversial areas in education, because determining what students will learn in school reflects both educational philosophy and societal values.

2.5.2 Curriculum in Ireland

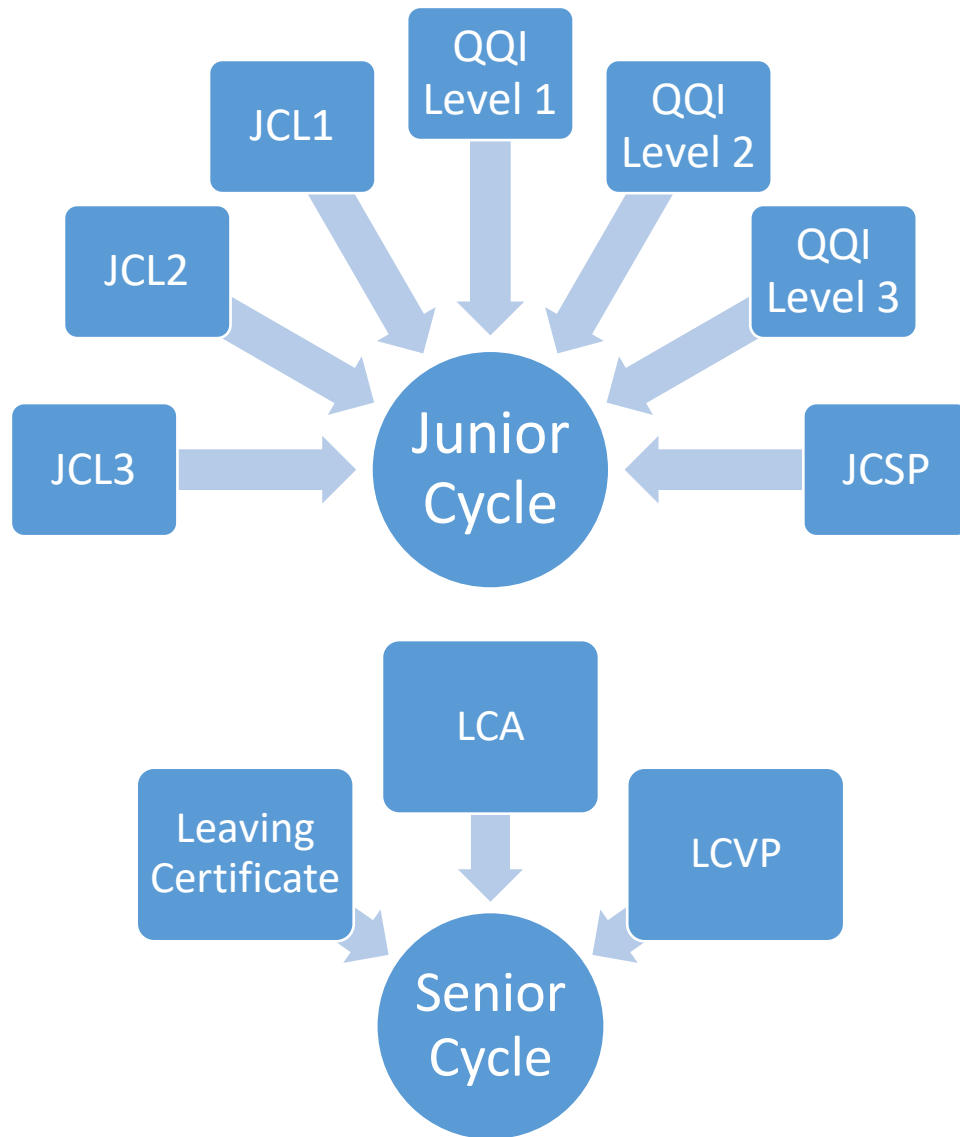
In Ireland, the Minister for Education determines the curriculum for primary and post primary school and is advised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The NCCA is also responsible for advising on the requirements of students with a disability or special educational needs and is obliged to consult with the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on developing this advice. Policy in Ireland is consistent with the general view among most education professionals: that it is entirely fair and equitable that students with SEN should have access to a broad curriculum at post-primary (O'Mara et al. 2012).

The NCCA (2007) states that the curriculum should aim to produce meaningful outcomes which deliver benefits to those with special educational needs which are not separate from, nor devalued in any way relative to those available to their peers. This view is entirely consistent with the current internationally held belief that students with special educational needs should have access to a curriculum that is broad, balanced, relevant, and differentiated (NCCA, 2007). As noted by the NCSE (2006), a key dilemma is how to describe and develop an education for those with special educational needs that is strongly linked to the curriculum.

In 2009 the NCCA outlined proposals to design a new curricular framework for the provision of education for some students with learning disabilities at post-primary level. This document was based on feedback from the education partners on the Draft Guidelines for Teachers of Students with Mild General Learning Disabilities (NCCA, 2003) which was finally published in 2007. Feedback from this consultation process flagged a gap in curriculum, assessment and certification provision at the Junior Cycle for students within the mild to moderate range of general learning disabilities (Douglas et al. 2014). The NCCA (2009) highlighted that the mainstream curriculum was not appropriate for this group of students who needed concerted support in personal, social and vocational development. (NCCA, 2009). The view emerged during these consultations that there existed a group of students who, even with the support of teachers using the most sophisticated approaches to differentiation, would never access the mainstream Junior Cycle curriculum (Douglas et al. 2014). Differentiating instruction involves adapting teaching and curriculum content to meet the learning needs of pupils with special educational needs. The risks associated with differentiated curriculum include lowered teacher expectations, oversimplification of material leading to exclusion for more demanding academic tasks and following a narrow curriculum with consequences for achieving certification (Rose et al. 2015).

The Irish post-primary system consists of a three-year Junior Cycle (lower secondary) followed by a two or three-year Senior Cycle (upper secondary) depending on whether a student participated in the optional Transitional Year programme (Department of Education and Skills). Figure 14 illustrates the Irish post primary education system.

Figure 14: Irish Post-Primary Education System



Students usually begin the Junior Cycle at aged 12 and complete the Junior Cycle examinations at the end of year 3. The main objective of the Junior Cycle is for students to complete a broad and balanced curriculum and to develop the knowledge and skills to proceed to Senior Cycle education (Department of Education and Skills). Currently there is an ongoing review of Senior Cycle by the NCCA. Presently, the Senior Cycle caters for students aged 15 to 18. Transition Year is optional and it aims to give students an opportunity to experience a wide

range of educational inputs, including work experience. In the final two years of Senior Cycle, students participate in one of three Senior Cycle programmes - the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) or the Leaving Certification Vocational Programme (LCVP) (Department of Education and Skills). The LCE ends with the traditional terminal examinations at the end of 2 years. The LCA programme is aimed at meeting the needs of those students who are not catered for in the traditional LCE and the LCVP concentrates on technical subjects and modules which have a vocational focus (Department of Education and Skills). One of the main themes of this research is to highlight the curriculum programmes which students with ID have engaged with at Senior Cycle in post-primary special schools in Ireland. Special classes at post-primary are predominantly offered in the Junior Cycle years – with Senior Cycle provision much less prevalent (McCoy et al. 2014).

2.5.2.1 Junior Cycle Curriculum

The Framework for Junior Cycle (2015), outlines the first three years of student's post primary education and constitutes the final phase of compulsory education in Ireland. Most students with general learning disabilities should be able to access most, if not all, subjects and short courses through differentiated teaching, learning and assessment (DES, 2015). The Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) incorporates teaching, learning and assessment practices which support the delivery of a quality, inclusive and relevant education that will meet the needs of junior cycle students, both now and in the future. The Junior Cycle (2015) outlines the curriculum and assessment arrangements which provides students with learning opportunities that will achieve a balance between learning subject knowledge and developing a wide range of skills and thinking abilities.

The revised and updated new Junior Cycle was introduced in 2016 with three national qualifications – Junior Cycle level 3, level 2, followed by the Junior Cycle

level 1 which was introduced in 2018. The Junior Cycle level 3 (JCL3) replaced the previously the established Junior Certificate. The revised Junior Cycle curriculum specifications and short courses developed by the NCCA were designed to be as universal as was feasible, providing meaningful and valuable learning opportunities for students from all cultural and social backgrounds and from a wide variety of individual circumstances (DES, 2012). This includes ensuring that the learning opportunities are as accessible as possible to students with special educational needs and that statements about the skills to be developed are articulated in a way that reflects this. Schools or other agencies preparing further short courses should also follow this principle of universal design for learning (DES, 2015).

The Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) identified the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) as the accreditation award for the Junior Cycle. The JCPA reports on achievement across all elements of assessment including ongoing, formative assessment; Classroom-Based Assessments and results from the state-certified examinations and the Assessment Tasks. The Junior Cycle provision that places the needs of students at the core of teaching and learning (DES, 2015). The inclusion of the JCPA recognises all areas of learning a student engages and participates in. For students with special educational needs the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement can capture other areas of learning and participation apart from the state examinations. This is a step forward in providing an opportunity for schools to comment on student achievement, participation or progress in other areas of learning (DES, 2015).

The addition of Junior Cycle Levels 1 and 2 Learning Programmes within the Junior Cycle framework was designed for students with particular special educational needs (DES, 2012). The DES (2012) outlines how Junior Cycle qualifications give schools more space and time to spend on deeper learning, literacy, numeracy and

key skills (DES, 2012). The Junior Cycle Level 2 Learning Programme (L2LP) and the Junior Cycle Level 1 Learning Programme (L1LP) are targeted at students with mild, moderate and severe to profound learning disabilities, and as such, they are small in number and represent the target group for these qualifications (NCCA, 2018).

The guidelines for L2LP and L1LP emphasise the importance of the students being included with their peers as much as possible and as appropriate to their needs (NCCA, 2018). There are two curriculum components that are central to the L2LP and L1LP programmes – Priority Learning Units (PLUs) and Short Courses (NCCA, 2018). L2LP and L1LP are designed to support post-primary schools and special schools in developing programmes to meet the specific learning needs of a group of students who are participating in Junior Cycle, but who are usually unable to achieve the learning outcomes involved in subjects leading to the Junior Cycle examination (Douglas et al. 2014). Students participating in L2LP have learning difficulties from the lower functioning mild to higher functioning moderate categories of general learning disability (Douglas et al. 2014). The L2LP qualification is designed for this target group, so that their learning achievements at Junior Cycle are fully recognised.

The guidelines for Level 2 Learning Programme were developed with the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NAMBSE). These programmes are capable of personalisation to suit the individual needs of a target group of students. The implementation of the L2LP was welcomed but it highlighted the facts the still there was a small group of students who were not able to access specific programmes and accreditation (NCCA, 2018). These students were generally at the early stages of cognitive development (NCCA, 2018). Level 1 Learning Programme was developed to capture this students cohort. L1LP focus on the students communication, cognitive, life and functional skills (NCCA, 2018).

The learning for this student cohort must be meaningful and interesting to them and offer opportunities for them to build on what they already can do (NCCA, 2018).

The existence of flexibility within the revised Junior Cycle is of enormous relevance to the Junior Cycle developments (Douglas et al. 2014). L2LP and L1LP are qualifications that will be taken on an exceptional basis (NCCA, 2018). The Junior Cycle qualification is no longer seen as relating solely and directly to an examination (Douglas et al. 2014).

2.5.2.1.1 Junior Certificate Schools Programme

The Junior Certificate Schools Programme is a national programme currently offered in 223 schools in Ireland (JCSP.ie). The JCSP operate within the Junior Cycle curriculum. The Junior Certificate Schools Programme was introduced by the DES in 1996 as an intervention within the Junior Cycle, specifically aimed at potential early school leavers and is relevant to young people who would benefit from a different approach to the Junior Cycle (JCSP.ie). The JCSP is a relevant to special educational needs students as it is a student-centred approach to education which provides students with a Junior Cycle education programme that meets their individual needs (JCSP.ie). An evaluation of the JCSP programme, carried out by the DES (2005) highlighted how many schools consider the programme suitable for students with SEN in both special schools and mainstream settings. This evaluation described how many of these students might not have attained any formal qualification were it not for their participation in the JCSP, and might indeed have left school early (DES, 2005).

2.5.2.1.2 Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) is an independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training

services in Ireland. It was established in 2012 (www.QQI.ie). The QQI's role is to maintain and develop the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The QQI approve programmes offered at a variety of schools, colleges and further and higher education and training institutions. These programmes lead to qualifications (QQI awards), listed in the NFQ, which are recognised internationally (www.QQI.ie). In accordance with the full range of qualifications in the National Framework Qualification, QQI programmes are offered to students from Level 1. Award standards are consistent with the NFQ's award classes i.e. major, special purpose, supplemental and minor awards (QQI.ie). The assessment of QQI programmes are based on accumulating credits through completion of modules. Assessment is through producing evidence of learning outcomes (QQI.ie). There are no end of year examinations.

2.5.2.2 Senior Cycle Curriculum

Senior Cycle education aims to help every student towards fulfilling their potential (NCCA, 2018). Learners in Senior Cycle are approaching the end of their time in school and are focusing on the directions they would like to take in their future lives (NCCA, 2017). At Senior Cycle most students participate in the Leaving Certificate (LC); however, alternative programmes such as the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) have been targeted at students who struggle with their academic work at Junior Cycle, experience behavioural difficulties and/or have special needs or learning difficulties (Banks et al. 2010). The LC, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied cater for students of different abilities and orientations (NCCA, 2018).

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is similar to the traditional Leaving Certificate Programme, with a concentration on technical subjects and some additional modules which have a vocational focus (www.education.ie). LCVP assessment comprises of a terminal examination after 2 years, while 60% of the total marks are allocated for the Links Module which consists of a portfolio

of work (PDST.ie). The LCA was introduced in 1995 by the NCCA and the DES as a distinct self-contained programme that offers students an alternative to the established Leaving Certificate (Banks et al. 2010). The LCA programme is designed to 'meet the needs of students who are not adequately catered for by other Leaving Certificate programmes or who choose not to opt for such programmes' (DES/NCCA, 2004). The LCA programme has been found to play an important role in provision for students with SEN (Banks et al. 2010) but weaknesses have also been found. Banks et al. (2010) highlight how students taking the LCA are often frustrated at the stigma associated with the programme in addition to the lack of challenge and inflexible nature of the curriculum.

2.5.2.2.1 Senior Cycle Review

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) are in the process of reviewing the existing Senior Cycle curriculum. The working groups and consultation processes have provided an oversight of the existing Senior Cycle and especially its limitations for students with special educational needs. This review process started as a scoping exercise in 2017 and reported that the existing Senior Cycle was deemed to be very content heavy, making it difficult to complete the course in the available time and constraining the use of more active teaching methods and a focus on independent learning by the NCCA (2018). Teachers highlighted that some aspects of Senior Cycle did not promote inclusion, as the existing Senior Cycle, which was more oriented towards academic rather than practical subjects, was seen as posing challenges for including young people with lower achievement levels and those with special educational needs (NCCA, 2018).

The implementation of the new Junior Cycle, specifically addresses for the first-time, curricular reform and the need for a more inclusive approach for students with SEN in 'a range of settings: in mixed ability classes and special classes' and in special schools (McCoy, 2014). There remains a considerable issue over

assessment of students in post-primary and special schools who do not participate in these programmes. The new developments in the Junior Cycle are a step towards further inclusion in terms of curriculum and assessment. NCCA (2018) identified the need to have a variety of teaching methods and assessment approaches to mirror those used in Junior Cycle such as the use of group and team work as well as projects and portfolios and an emphasis on oral presentation skills was also mentioned. The Senior Cycle review highlighted the need to ensure continuity between Junior and Senior Cycles as this lack of continuity of provision was seen as a particular issue for young people with SEN (NCCA, 2018).

Shevlin et al. (2008) found that students with SEN often experience exclusion from full curricular access in post-primary schools. There are major gaps in the evidence on how curriculum should best be designed, developed and delivered, and whether it needs to be adapted for post-primary students with SEN in Ireland (O'Mara et al. 2012). It is generally agreed that providing access to a full curriculum for many students with SEN requires a degree of modification of what is taught and how it is delivered and assessed. However, the degree to which this happens in practice is variable (O'Mara et al. 2012). Kenny et al. (2005) highlighted that there may be issues for children in accessing the curriculum due to the nature of their disabilities. Access can also be blocked for other reasons including difficulty in students obtaining the appropriate and necessary supports for certain subjects. What evidence there is suggests that providing effective access to an inclusive curriculum for students with SEN requires the support and commitment of school management and teaching staff (O'Mara, 2012).

One current debate in relation to the curriculum available to students with special educational needs is whether they require a different type of teaching, or whether they simply need 'good teaching' (Ware et al. 2011). As discussed in the earlier section Universal Design for Learning, when applied within a learning system,

ensures that learners feel more included and experience a greater feeling of belonging within that system. This inevitably results in greater equality and successful outcomes for all involved (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). Daniels and Porter (2007) highlighted that most children with SEN require teaching approaches that are based on careful assessment and opportunities for practice and transfer. The review of the new Senior Cycle curriculum would benefit from the progress made in the new Junior Cycle Framework (2015), which focused on the implementation of Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes. This would ensure access to all learners to an appropriate curriculum and a continuity of curriculum for students with special educational needs at Junior and Senior Cycle.

2.6 Accreditation

2.6.1 Introduction

This chapter has comprehensively outlined the current debates surrounding inclusion, the right to education for all learners, inclusive policies and inclusive special education. From the investigation of inclusive education, inclusive pedagogies and the curriculum available to students with intellectual disabilities in post primary special schools in Ireland have been explored. It is appropriate now to highlight the accreditation pathways avail to students with intellectual disabilities and how these accreditation pathways compare to their peers in mainstream. As with all concepts explored in this research, it is necessary to view accreditation pathways through the lens of inclusion and equality for all learners.

In recent years, the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE) has argued that assessment processes can both contribute to and hinder the process of inclusion. EADSNE has focused on what it refers to as 'inclusive assessment', which it defines as an approach to assessment in mainstream settings where policy and practice are designed to promote the learning of all pupils as far as possible. The overall goal of inclusive assessment is that all assessment policies and procedures should support and enhance the successful inclusion and participation of all pupils vulnerable to exclusion, including those with special educational needs (Watkins, 2007). Educational policy-makers should then optimise the needs of both the system and those of its students in determining assessment policies (Mitchell, 2010). In the UK, the Special Schools Working Group (SSWG) (2003) states that arguably it is more difficult to measure attainment in a special school than in a mainstream school because the students for whom the schools cater are generally operating at or below the levels of attainment of their peers (Ware et al. 2009). This conclusion may go some way towards highlighting the underlying reasons as to why there is such a dearth of information on outcomes for pupils with SEN in special schools (Ware et al. 2009).

2.6.2 Accreditation – An International Perspective

In some education systems, considerable teacher discretion is allowed in administration of assessments (Douglas et al. 2014). In England, tasks and tests set for assessment at the end of Key Stages 2 and 3 (for students aged 11 and 14, respectively) are designed to monitor attainment targets for each of the National Curriculum subjects and are expected to be accessible to the vast majority of students, including those with special educational needs. However, those children in Key Stage 2, working at level 1 (or below) of the National Curriculum eight-level scale are assessed by teacher assessment alone. Similarly, at Key Stage 3, students working at or below level 2 of the National Curriculum scale are assessed by teacher assessment and not by statutory national testing (Mitchell, 2010). In the UK, the influential government document '*Removing Barriers to Achievement*' (Department of Education, 2004b) stressed the need for accountability '*though we do not wish to prescribe one model, we are clear that all local monitoring arrangements should be linked to service standards for special educational needs specialist support and should be focused on outcomes for children and school self-evaluation*' (Department of Education, 2004, p78). The question of the appropriateness of standard accreditation and assessment tools, which are unilaterally used to assess all students, requires reform. Traditional measures for accrediting students for their work needs to be re-examined in the light of a diverse student population.

The '*Achievement for All*' project in England (Humphrey & Squires, 2010) illustrates how a study, designed specifically to evaluate a special needs intervention programme, can inform policy and practice (Cosgrove et al. 2014). The AfA initiative (Humphrey and Squires, 2010) piloted in the UK, attempts to address the area of pupil engagement and progress at individual and school level. From their findings, it is evident that collaboration plays a key role in raising achievement – within classrooms and schools, but also extending into local communities, with a key role for national and international networks to exchange ideas and enhance developing policy and practice (EADSNE, 2002). The '*Achievement for All*' project

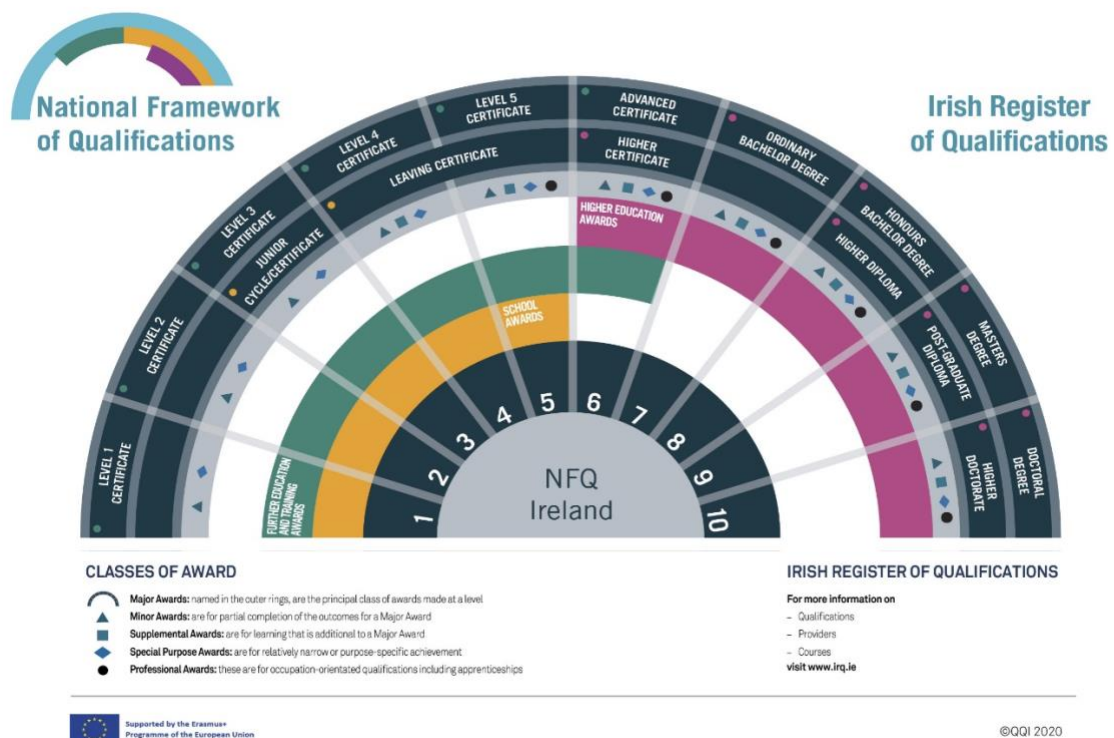
revealed a range of processes and practices that were important in improving pupil outcomes. Key factors leading to improvement in outcomes include the AfA lead personnel should include the principal or a member of the senior leadership team. Teachers should be involved more frequently in reviewing individual pupil and using data to inform assessment, tracking and intervention. Also, there should be more frequent parental involvement in reviewing individual pupil targets. A greater range of methods of communicating information to parents about pupils' progress was used in the AfA project and a greater range of professionals had access to pupil information (Humphreys and Squires, 2011).

Personalised learning is a European Union policy aim. Strategic Objective 3 of the strategic framework for European Co-operation in Education and Training (ET 2020) is concerned with promoting equity, social cohesion and citizenship states. EADSNE (2002) emphasised that education and training systems should aim to ensure that all learners, including those with special needs, should complete their education through the provision of more personalised learning. It is evident that countries need to develop national and local level data that will provide a comprehensive account of pupil progress across academic and social domains which can inform future provision for this cohort of pupils (Rose et al. 2015). While policy and practice designed to address equity issues remain at the margins rather than at the centre of mainstream education, little progress is likely to be made (EADSNE, 2002). Teachers need to be aware that children at risk of learning failure require support designed to ensure that they can make academic progress, even if it is at a slower pace than their peers (McCoy et al. 2019).

2.6.3 Accreditation in Ireland

Circular 0030/2014 states: 'a key aspiration for pupils with special needs is that they will, on completion of their school-based education, be able to graduate as young independent adults insofar as this is possible. People, including those with disabilities, need clear information when making choices about education and training courses that best meet their needs'. This aspiration is facilitated through the validation of courses under the National Framework of Qualifications or other recognised validation arrangements (NCSE, 2014). Ware et al. (2009) highlighted that a number of special schools are accessing mainstream post primary accreditation programmes. The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) provides a framework to validate educational and training programmes in Ireland (QQI, 2018). Figure 15 illustrates the NFQ framework.

Figure 15: National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)



Ref: QQI 2020

NFQ is an awards framework of ten levels aligned to the European Framework of Qualifications. The NFQ provides a structure to compare and contrast the level and standard of different qualifications. This helps the learner to make informed decisions about course and qualification choices and to consider the available progression opportunities. The NCSE (2014) highlighted that people, including those with disabilities, need clear information when making choices about education and training courses that best meet their needs. This is facilitated through the validation of courses under the NFQ or other recognised validation arrangements.

The awarding bodies for NFQ include Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and Institutes of Technology and Universities. These accreditation awards within the NFQ at Junior Cycle in post primary schools include Junior Cycle Levels 1, 2 and 3 and QQI Levels 2 and level 3. At Senior Cycle the accreditation awards are Leaving Certificate Established, LCA and LCVP. Post primary programmes have been introduced over the past 15 year which focus upon making the post-primary curriculum more accessible to students with diverse needs or at risk of early school leaving. These programmes include the JCL1, JCL2, Junior Certificate Schools Programme, QQI L1, QQI L2 at Junior Cycle and the Leaving Certificate Applied and LCVP at Senior Cycle.

Developing inclusive learning environments is complex and schools need to be proactive to ensure students are fully engaged academically and socially otherwise they risk students experiencing a far from inclusive learning environment (McCoy et al. 2019). Inclusion is defined as building a supportive educational environment that it is like to reduce early school leaving, which is closely related to other limitations in educational opportunities, participation and achievements (EASNIE, 2016). Senior Cycle is currently under review in Ireland and the extensive research going by the NCCA indicate an appetite among students, parents, and teachers for greater flexibility in subject and programme choices and more learner-centred approaches in teaching, learning, and assessment at senior cycle (NCCA, 2019).

2.6.4 Expectations and Aspirations

Shevlin et al. (2008) reported that the limited curricular access for pupils of post primary age was concerning and that the perceived lack of teacher expectations for these children was noted as a severe limitation on the efficacy of the education received in certain special school. O'Mara et al. (2012) reports that students in lower ability streams, which include students with SEN, may be less challenged academically throughout their post-primary education and may become demoralised because they are in the lower stream, with a lower self-image, and spending less time on homework than students in higher streams. Teacher attitudes are important in determining how far students with SEN can access the curriculum (Rose et al. 2010). Rix et al. (2013) emphasised the teacher's significant role in shaping interaction and enhancing learning opportunities in the classroom. Teachers who see themselves as responsible for fostering the learning of all their students promote higher order interactions and engage for longer with their students with SEN (Rix et al. 2013). In contrast, teachers who consider that others are primarily responsible for such learning tend to have lower-level, non-academic interactions with these students.

Learners can best access the curriculum when interacting with others, and when prior knowledge is used as a basis for future learning on which to build (Rix et al. 2013). Often, low expectations from teachers of students with SEN can result in a denial of curriculum access or involvement in assessment for accreditation (Rose et al. 2015). Parental expectations affects student expectations of themselves (Newman, 2006). The ethos and culture of the school influences the level of importance placed on inclusive practices, affecting teacher attitudes towards achievable goals for pupils with SEN (Doyle et al. 2017). Schools can influence academic attainment levels experienced by this cohort of pupils (Rose et al. 2015). Positive academic outcomes were most consistently reported, where young people participated alongside their peers in classrooms, characterised by higher scores in maths and reading (Rose et al. 2015).

O'Mara et al. (2012) found few studies that reported on academic attainment in students with SEN and their peers in the context of access to the curriculum. There is still a group of students for whom current post-primary provision does not meet their curriculum or assessment needs. Students with SEN are not a homogeneous group and their requirements often vary. This means single, simple solutions are unlikely to work consistently with all such students (O'Mara et al. 2012). There is an assumption that many of these children leave formal education without the skills to participate in economic, cultural, and social activity, or to be fulfilled and live independently in the community (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). Data on these outcomes is very sparse (NCSE 2006). This research study will comprehensively explore the curriculum and accreditation programmes available for students with ID in special schools in Ireland.

2.7 Transition Pathways

2.7.1 Introduction

The final aspect this research is concerned with is the transition pathways available to students with intellectual disabilities post school. Following Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework, the research has explored the concept of inclusion (macrosystem) and the government policies which pertain to inclusive education in Ireland (exosystem). The curriculum and accreditation opportunities available to all learners within the Irish education system have also been robustly examined. The curriculum programmes available to students with intellectual disabilities impacts on the accreditation programmes they can engage in and consequently the transition pathways students with ID can participate in post school. This research aims to review these transition pathways and consider if they equate with their mainstream peers or has the landscape of inclusion and equality for all learners altered as students with ID progress through the education provision at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland.

OECD (2012) highlight how many young people leave school with no worthwhile qualifications, whilst others are placed in special provision away from mainstream education and some choose to drop out since the lessons seem irrelevant (Messiou and Ainscow, 2021). A fundamental structural problem of equal opportunity lies at the heart of a system where those considered capable of high achievements are encouraged to stay at school and beyond into higher education, while those who struggle, because their learning needs are not properly addressed or their parents are not able to advocate for their interests, may be marginalised in school or leave education at the earliest opportunity (Florian et al. 2017).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 (UNCRPD) Article 27 seeks to enable persons with disabilities to have effective access to general technical and vocational guidance programmes, placement

services and vocational and continuing training; and promote vocational and professional rehabilitation, job retention and return-to-work programmes for persons with disabilities. Disability is also a reliable predictor of poverty and estrangement (Slee, 2019, Watkins et al. 2017). Under the Disability Act people with disabilities are entitled to have their health and educational needs assessed (NCSE, 2021). The OECD (2012) highlighted that many young people leave school with no worthwhile qualifications, whilst others are placed in special provision away from mainstream education. In addition some choose to drop out since the lessons seem irrelevant. The World Report on Disability (World Health Organisation (2011) found that people with disabilities in developed countries experience worse educational and labour market outcomes, and that they are more likely to be poor and marginalised than persons without disabilities. There is a bi-directional relationship between disability and poverty (OECD, 2017). Under the EPSEN Act (2004) the NCSE has a specific role to review the provision made for adults with disabilities to avail of higher, adult and continuing education, rehabilitations and training and to advise educational institutions concerning best practice (NCSE, 2021).

While support for people with disabilities features in many aspects of the wider policy context, evidence from stakeholder consultations demonstrated that the policy and legislative context within Ireland for them is viewed as disjointed (NCSE, 2021). At present, there is no legislative basis for those working in the sector to provide education/learning. At present, education provision tends to be ad hoc in health settings/HSE- funded services (NCSE, 2021). Most stakeholders believed day services should provide access to mainstream education and encourage mainstreaming where possible to ensure that people with disabilities are supported in breaking social barriers, decreasing poverty, increasing employment and reducing stigma (NCSE, 2021). There are many education and training options for students with disabilities (NCSE, 2021). These include further and higher education and vocational training routes. For some people with disabilities, other options offer access to additional, individualised support (NCSE, 2021). In the Irish

context, recent evidence points to the particular disadvantages facing students with intellectual, speech or learning disabilities in post-school life (Watson et al, 2015).

Education is a key influence on life chances including job prospects, earnings and risk of poverty (Watson et al. (2015). Young people with ID face an uncertain future on leaving school (McConkey et al. 2017). One of the purposes of curriculum and accreditation is employability (McGuckin et al. 2013; Grigal et al. 2012). Accreditation provides a pathway for students with ID to transition to further placements, training courses and employment post school. The '*Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities*' (Government of Ireland, 2019) states that the vision for this governmental strategy is that people with disabilities can get a job and enjoy a rewarding career. The vision and values underpinning this report focus on a person's capacity not their incapacity and that people with disabilities are supported to maximise their potential. Putting employment on the agenda for young people with disabilities during their school years has a positive impact on their longer-term employment prospects (GOI, 2019). Placing a focus on employment and career planning needs to start as early as age 13 or the first year of post-primary school rather than leaving it to the last year or two of school life (GOI, 2019).

EADSNE (2002) stated that the concept of transition from school to employment or working life appears in several international documents with slightly different definitions. However, all definitions include three main ideas of process, transfer and change. Process refers to the preparatory work required and time necessary for the transition of students from school to future placement. Transfer refers to the movement of students with SEN from one educational level or life step to the next and change is related to the personal and professional situations which are being altered (EADSNE, 2002).

The Salamanca Framework for Action (UNESCO 1994) states that young people with special educational needs should be helped to make an effective transition from school to adult working life. There have been more active policy developments since the 1990s which have been informed by international statements of equal opportunities and the rights of persons with disabilities (McConkey et al. 2017). Schools should assist them to become economically active and provide them with the skills needed in everyday life, offering training in skills which respond to the social and communication demands and expectations of adult life (EADSNE, 2002).

The European Agency for Special Needs in Inclusive Education (EASNIE, 2016) reported that having an upper secondary education is crucial to a young person's life chances. It is often seen as the minimum entry requirement to the labour market and is an important protector against unemployment. Low educational attainment and lack of qualifications have been cited as reasons for people with disabilities not being more successful in achieving employment (EADSNE, 2002). People with disabilities have fewer education qualifications than non-disabled people when they leave school (NDA, 2012). This leads to a double disadvantage, where economic prospects are reduced both by disability status and by lower levels of education (NDA 2012). Research consistently shows that young people with disabilities have poorer post school outcomes (e.g. independent living, employment and attendance in further education) compared to their non-disabled peers (Bouck 2012).

The transition experiences of student with SEN have received little attention (McCoy et al. 2019). Transitioning from primary to secondary is a key moment in a student's educational career (McCoy et al. 2019). Transitioning from home to primary school, from primary to secondary school and upwards to 'real world' situations, is fraught with psychological, physiological and practical junctures

(McCoy et al. 2014; Smyth et al. 2011; Doyle et al. 2017). The transition from post primary education can be another challenging juncture for students.

Transitions services have been proposed to help transitions from age 14 onwards to explore more person-centred options for school leavers with ID (McConkey et al. 2017). EADSNE (2002) highlighted the importance of developing an individual education programme in collaboration with the student and their parents focussed not only on the student's progress, but also on any changes to be made in their school experience. Countries highlighted a distinction between an IEP, which is more broad and educationally oriented and a transition plan, which is more centred on transition matters and related to adult life and employment and both need to be closely inter-related (EADSNE, 2002). Doyle et al. (2017) highlights the need to create Individual Transition Plans which have the same function as an IEP, representing continuously evolving documents that are transferable to post-secondary settings.

2.7.2 Transition Procedures

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) provides guidelines for schools and parents to support the transition of students between different education levels and from school to post-school pathways. These guidelines can be used as a framework for all students transitioning within the different sectors within the education system. Transition pathways need to ensure student participation and respect the personal choice of the student. The student, their family and practitioners must work together to formulate an individual plan. Parents play an integral role in filling the support gap and family support is pivotal, particularly where support is not available in school, but the intensity of seeking appropriate guidance can result in fractured relationships with schools, and decreased opportunities for young people to develop independent skills (Doyle et al. 2017). Transition is part of a long and complex process preparing and facilitating young

people to enter economic and adult life (EADSNE, 2002). The transition from school is recognised as a stressful time for students and parents (McConkey et al. 2017). McCoy et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of the voice of the young person when transition planning.

The NCSE Inclusive Research in Irish Schools: Project Iris (2015) emphasised the challenges facing students with SEN when transitioning from primary to post primary. It is imperative that young people take ownership of their own transition and associated tasks and actions: greater recognition of the need for a scaffold approach to independence for pupils with complex needs, is essential (Doyle et al. 2017). School transfer is an important milestone in the educational career of young people. The challenges for students progressing within an academic environment include change in pace, breath and complexity of schoolwork and increased demands in terms of academic progress and the ability to learn independently (Makin et al. 2017). Students continue to face these challenges as they transfer from post primary education to further placements post school. Transition partnerships require the active involvement of young people with SEN, their families, schools and providers of post-secondary education (Doyle et al. 2017; Aston et al. 2021).

2.7.3 Transition Planning

In Ireland, inequitable access to IEPs, and a lack of policy infrastructure to provide formal transition planning, means that these journeys are varied and uncertain (Doyle et al. 2017). The quantity and quality of disability-specific transition advice and guidance available to secondary pupils with SEN and parents/carers was variable and disparate. There was a recognition that vulnerable pupils need support at this time of transition (Doyle et al. 2017). Scanlon and Doyle (2019) reported that a *Personal Transition Plan* would assist students with SEN by clarifying the implications of pursuing specific options, identifying goals and targets,

and providing an opportunity for all stakeholders to discuss these via a transition planning meeting. Figure 16 illustrates how the transition plans assist students with SEN. Engaging in a supported transition programme can provide parents and young people with SEN with access to information, options, confidence, and some of the hard and soft skills required for successful transition into education and employment contexts (Scanlon and Doyle, 2019).

Figure 16: Personal Transition Planning



2.7.3.1 Role of Guidance Counsellor

Schools (including primary, post primary and special schools and PLC colleges) through their school guidance plans seek to ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices (NCSE, 2014). The Indecon Report (2019) defined guidance counselling as an effective mechanism to provide career information and impartial advice guidance counselling is one of the most effective modalities for providing career intervention. Guidance generally aims to assist students to transition into adulthood with the skills necessary to participate in society, in an inclusive way consistent with their abilities. (NCSE, 2014).

Given the importance of the role of guidance counsellors, it is necessary to consider the position of students with special education needs who are in special schools, as there are no separate guidance counsellors allocated to these schools (Indecon, 2019). Career guidance for learners with disabilities should be delivered in an individually focused person-centred way across the learner pathways (NDA, 2017). The Disability Federation Ireland suggested that access to career guidance for young people with SEN at all levels and in all educational settings is of critical importance. While special school staff provide career guidance as part of their planning for the needs of learners, it is important that these staff have sufficient expertise in career guidance and access to information on employment options (Indecon, 2019). Grigal et al. (2012) highlight that few transition co-ordinators, teachers, higher education personnel, personnel from adult services, students and families know the options available post school. Scanlon and Doyle (2019) identified a dearth of basic information to enable informed decisions by parents and students on post school options. Career and educational guidance can become important tools to help address and reduce graduation, employment and income gaps for students with SEN (OECD, 2020). The OECD (2011) reported that the pathway for young people with disabilities to tertiary education are also less straightforward and there may be breaks of forced changes of direction along the way. Scanlon and Doyle (2019) emphasised that there is an urgent need for

greater clarity around options and financial implications of post school options. Failure in the provision of Guidance Counsellor in special schools was perceived to be a reflection of the lack of prioritisation of transition planning for young people with special needs and disabilities (Scanlon and Doyle, 2019).

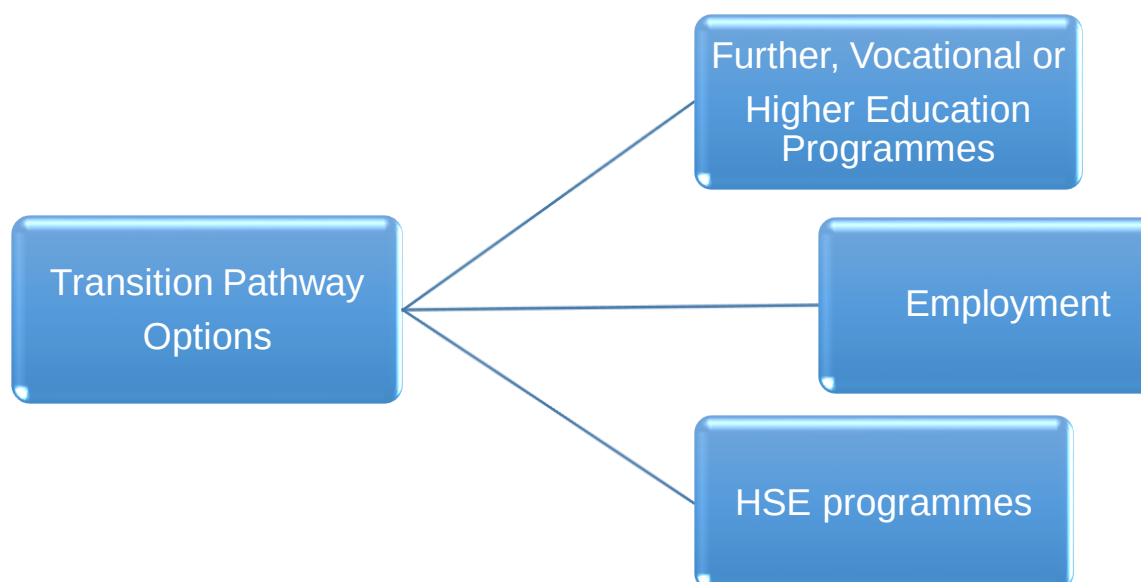
2.7.4 Transition Pathways Options

Knowledge and understanding of the range of post school pathways and options are a fundamental factor in planning for post-school transitions (Scanlon and Doyle, 2019). On leaving school there is a range of services available for young people with disabilities wishing to enter the labour market or further education and training (Watson et al. 2015). In recent years there has been an improvement in the transition for students with ID to adult services and in offering a wider range of choices post school (McConkey et al. 2017). Training programmes are also available for people with disabilities by specialist training providers such as the National Learning Network (NLN) (DES 2012). For those wishing to pursue further education or training after school, SOLAS is the organisation responsible, and many of its programmes operate through the newly established Education and Training Boards (ETBs) which replaced Vocational Education Committees (VECs). The Department of Health also provides rehabilitative training, training that is not linked to the labour force, and sheltered work for people with disabilities. Responsibility for the delivery of these services rests with the Health Service Executive (Watson et al. 2015). These include employment support provided by the Department of Social Protection for people with disabilities to facilitate labour market entry (Watson et al. 2015). Most disability services in Ireland are provided by the voluntary or non-profit sector with grant aid from the HSE. Disability services cover a wide range of provision, including residential and respite services, medical and clinical therapies, day services, work and employment services, assisted living/personal assistant services, home support and the provision of aids and appliances (Watson et al. 2015). Care centres remains the most common form of day service provided to school leavers in Ireland (McConkey et al. 2017). Few students with ID avail of mainstream further education, vocational and employment

training while, in contrast, over half of non-disabled students transition to higher education, over a quarter enrol in training of further education and 7% transition into employment (Department of Education and Skills, 2016).

In their Guidelines for students with SEN and their parents/guardians, the NCSE (2016) stated that preparation and planning are the key to a successful transition from school. The NCSE (2016) identified a range of options which are available to students with SEN to suit all levels of ability and interests. These include deciding to enter the world of work or continuing with further education and training. Figure 17 illustrates the options and choices that are available to students with SEN post school.

Figure 17: Transition Pathways options for Students with SEN



Ref: NCSE 2016

The NCSE (2016) identified the transition pathway options available for students with ID post school. Some students may choose to go straight to employment and join the workforce. For students thinking of the further, vocational or higher education pathway, post leaving certificate courses act as a steppingstone to employment and further qualifications. Vocational training courses gear young people towards the workplace and apprenticeship training. While the higher education option offers young people pathways to pursue certificates, diplomas and undergraduate degrees. The NCSE (2016) outlined a range of pathways for students with high support needs. Students with special educational needs were deemed to be in this category. The HSE rehabilitative training programmes are funded by the HSE and are programmes to develop life skills, social skills and basic work skills. These courses can last from 2 to 4 years and can be a steppingstone to mainstream education or training. The HSE adult day services are HSE-funded and provide day care activities, supported employment and voluntary work programmes. These programmes are for people with significant lifelong support needs. Scanlon and Doyle (2019) reported that adult services were viewed as appropriate for only a few young people, based primarily on a perceived lack of opportunity for growth and skills development in current models of provision. The occupational guidance adviser works closely with the school; meets the person and their family/advocate as appropriate; assists in identifying and clarifying personal goals and individual needs; explores the training and development options most suited to their needs and supports the individual in accessing their selected service options (NCSE, 2014). Some young people will have needs which can be appropriately met by HSE rehabilitative training programmes; others may have needs which can be met by other HSE adult day services and others may be included in mainstream education or training services.

Most disability services in Ireland are provided by the voluntary or non-profit sector with grant aid from the HSE (Watson et al. 2015). Disability services cover a wide range of provision, including residential and respite services, medical and clinical therapies, day services, work and employment services, assisted living/personal

assistant services, home support and the provision of aids and appliances (Watson et al. 2015). Scanlon and Doyle (2019) highlighted that the move to HSE Adult Services was the least favourable option for many parents, and comments alluded to the fact that this option was a by-product of lack of choice. Schools perceived transition pathways and options post school to be limited and highlighted the difficulty of bridging the gap between a QQI Level 2/3 programme in school, and the QQI Level 5 courses in further education (Scanlon and Doyle, 2019).

2.8 Conclusion

The literature review has outlined a number of significant changes in the past three decades which has seen a shift in the cultural and societal view of students with intellectual disabilities (macrosystem). Societal views has moved away from a deficit model which placed the problems within the child and towards a social justice and right based approach to special educational needs, disability and inclusion. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986, 1999, 2005) robust theoretical model recognises the shifts which happen in the micro, meso, exo, macro and chromo system. The ecology framework is fluid and dynamic. The ecology of students with ID and their education and lives have been effected due to the dramatic changes internationally and nationally. These shifts in societal and cultural views of disability have emphasised the fundamental right to education for all children. A more equitable system of education has developed. Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1986, 1999, 2005) highlighted how student experiences are always at the centre of the system (the microsystem) while the Irish Education system and international policies are at the outer edge of the system (the macrosystem). Bronfenbrenner's ecology system highlights the interconnections between agencies who have influence on and are responsible for the child. The literature review explored the shared goals, priorities and interconnections between the child, school, national agencies and international and national policies which have a direct and indirect influence over the child experience in school.

Chapter 2 has provided an overview for the provision of special education in Ireland today. Over the last several decades, inclusive education, both nationally and internationally has been a focus in special education provision, with the development of policy and legislative changes and the adoption of inclusive education frameworks have been broadly welcomed (Watson et al. 2015). Within Ireland the development of provision for students with SEN, in common with other European and international administrations, has tried to address issues of equity and equal opportunity by embracing a more inclusive educational philosophy (Rose et al. 2015). Due to policy legislative commitments in Ireland, there is a firm commitment to inclusive education at a policy level, however, in practice, the funding and provision of special education operates parallel to the mainstream education system (Banks et al. 2021).

A comprehensive overview of inclusive education was outlined focusing on international policies which highlighted a cultural shift away from the view of deficits within the child with special educational needs and towards a rights-based policy of special education for students with SEN. No two countries dealt with the issue of support for pupils with SEN in the same way. A comprehensive investigation of the development of inclusive education internationally was outlined and an historical context of inclusion and special education in Ireland over recent decades was explored. This chapter provided an overview of national policy developments, which were ratified in the context of an international shift towards inclusion, and the focus of special education being a right on a global level.

The National Council for Special Education's vision is a society where children and adults with special educational needs receive an education that enables them achieve their potential (NCSE, 2019). Following recent international and national policies focusing on inclusion, additional teacher supports and investment in resources, there is much that is good about the current education provision for students with special educational needs (NCSE, 2019). Data is not formally collected on the outcomes of students who attend special schools (NCSE, 2019).

The following research will attempt to shine a light on the real life experiences of education policy in practice in special schools. This new knowledge will add to the current debates surrounding inclusion, inclusive policies, inclusive education and inclusive special education.

Special education is made 'fit' into the general education system which may not value the education of students with ID in the same light as students in mainstream education (Shevlin et al. 2021). A full inclusion policy, similar to that in New Brunswick, Canada, is under consideration by the National Council for Special Education. This marks a challenge to the traditional mind-set that promoted special schools and special settings within mainstream. The view of inclusion under the UNCRPD (2018) emphasise the move away from separate mainstream and special education settings, as they are not compatible with as parallel systems are not considered inclusive (NCSE, 2019). The implementation of policy has often struggled to live up to the ideas expressed in policy documents (Meijer and Watkins, 2016) and the challenges to inclusion were identified.

This chapter detailed the post primary education system in Ireland and outlined curriculum and accreditation programmes. Over recent years the broadening of the curriculum and accreditation options has provided a greater availability of programmes which are aligned with the National Framework of Qualifications. O'Mara et al. (2012) outlined the curriculum dilemma which focuses on the range of subjects and activities for which students with SEN might be included or excluded. Special classes at post-primary are pre-dominantly offered the junior cycle years – with Senior Cycle provision much less prevalent (McCoy et al. 2014). The introduction of the Junior Cycle Level 2 and Level 1 awards, under the revised Junior Cycle has enhanced the school experiences for young people with special needs for whom the traditional Junior Certificate was unsuitable (Watson et al, 2015). The exploration of recent curriculum developments and reviews in Ireland indicates a shift in mind-set towards inclusive education in Irish schools (Flood and Banks, 2019). The movement towards a 'full inclusion model' in Irish schools,

provides an opportune time to proactively embed inclusion in policy and curriculum design as well as learning and teaching design and practice (Flood and Banks 2021).

Young people with disabilities are at a disadvantage, and face many more barriers to accessing the same opportunities in further/higher education, training, or employment, than their non-disabled peers (Doyle et al. 2017). The Government Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities policy (2019) embodies a vision where people with disabilities are supported to maximise their potential for employment and to focus on a person's capacity and not their incapacity. Each person with a disability will have the education, skills, competence and independence to obtain employment (GOI, 2019). Scanlon and Doyle (2019) reported that a supported transition programme increased levels of self-awareness and self-determination among student with SEN, meaning that ambitions were included in plans for life after school. This chapter has drawn on the extensive literature in inclusive policies, both nationally and internationally. The ratification and implementation of inclusive policies and programmes do not always mean true inclusion for students (Banks et al. 2017). This research will delve into what are the 'true' experiences of inclusion for students with ID in terms of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways in post primary special schools in Ireland. This review of the literature provides a context and framework to inform the research design and to focus on the research questions at the core of this study which are curriculum and accreditation programmes and transition pathways for students with SEN. The following chapter will outline the key research questions which arise from this comprehensive literature review and Bronfenbrenner's ecology system will provide a structure for the research design for this research.

Chapter 3 - Research Design

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 outlined a robust and comprehensive picture of inclusion, inclusive policies, inclusive education and special education, inclusive pedagogy, curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with intellectual disabilities. The following chapter will detail the research design which was constructed based on the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecology model.

A research design framework involves the interconnectedness between philosophical worldviews, selected strategies of inquiry and research methods (Creswell, 2009). One cannot judge the appropriateness of the methods in any study or the quality of the findings without knowing the study's purpose, agreed-on uses, and intended audiences (Patton, 2002). No rigid rules can prescribe what data to gather to investigate a particular problem. There is no recipe or formula in making methods decisions (Patton, 2002). As detailed in chapter two, the theoretical framework which underpins this research is Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986, 1999, 2005) adopts a holistic perspective on human development. The ecological model acknowledges that students influence and are influenced by their environment.

This research study combined the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods to allow a much fuller understanding (McCoy, 2014). Crotty (1998) states that human beings engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspective. Following a comprehensive review of the international and national literature, the following research questions evolved from the current debates focusing on inclusion, inclusive policies, inclusive education and special education, inclusive pedagogy, curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with intellectual disabilities. The following questions were identified as being pertinent and central to the research and would add to the body of knowledge in this area.

1. What curriculum is available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland?
2. What are the accreditation outcomes for students with ID in special schools?
3. What transition pathways are available to students with ID in special schools after they leave post primary education?

Chapter 3 has been structured under the following themes: (1) Positionality and Reflectivity, (2) Mixed Methods Design (3) Triangulation (4) Validity and Reliability (5) Ethical Issues (6) Student Voice (7) Data Collection Instruments (8) Design of the Research and (9) Pilot of Research Design.

3.2 Positionality and Reflexivity

Clarke and Braun (2013) recognises that the researcher brings their subjectivity, their views, perspectives, frameworks for making sense of the world; their politics; their passions, into the research process. This is seen as a strength rather than a weakness (Clarke and Braun, 2013). Finlay (2002) discusses the importance of reflexivity, which involves critical reflection on the research process and on one's own role as researcher. It was vital to identify the author's position within the research. The author was aware of positionality throughout the research as the researcher brings unique perspectives to the study. This include the perspective of a teacher, of a past student, of a parent and of an academic researcher.

We are all born into a world of meaning bestowed upon us by our culture – Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem. Thus, qualitative researchers seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally (Crotty, 1998). Qualitative methods facilitate study of issues in depth and detail while quantitative methods require the use of standardised measures (Patton, 2002). Qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a smaller number of people and cases. This increases

the depth of understanding of cases and situations studied but reduces generalisability (Patton, 2002).

3.3 Mixed Methods Design

Mixed methods studies have become increasingly prevalent in social and educational research as a way of enabling the acquisition of rich empirical data unfeasible through a mono-method approach (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). McCoy et al. (2014) referred to the mixed method approach as the 'gold standard' in educational research. Exclusive reliance on one method, therefore, may bias or distort the researcher's picture of the particular slice of reality being investigated (Cohen et al. 2007). Creswell (2008) advocates a mixed methods approach to research design and argues that all methods have limitations and by using mixed methods approaches this limits the bias of any one single method. Mixed methods researchers need to establish a purpose for their "mixing," a rationale for the reasons why quantitative and qualitative data need to be mixed in the first place (Cherryholmes, 1992). The core argument for a mixed methods design is that the combination of both forms of data provides a better understanding of a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative data by itself (Creswell, 2012). Mixed methods designs are procedures for collecting, analysing and mixing quantitative and qualitative data in a single study (Creswell, 2012). Mixed methods provides an interrelated process to develop a comprehensive picture of the research objectives.

3.4 Triangulation

Systematic data collection procedures, rigorous training, multiple data sources and triangulation of external reviews are aimed to produce high quality qualitative data that are credible, trustworthy, authentic and balanced about the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) argues that any credible research

strategy requires that the investigator adopt a stance of neutrality regarding the phenomenon under study. This simply means that the investigator does not set out to prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at a predisposed truth (Patton, 2002). Miles and Huberman (1994) explore the underlying issues of whether the process of the study is consistent, reasonably stable over time and across researchers and methods. Furthermore, do the findings of the study make sense and do we have an authentic portrait of what we are looking at? (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Patton (2000) suggests that researchers should realise that completely value free inquiry is impossible, but researchers worry about how their values and preconceptions may affect what they see, hear and record in the field, so they wrestle with their values, try to make any biases explicit, take steps to mitigate their influence through rigorous field procedures, and discuss their possible influence in reporting findings. Researchers want to minimise bias, maximise accuracy and report impartially. Triangulation of data sources increases accuracy and credibility of findings (Patton, 1999).

Triangular techniques in the social sciences attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint and, in so doing, by making use of both quantitative and qualitative data (Cohen et al. 2007). Triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods. This can mean using several kinds of methods or data, including both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Patton, 2002). The methodology for this research is predominantly qualitative; however, a mixed methods approach was implemented to triangulate the data and to provide added depth to the evidence gathered. Triangulation was achieved by using a combination of instruments including principal/ senior teacher questionnaire, student questionnaire, parent questionnaire, principal interview, parent interview and case studies involving focus group student interviews.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

Validity depends on careful selection of instruments to ensure that the instruments measure what they are supposed to measure (Patton, 2002). Threats to validity and reliability can never be erased completely; rather the effects of these threats can be minimised by attention to validity and reliability throughout a piece of research (Cohen et al, 2007). At best we strive to minimise invalidity and maximise validity (Cohen et al, 2007). In combining the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative data collections, the research strengthened the validity of its findings.

Participants in research may be limited in the extent to which they can be expected to understand or agree voluntarily to undertake their role due to age, intellectual capability or other vulnerable circumstances. Researchers must fully explore alternative ways in which they can be enabled to make authentic response (BERA, 2011). People with learning difficulties may experience additional difficulties with communication including difficulties with intelligibility, fluency and rate of speech, comprehension and memory, concentration skills and hearing loss (Dye et al. 2003). Acquiescence is the tendency of an individual to respond 'yes' to a question regardless of the questions content (Gudjonsson, 1986). Dye et al. (2003) outlines how suggestibility involves giving in to leading questions and changes in initial answers in response to negative feedback. Both suggestibility and acquiescence can lead to bias in research data. The researcher was mindful of this factor and to ensure validity the student questionnaire was comprised of simple statements and visual keys and references.

3.6 Ethical Issues

Creswell (2012) states that respect for audiences and the use of discriminatory language are ethical issues which must be observed. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that ethical issues range from the project's worthiness, a researcher's own competencies, informed consent, anticipated benefits and cost to those including harm and risk, the relationship with respondents, privacy/confidentiality/anonymity,

intervention and finally research quality, data ownership and use of results. All have clear implications for analysis and the quality of conclusions (Miles and Huberman 1994). An individual gives consent when they give their agreement to a decision and its consequences (Dye et al., 2003). Researchers need to protect their research participants and not cause any harm to them. Ethical questions are apparent today in such issues as personal disclosure, authenticity and credibility of the report, the role of researchers in cross cultural contexts, and issues of personal privacy through forms of internet data collection (Israel and Hay, 2006).

Ethical considerations of this research were given the utmost importance. They were considered at all stages of the research design. The welfare of the participants was always the priority of the research. Creswell (2009) emphasises the need not to put participants at risk and to respect vulnerable populations. The cohorts for this research were students with intellectual disabilities in their final year of post primary education, which are considered a vulnerable group. The researcher was cognisant of this and informed consent for all participants was a prerequisite before any research commenced. The consent form acknowledged the participants right to withdraw from the research at any time during data collection without need for explanation and without prejudice.

Securing participants' voluntary informed consent before research gets underway is considered the norm (BERA, 2011). At all times the research was guided by legal, ethical and moral codes of practice. The research adhered to both Trinity College, Dublin's Policy on Good Research Practice and The Teaching Council's Code of Ethics. The research was based on a) respect for the participants, b) beneficial and the absence of malice, and c) justice. No incentives were offered and there were no further ethical aspects that required consideration in the recruitment of the proposed participants. The research was also vetted through a strict ethical approval application by the Ethic Approval Committee, School of Education at Trinity College Dublin.

The voluntary and confidential nature of the research was emphasised to all participants throughout the research process in the relevant Participant Information Sheet for all questionnaires, interviews and focus groups (See Appendices 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, 12 and 14). The research required tact and understanding and acceptance of the student's level of engagement. The capacity to give informed consent may be improved by simplifying the information so that comprehension of the information is less dependent on verbal and memory ability (Arscott et al. 1999). Contact details of the researcher were given to all participants should any questions need to be addressed privately. The unequal power relations between the researcher and participants must be recognised. Participants should not consent through fear or through feeling that they don't have a choice (Porter and Lacey, 2005). Knox et al. (2000) argue that informed consent should be seen as an ongoing process. Where parents or others give consent to involvement it is still important that the person themselves consents to be involved and is given opportunities to voice dissent and to be heard (Porter and Lacey, 2005).

Recruitment for this study was voluntary among special schools on the Department of Education and Skills 2017 list. Written consent was sought from students, parents/guardians for participation in this research prior to the research commencing (see Appendices 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, 13, and 15). Informed consent was achieved by sending a letter and hard copy of questionnaire to all parents involved, detailing information about the research and the rationale behind collecting data. It was made clear that all participants were not obliged to take part in the research and could withdraw at any time without having to give a reason and without prejudice. The aim of the research was outlined to all participants in an Information Sheet. (see Appendices 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, 12 and 14)

All information provided by the participants in response to the study was treated anonymously by the researcher. The data collected was represented in

aggregated form and the raw data was expressed in a summary form. This protected the anonymity of schools and students. Participants' identities were anonymised by randomly assigning ID numbers. No participants' names were recorded on the questionnaire or used in the transcript of interviews or data inputting.

The researcher did not observe the participants as they completed the questionnaires. In this way, responses were not attributed to any participants or schools. The identities of the responding schools were not revealed to any person or organisation outside the research and the data was securely stored and managed by the researcher. Of the 91 schools invited to participate in Phase One, the researcher had no relationship with 90 schools. The researcher taught in one of the schools invited to participate in the research. The researcher is aware of the complexity of positionality in relation to the dual role of being researcher and teacher.

3.7 Student Voice

There has been a growing recognition both nationally and internationally of the importance of children's rights especially influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). The UNCRC challenged societal behaviour and attitudes towards children as a group and sought to improve this by affirming their right to 'special consideration' enshrined in the articles of the Convention (Flynn and Hayes, 2021). The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice in the UK (DfEE, 2000) is underpinned by a fundamental belief that 'the view of the child should be sought and taken into account' (para 1.5) in decision-making about provision to meet their educational needs (Porter and Lacey, 2005). Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that children, who are capable of forming their own views, should be granted the right

to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity (BERA, 2011). Internationally there has been a long history of recognising the importance of hearing the voice of the child in matters that relate to them (Porter and Lacey, 2005). Evidence of the potential benefit to student voice engagement have been established in research literature; however, listening to students is not enough (Flynn, 2017).

If we want to understand what is happening in a particular environment, we need to see it through the varied perspectives of those who are part of it (Porter and Lacey, 2005). Young people need to know they have been heard and to have their input and opinions acknowledged (Flynn, 2017). All individuals, given the opportunity, can make an important contribution to our understanding of teaching and learning (Shevlin and Rose, 2003). The student voice can inform policy by taking account of the perspective of young people and improving our understanding of students' experiences of teaching and learning (Banks et al. 2016).

A broad distinction can be made between 'research on' and 'research with' people with learning difficulties (Kiernan, 1999). While some researchers struggle with the ways in which people with learning difficulties can be collaborators in the research process, others are questioning the degree in which we can collect valid and authentic views (Porter and Lacey, 2005). It is important that within the authenticity of student consultation and inclusion in education discourse, student expertise is afforded the same respect as that of other experts (Flynn, 2017). To avoid criticisms of lack of rigour and triviality Gillham (2000) suggests the use of triangulation, with multiple sources of evidence. An essential element within the process of student voice in practice and research must involve a commitment to 'authentic listening' which is realised only through 'acknowledgement in response to the views expressed and suggestions made by student participants' (Flynn,

2014, p166). Lundy (2007) refers to a children's rights-based framework for participation which emphasises four elements of space, voice, audience and influence.

An essential element within the student voice engagement must involve a commitment to 'authentic listening' which is realised only through 'acknowledgement and response to the views expressed and suggestions made by student participants' (Flynn and Hayes, 2021). When accessing student views in education discourse, it is important to acknowledge that students will each interpret the world with respect to their own relative experiences (Flynn and Hayes, 2021). The potential link between student voice and empowerment can only be achieved if the students themselves know that they have been heard and experience an acknowledgement of their views and opinion (Flynn and Hayes, 2021).

Kiernan (1999) points out that research has traditionally relied heavily on cognitive skills and even where research is immediate to a person's interest it may still require a level of abstract thinking. Children's rights to express their views are not dependent upon their capacity to express a mature view; they are dependent only on their ability to form that perspective, mature or not. Therefore, children may need the help of others in order to form a view and have a right to receive direction and guidance from adults in order to do so (Welty and Lundy, 2013).

It was important for the researcher to acknowledge students' contributions to the research questions and that their experiences and opinions would be heard. The individual is at the centre of Bronfenbrenner's ecology system and the researcher wanted to capture the fluid and dynamic influences on the development and

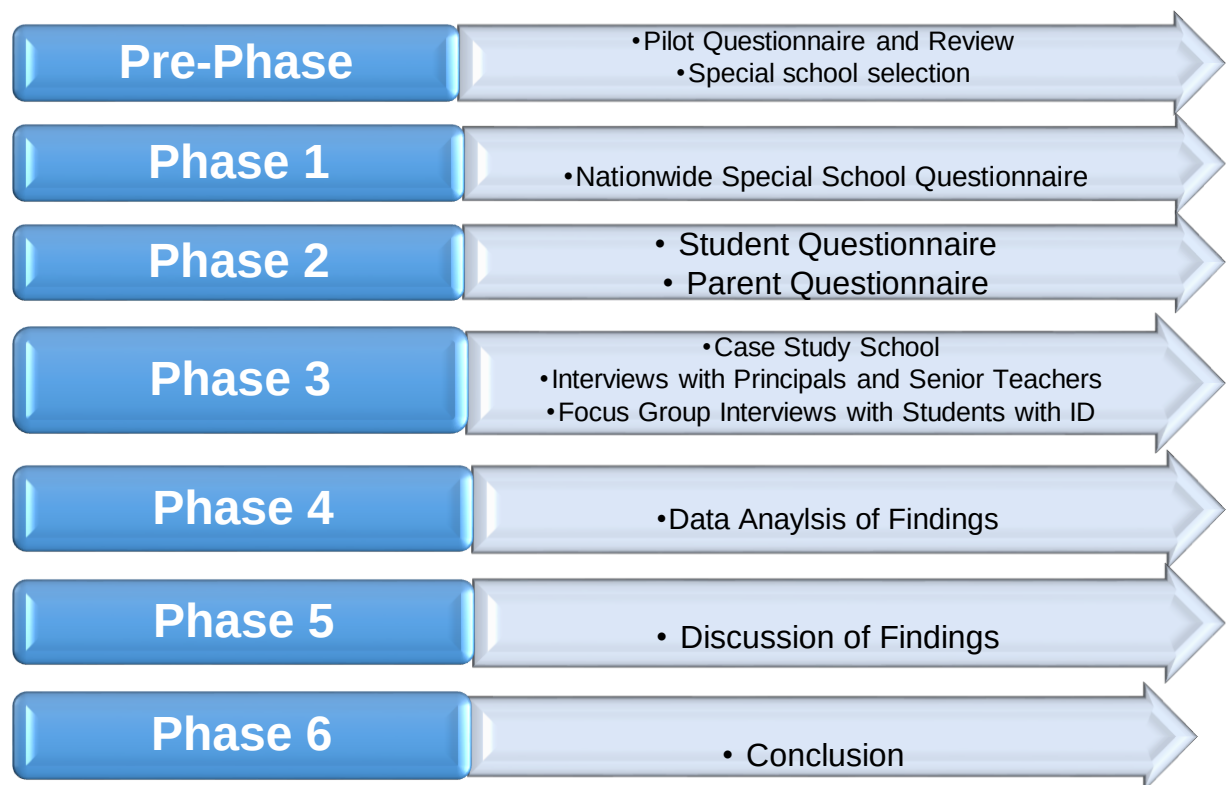
experiences of the individual. To gather a rich and authentic insight into the participation levels of students with ID in the variety of different accreditation and certifications options available and their perspectives and experiences, students were asked to complete a questionnaire which focused on students experiences and accreditation and how they were achieved in their last year in special schools. The student questionnaire, as an instrument for data collection, offered the researcher an opportunity to obtain an overview of students' thoughts and experiences of the accreditation programmes of final year students with ID. Questionnaires require a level of reading ability that might not be present in the population under study (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). The student information sheet for both questionnaire and focus groups interviews had limited information relative to the parent and principal information sheets as the researcher was mindful of the challenges some of this cohort may have with the reading material. The researcher was also mindful of the language used in order not to lead pupils into making decisions. The language of the student questionnaire was clear and simple. The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions, 7 of which required a tick answer. In addition, a Likert scale was used to help students give feedback, while being cognisant of not encouraging 'yes' answers. The remaining 4 questions focused on eliciting the students' thoughts and feelings. Welty and Lundy (2013) states that children may need the help of others in order to form a view and have a right to receive direction and guidance from adults in order to do so. Considering this, the students' teacher was also in the classroom when the student questionnaire was administered to assist with any literacy and comprehension issues.

3.8 Data Collection Instruments

There were five phases of the research. The pre-phase of the research design focused on piloting the questionnaires and selecting the special schools for the study. Phases One, Two and Three were concerned with data collection – questionnaires, interviews and in-depth case study of special schools comprising focus group and semi-structured interviews with students with ID. Phases Four,

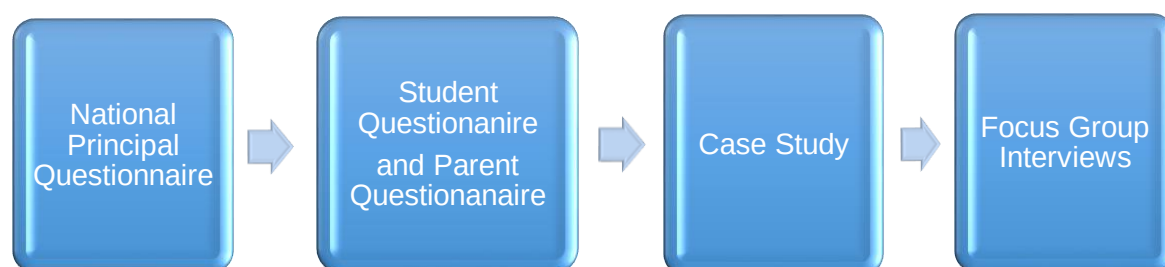
Five, and Six focused on analysis of findings, discussion of findings in relation to the current literature and conclusions. Figure 18 illustrates the stages of the research.

Figure 18: Stages of the Research



The research design enabled the researcher to progress through the stages of the research on the key themes of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways. Each stage of data collection informed the next stage and allowed for minor adjustments as each stage progressed. Figure 19 outlines the data collection instruments employed in the research.

Figure 19: Data Collection Instruments



3.8.1 Questionnaires

When questionnaires are used in a study, the researcher is employing a strategy in which participants use self-report to express their attitudes, beliefs and feelings towards a topic of interest (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). The purpose of gathering responses to open-ended questions is to enable the researcher to understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories (Patton, 2002). Questionnaires are a very efficient data collection strategy (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). A major advantage of questionnaires is that researchers can mail or email them to their respondents, which is less expensive to conduct than in-personal interviews or questionnaires (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). The researcher must use an extensive follow-up method consisting of reminders and re-mailing non-respondents (Gall and Borg, 2006). The researcher issued questionnaires to the principal/senior teachers, parents and final year students with ID in special schools.

3.8.2 Case Studies

The essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions, why they were taken, how were implemented; and with what results (Schramm, 1971). Yin (2003) explains that the purpose of case studies is explanatory, exploratory and descriptive. Case studies contain rich data and these offer insights into the world of learning disabilities which are hard to achieve in any other way (Porter and Lacey, 2005). Case study design increase validity of data collected. This strengthens the research findings. A case study enquiry relying on multiple sources of evidence is a preferred strategy of asking 'how' and 'why' questions (Yin, 2003). Sources of evidence can include documents, archival records, interviews and observations. Phase Three of this research involved a case study of two special schools. The case study involved semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers and focus groups with students in their final year of post primary education. The case study data added a further layer of validity and reliability to the findings of Phase One and Phase Two.

3.9.3 Interviews

To increase validity and achieve triangulation a mixed methods approach was used to gather data on the research questions. Questionnaires and interviews generate complex mixed data and are similar as they both seek to determine attitudes, feelings and beliefs of respondents and involve self-reporting (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). Interviews yield direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge (Patton, 2002). However, questionnaires and interviews differ due to the face-to-face aspect of interviews, the traditionally open-ended formats of interviews and the expensive factor of conducting interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and digitally recorded. The primary goal of the interviews was to gain personal insight into the participants' experiences of the school programmes that were available. These interviews enabled the researcher to pursue the specific aims of the research under the three themes of (1) Curriculum Programmes (2) Accreditation Policy, and (3) Transition Pathways.

3.8.4 Focus Groups

The purpose of focus groups is to promote a comfortable atmosphere of disclosure in which people can share their ideas, experiences, and attitudes about a topic (Krueger and Casey, 2015). Focus groups work particularly well to explore perceptions, feelings and thinking about issues, ideas, products, services or opportunities (Krueger and Casey, 2015). A focus group is a carefully planned series of meetings. The intent of a focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants (Krueger and Casey, 2015). A focus group interview is an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic (Patton, 2002). In each study, a series of different focus groups was conducted to get a variety of perspectives and increase confidence in whatever patterns emerge (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) suggests that the object is to gather high quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others. Focus groups represent a sample of student voices in their school and have the important task of including students' opinions, experiences and feedback on the research questions.

Focus groups were conducted with the two case study schools. The goal of the focus groups is to elicit a discussion that allows the researcher to see the world from the participants' perspectives (Heary and Hennessy, 2002). Focus group discussions allow the researcher to probe both the cognitive and emotional responses of participants while also allowing observation of the underlying group dynamic (Heary and Hennessy, 2002). Facilitating a focus group gave students a voice and provided students with a forum to articulate their experiences of the key themes of the research. Within the two selected case study schools, students in the senior section of the school were invited to attend and participate in the focus group. 'The focus group provide the researcher with a unique insight into the lives of teachers pupils parents and other professional in a range of contexts and assisted in expanding on (survey) finding and scrutiny of documentation'(p50, NCSE, 2015).

3.9.3 Transcription

The process of transcription while it may seem time consuming and frustrating it can be an excellent way to start familiarising yourself with the data (Reissman 1993). All interviews were transcribed by the researcher which allowed for the authentic voice of the participants to be captured. Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that a rigorous and thorough 'orthographic' transcript a 'verbatim' verbal account retains the information in a way which is 'true' to its original nature. All transcripts from participants remained at all times anonymous and confidential.

3.9 Design of the Research

3.9.1 Pilot Phase

In research, a well-planned and thoroughly conducted pilot study is not only important but necessary to ensure high research quality when a depth of understanding is sought (Malmqvist et al. 2019). The principal benefit of conducting a pilot study is that it provides researchers with an opportunity to make adjustments and revisions in the main study (Kim, 2010). A critical function of the pilot exercise relates to identifying specific methodological and epistemological issues so that researchers can affirm, sharpen, or revise how to pursue and achieve their goals in their proposed studies (Kim, 2010). In advance of implementing Phase One of the research a pilot study was undertaken. The questionnaires in Phase One were piloted by several teachers in a special school. The teachers involved in the pilot study were not included in the findings of this research. The original questionnaire to principals/senior teachers consisted of 34 questions. As a result of piloting the questionnaire, the research design was adapted and refined to reflect feedback and suggestions from the pilot stage. Duplications of questions were removed and any wording and phrases which were deemed confusing were clarified. The original accreditation pathways table was amended to be more user-friendly for the participant. The revised final questionnaire in Phase One consisted of 36 questions. (see Appendix 16).

In advance of the case study commencing the student questionnaire and the focus groups questions were tested on a similar student cohort of similar age and profile. The focus of the pilot of this research was to ensure the participants could understand the questions posed and that the questions matched the key themes of the research. The pilot study was carried out on participants not engaged in the overall case study. Several amendments were made to the phrasing of questions to ensure clarity. Additional questions were added to guarantee feedback on all the key themes of the research.

The interviews of principals, senior teachers and students as part of the case study in Phase Three were a vital component of the data collection process. The researcher was very cognisant of being transparent with the participants and the importance of developing a relationship between the participants and the researcher. Visits to the case study school were organised prior to the interview day to help establish a friendly, relaxed atmosphere. This visit provided an opportunity to outline the details of the research to the principals, answer any questions, and to discuss timetabling and scheduling issues. The researcher was aware of the imposition the interviews could have on the school day and wanted to be as flexible as possible with the school. The visits to the schools prior to interviews were deemed invaluable to the collection of data as it ironed out of issues and enabled smooth running of the interview schedule. The research was always mindful of the time and efforts made by all participants in this study to ensure the interviews operated as smoothly as possible. The benefits of piloting the research produced more transparent, clear and in-depth findings.

3.9.2 Research Cohort

The terminology used to classify students with intellectual disabilities was complex. European Union countries do not have an agreed list of special educational needs (SEN) (OECD, 2020). Throughout the comprehensive review of the literature in chapter two, it became very apparent that there is no one agreed definition of

special educational needs (SEN) or intellectual disabilities (ID). The NCSE (2014) define a general learning disability (GLD) as children who find it more difficult to learn, understand and do things than other children of the same age and can range from borderline mild, moderate, to severe/profound. The EPSEN (2004) legislation defines a special educational need as arising from physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability. The term intellectual disability refers to students who have a significant below average general intellectual functioning (NCSE, 2014). All these terms refer to a similar profile of student and there is crossover between definitions and boundaries. For the purposes of this research the term intellectual disability (ID) is used. This term refers to students who have a mild or moderate general learning disability. The primary focus of this research is post primary senior cycle students with ID attending a special school in Ireland.

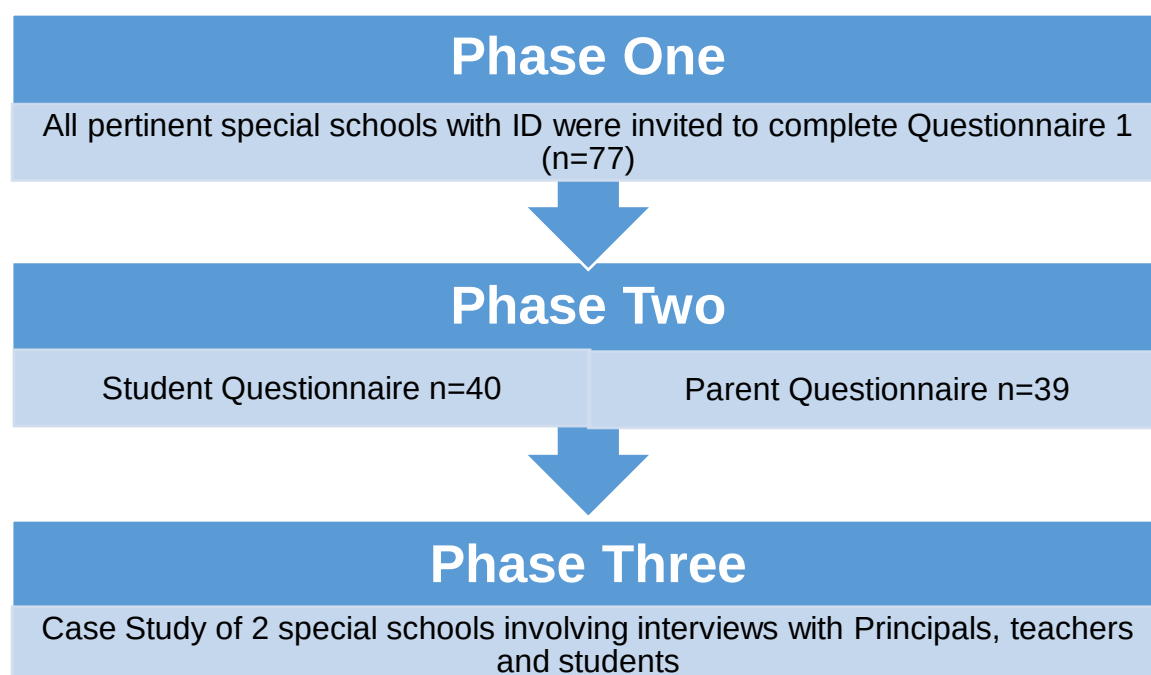
The study wanted to capture a national picture of what is happening in special schools in Ireland presently. The cohort for this research was students with mild ID in their final year of post primary education. The starting point for compiling this cohort was the Department of Education Special School list 2017. This list comprises of all the recruitment for this study and participation in this research was voluntary among special schools on the Department of Education and Science Special Schools List 2017. This list contains 137 schools, not all schools were pertinent to the research due to a variety of factors as outlined in Table 2 .

Table 2: Phase One – Special Schools pertinent/not pertinent to the research

Department of Education Special School List 2017	137
Schools not pertinent to research due to student profile	
Students of pre-primary or primary age	6
Hospital school	9
Students with physical and/or multiples disabilities	2
School for the Blind	1
Rehabilitation unit	2
School for EBD	6
Reading school	3
Traveller school	1
Early School leavers	3
High Support Unit, Special Care Unit, Child Detention Centre	8
ASD	14
Irish Speaking Child Education and Development	1
Youth Psychiatric Unit	2
School for the Deaf	2
Total of schools not pertinent to research due to student profile	60
Total of Post Primary Special Schools with students with ID	77

Figure 20 provides details of the process of selecting participants for this research.

Figure 20: Process for Selecting Research Cohort



The research design enabled the researcher to progress through the stages of the research. Each stage of data collection informed the next stage and allowed for minor adjustments as each stage progressed. Figure 20 outlines Phase One, Two and Three and the data instruments applied to capture both qualitative and quantitative data on the themes of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with ID in special schools in Ireland.

3.9.3 Phase One

Phase One of the research invited all 77 special schools in Ireland, catering for students with ID, to participate in Questionnaire 1 (see Appendix 3). Questionnaire 1 was completed by the principal/senior teacher in these schools. Questionnaire 1 contained 36 questions and was divided into 3 sections:

1. Demographics
2. Curriculum and Accreditation Options and
3. Participant's Practice and Experience

Questionnaire 1 used a Likert scale to capture participants' attitudes to the research questions. Questionnaire 1 was posted to each school, with follow-up via email and telephone. Questions 34, 35 and 36 of Questionnaire 1 focused on inviting participants to engage in phases 2 and 3 of the research. Table 3 illustrates that 51% response rate was received for Questionnaire 1.

Table 3: Response Rate for Questionnaire 1

Phase One – Questionnaire 1 Target population	
Number of schools to whom questionnaires were sent	77
Number of questionnaires returned	39
Response rate	51%

3.9.4 Phase Two

Phase Two of the research focused on special schools who had volunteered to participate in Phases Two and Three from Questionnaire 1 (N=15). Phase Two involved a Student Questionnaire (Questionnaire 2) and a Parent Questionnaire (Questionnaire 3). One of the fundamental issues in evaluating services must be the inclusion of stakeholders' views and arguably the service user should be central in developing the research (Porter and Lacey, 2005). Questionnaire 2 – Student Questionnaire (see Appendix 17) contained 11 questions, adapted to take account of the students' ages and intellectual abilities. Key visuals, an information sheet and rating scales were utilised to ensure Questionnaire 2 was clear and as user-friendly as possible for the participating students. Questionnaire 2 was administered at school, during school time and at a time that suited the participants and that did not cause any disruption to their formal studies. Separate student and parent consent forms were required to be signed before Questionnaire 2 was administered (see Appendix 4, 5). Questionnaire 3 - Parent Questionnaire (see Appendix 18) was available for parents wishing to voice their opinion on the research. All participants were given a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix 1, 2, 3, 7) and Consent Form (see Appendix 5, 6, 9) which outlined all pertinent information relating to the research and their involvement in the research.

3.9.5 Phase Three

A qualitative approach yields rich data by examining individual subjective experiences and attempts to understand and describe phenomena from a participant's point of view (Robson, 2002). By employing a case study as a method of data collection the research focused on revealing the participants understanding, interpretation and experience of their school world and their educational experiences. The research adopted a qualitative approach to data collection in Phase Three to capture the experiences, perspectives and opinions of the main stakeholders in this research – students, parents, teachers, and school management. The research model for this study allowed the qualitative data collected from Phase Three to be combined with data from other Phase 1 and Phase 2 to create a comprehensive picture of special education in Irish schools

under the themes of accreditation policy, practice/ experience and progression/transition.

A similar model of data collection was previously used in a large scale Irish Project – Project IRIS (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O’ Raw, 2015) which was a longitudinal study of the experience of and outcomes for pupils with special educational needs in Irish school. The publication of Project IRIS (2015) has guided the research design and the format of this study. The four main themes of Project IRIS of policy, provision, experience and outcomes are reflected in the similar key themes of this study. By constructing the research around these three key themes, which focused on curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways, this enabled the data generated from Phase One, Two and Three to be easily organised and sorted.

Phase Three of the research involved a case study of a sample of special schools (n=2). The case study schools were selected as their student cohort is students with mild general learning disabilities and also provided a senior cycle for their students. Finally the case study schools volunteered to be part of this research. The case study provided a further level of inquiry and created a picture of what was happening on the ground in special schools presently. The case study cohort was decided based on the response rate and on issues such as urban/rural location, gender, profile of school and accreditation and transition programmes available. Two schools who had participated in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the research were invited to participate in Phase 3 - case study. The case study data provided qualitative data enabling the emerging themes to be viewed from different perspectives within the school – allowing students, parents, teachers, deputy principal and principal to provide their individual opinions and perspectives in their own words in the areas of accreditation policy, practice/experience and progression/transition.

Visits to two schools were organised as part of the case study to provide an in-depth insight into the perspectives and experiences within special schools. The number of case study schools was limited to two school due to the means available and the limitations of the scope of this research. Data generated from the case study schools does not provide a true representation of all special schools in Ireland. The data collected from each case study school was analysed independently. The analysis of the case study data was not intended for cross case analysis. The case study reflected an overview of the school at a particular time and a particular student cohort. The two schools selected were based on their enthusiasm and feedback from Phase One and Phase Two. The student profile within both schools selected were mild general learning difficulties which matched the student profile of this research. Finally the selected case study schools offered their students a wide variety of accredited educational programmes. The case study provided data which would construct an entire and comprehensive picture of each individual school and the experiences and perspectives of its stakeholders.

The case study schools were voluntary participants in this research. All participants were not obliged to take part in the research and could withdraw at any time without having to give a reason and without prejudice. All participants involved in the case study were informed of the structure and purpose of the research. An information pack was forwarded to participants and informed consent was sought from all participants prior to confirmation of participation in Phase Three. No data was collected until all forms were returned and signed by all relevant parties. Approval was sought from the Board of Management of the two case study schools for permission to commence a case study. The case study was based on a) respect for the participants, b) beneficence & the absence of maleficence, and c) justice. No incentives were offered and there was no further ethical aspects that were to be considered in the recruitment of the proposed participants.

The case study involved;

1. Semi-structured interviews with principal and/or senior cycle teacher.
2. Semi-structured interviews with parents of students in their senior year of post primary school.
3. Focus group semi-structured interviews with a sample of students in their final year of post primary school.

3.9.5.1 Interviews with principal and/or senior cycle teacher

Principals/senior teachers/parents who were willing to participate in Phase Three of the research were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews with the researcher. Interviews provide a qualitative perspective on the research questions and allow the researcher to seek clarification regarding some of the responses that emerged from Questionnaires 1, 2 and 3. To gain insights into the research questions the researcher convened a series of interviews with principals, senior teachers and eight focus group students interviews. These interviews provided opportunities for participants to express their opinions and their experiences of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways within special schools. The interviews were held at a convenient venue and time for the participants' and which caused minimal disruption to their day. Interviews last between 20 – 40 minutes, depending on the participant. More time was allocated to the focus group student interviews to ensure that the students fully understood the questions posed and also that they have ample time to convey their answers and opinions.

3.9.5.2 Parent Interviews

In addition to the parent questionnaire in Phase Two it was envisaged that parent interviews would form part of the case study. Parent interviews would add an extra dimension of knowledge and depth to the findings. Upon discussion with the case study schools it was highlighted how difficult it can be for parents to dedicate time to voluntarily attend for an interview. In addition due to Covid restrictions it was very challenging to get parents to commit to involvement in the case study. It was

decided that that the parental contribution would be achieved through the parental questionnaire in Phase Two. The researcher wanted to gain a broad view of experiences from differing cohorts within Irish special schools catering for students with ID.

3.9.5.3 Focus Group with Students

The format of the focus groups followed the core elements outlined by Vaughn et al. (1996). A sample of students were invited to attend semi-structured focus group interviews. The focus groups consisted of a small group, 6-8 students from the two case study special schools who were in their senior year in school. The researcher delivered, prepared and piloted questions based on the student questionnaire and focusing on the three key themes of the research. The objective of the focus groups was not to generate quantitative information that can be projected or generalized to a special schools in Ireland. Basch (1987) argues that one of the major limitations of focus groups is that they are not appropriate for drawing inferences about larger populations or for statistical testing and interval estimation, which require quantitative findings.

The goal is to elicit the perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas of participants about a selected topic (Vaughn et al. 1996). The fact that children may respond in ways that they believe the researcher desires has long been seen as a threat to validity in one-to-one interviews between adults and children (Donaldson, 1978). The researcher was cognisant of the limitations of using focus groups and although the groups interaction is generally seen as an advantage of focus groups, there is always the possibility that intimidation within the group setting may inhibit interaction (Lewis, 1992). Lewis (1992) points out that children in focus groups may also tag on to themes previously raised by other children rather than offering their own opinion. However, she also acknowledges that this may indicate the salience of these ideas within the group. The researcher was aware of the limitations of the focus group and they were managed by having a variety of different questions referring to the same theme.

3.9.5.4 The Researcher in Phase Three

The researcher was aware of the complexity of positionality in relation to the dual role of researcher and teacher. The researcher was mindful of the fact that the student cohort have intellectual disabilities. The student information sheets are cognisant of this and are purposefully shorter in length and concise. There was an opportunity available for students to ask questions prior to the questionnaire and focus group interviews commencing. The student's teacher was present and was available to assist students if they need information read to them individually or explained in further detail.

The use of self-involved in conducting in-depth focus groups or semi structured interviews raises obvious questions of possible bias (Kim, 2010). The researcher translates the lived experience of participants into a researcher's language in the name of enhancing understanding, generating knowledge, and advocating for the participants (Kim, 2010). The researcher was reflective of this bias and self-aware within the focus groups and interview process. As a professional highly skilled specialised teacher, with 21 years of experience of working with students with intellectual disabilities the researcher was congruent of and recognised that the cohort of students for this research were a vulnerable population. All considerations were made to ensure that all participants were informed and participated on a voluntary basis. The researcher was aware of the policy and practice criteria regarding safety and protection of children participating in non-curricular activities, including research. All participants were free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason and without prejudice. The involvement of the students was arranged at a time that suits the students, so as to cause minimum disruption to their formal studies.

3.10 Conclusion

A well-planned and robust pilot study is not only important but necessary to ensure high research quality when a depth of understanding is sought (Malmqvist et al. (2019). Chapter 3 was concerned with providing an overview of the design of this study. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system provided the framework which underpinned this study. Paramount to the research design were the experiences of the participants and their interaction with their world. The study adopted a mixed methods design approach to collecting data. The rationale for designing both qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments ensures deeper, more insightful findings. In addition triangulation within the research design was achieved which increases the accuracy and reliability of the findings. Throughout the research design it was important for the researcher to be aware of positionality and reflexivity to minimise the possibility of bias, to remain as objective as possible through the data collection and finally to be aware of the culture and attitudes the researcher brings to the process of research design. The research cohort for this study were students with ID attending Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland. It was important in the research design to acknowledge student contribution to the data. Student voice was encouraged through the questionnaires and focus groups in Phase Two and Three. As this student group is classified as minors and a vulnerable group ethical issues were paramount during all aspects of the research. There were considerations of all aspects of this research. The voluntary and confidential nature of the research was emphasised and consent was sought from all student prior to questionnaires and interviews. Following piloting of the questionnaires and interview questions, the final research design consisted of a nationwide questionnaires to principals and senior teachers in special schools, a student questionnaire, parent questionnaire and two case study special schools which involved interviews and focus groups. The research design was divided into six phases and a time schedule was implemented. This chapter created the framework for the study based on the research questions of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways in the context of the comprehensive literature review outlined in chapter 2. Based on the information and findings in the literature review and the research design Chapter 4 will provide an extensive insight into the findings of this study.

Chapter 4 – Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

The overarching objective of this research was to analyse academic outcomes, academic achievement and transition pathways for students with ID after they leave post primary education in special schools in Ireland. Chapter 4 describes the main themes arising from an analysis of Phases One, Two and Three of this research data. A rigorous, reflexive thematic approach can produce insightful analysis of themes and patterns, which answers particular research questions for the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2020). The research findings were explored and analysed under the following themes:

1. Demographics and School Context
2. Curriculum
3. Accreditation
4. Transition Pathways

Braun and Clarke (2020) recognized their 2006 thematic analysis left aspects of their approach incompletely defined and open to interpretation. Braun and Clarke's (2020) contemporary approach to thematic analysis, referred to as reflexive thematic analysis, has come about in response to these initial misconceptions. Reflexive thematic analysis is an easily accessible and theoretically flexible interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis that facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns or themes in data sets (Braun and Clark, 2012). Reflexive thematic analysis is considered as a reflection of the researcher's interpretive analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2020). Researchers are unique and there is no expectation that themes interpreted by one researcher may be reproduced by another (Byrne, 2021). Reflexive Thematic Analysis focuses on the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with both their data and their analytic process (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This approach to data analysis aims to achieve richer interpretations of meaning, rather than attempting to achieve consensus of meaning. (Byrne, 2021).

The analysis of the findings in Chapter 4 will provide a detailed contextual framework, structured on Bronfenbrenner's ecology systems, on academic achievement, the academic outcomes and academic transition pathways for students with ID. The analysis of this research was cognisant that the findings are not designed to be generalised across the population of special schools in Ireland. The findings provide a snapshot of what is occurring in special schools in Ireland currently.

The quantitative data collected in Phases One and Two provided important dimensions to the qualitative data collected in Phase Three. A direct link between data from principal feedback in Phase One and student and parent questionnaires in Phase Two could not be achieved as confidentiality and participant anonymity measures were of paramount importance to this research. Direct triangulation was not possible. Braun and Clarke's (2020) reflexive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. By following the reflexive thematic approach, it enabled movement back and forth through the data gathered in Phases One, Two and Three and it ensured the emergence and analysis of the themes and sub-themes was thorough, robust and had depth and richness. Figure 21 illustrates the phases of analysis.

Figure 21: Phases of Analysis



The phases of analysis consisted of coding of principal questionnaires, coding of student questionnaires, coding of parent questionnaires, transcript of case study student focus group interviews, transcript of case study senior teacher interviews, transcript of case study principals' interviews, themes write-up, sub themes write-up, editing of themes and sub-themes and final write-up analysis.

4.2 Demographics and School Context

The following section will explore the demographics and school context of the participants in this research. The data findings from Phase One (nationwide principal questionnaire), Phase Two (student and parent questionnaire) and Phase Three (case study involving interviews of principals and senior teachers and focus groups with students) provided data for the demographics and data on the school context for the research. This data provided an overall picture of who participated in the research. The demographics and school context were investigated under the following sections: (1) List of special schools pertinent to research, (2) Size of schools, (3) Location of schools, (4) Primary disabilities of students in senior cycle, (5) Participant information, (6) Teaching career/experience and (7) Student profile and background.

The findings from Phase One will be reported first in this chapter, followed by findings from Phase Two and finally the data collected from Phase Three. The research instruments were designed to enable and encourage respondents in all phases of the research to provide comments on any questions posed. Quotes from respondents provided clarity and a depth and understanding of their experiences and thoughts on the questions posed in the research.

4.2.1 List of Special Schools Pertinent to Research

The Department of Education and Skills Special Schools List 2017 provided the baseline data for this research. This list consisted of all 137 special schools in the Republic of Ireland. Not all special schools on the Department of Education and Skills Special Schools list were pertinent to the research due to their student cohort. From the Special Schools List 2017 seventy-seven schools were pertinent to the research as they were schools catering for students with ID in post-primary education. Sixty schools were deemed unsuitable for the research as the student cohort of the school did not match the research criteria. Table 4 gives a breakdown of the schools not pertinent to this research due to their student cohort.

Table 4: Nationwide Special Schools invited to participate in Phase One

Department of Education Special School List 2017	137
Schools not pertinent to research due to student profile	
Students of pre-primary or primary age	6
Hospital school	9
Students with physical and/or multiples disabilities	2
School for the Blind	1
Rehabilitation unit	2
School for EBD	6
Reading school	3
Traveller school	1
Early School leavers	3
High Support Unit, Special Care Unit, Child Detention Centre	8
ASD	14
Irish Speaking Child Education and Development	1
Youth Psychiatric Unit	2
School for the Deaf	2
	Total = 60
Post Primary Special Schools with students with ID	Total = 77

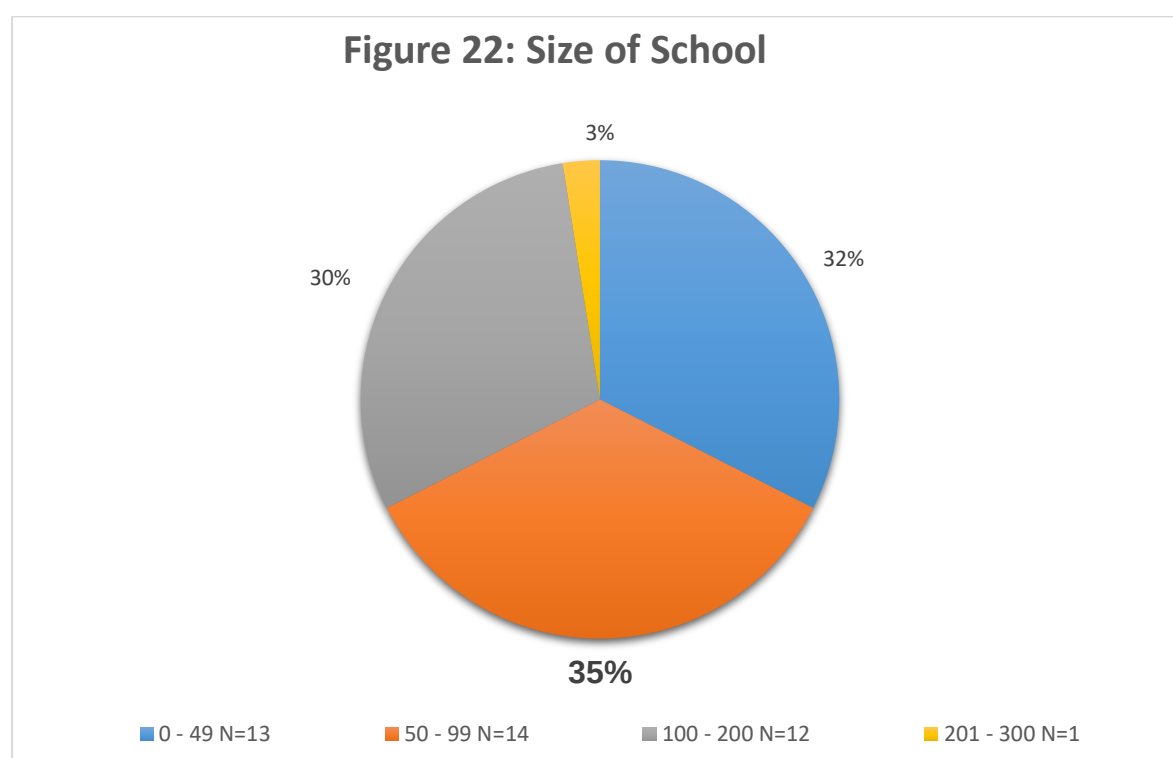
A response rate of 51% (n=39) was achieved in Phase One. Thirty-nine special schools in Ireland catering for students with ID participated in Phase One of the research. See Table 5.

Table 5: Response Rate to Phase One Principal Questionnaire

Number of special schools	77
Number of questionnaires returned	39
Response rate	51%

4.2.2 Size of Schools

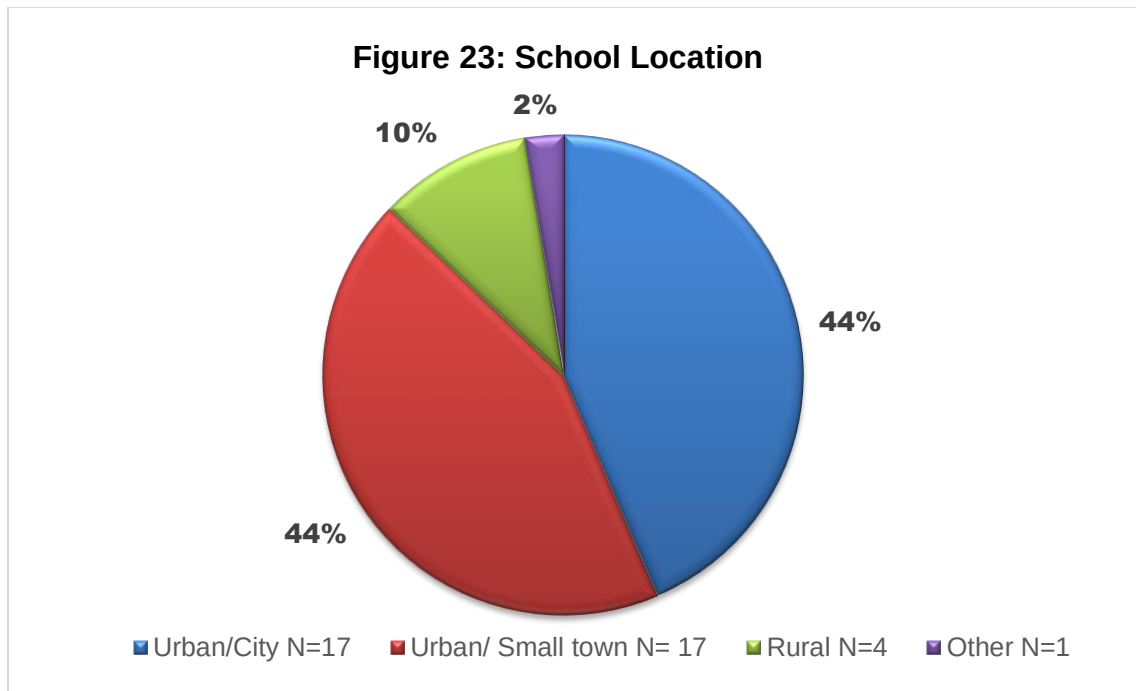
In relation to the size of special schools in Ireland responding to the research, almost a third of special schools (32%, n=13) cater for up to 49 students. Just over a third of special schools (35%, n=14) cater for a student cohort of up to 99 students in their school and nearly a third (30%, n=12) had an enrolment of between 100-200 students. One school (3%, n=1) caters for 201-300 students. See Figure 22.



The findings highlight that the research had an equal response rate from small, middle and large special schools in Ireland. Thirty respondents (77%) categorised their school as both primary and post primary. The majority (59%, n=23) of special schools participating in this research had a Senior Cycle post-primary section in their school. All respondents were from co-educational special schools.

4.2.3 Location of Schools

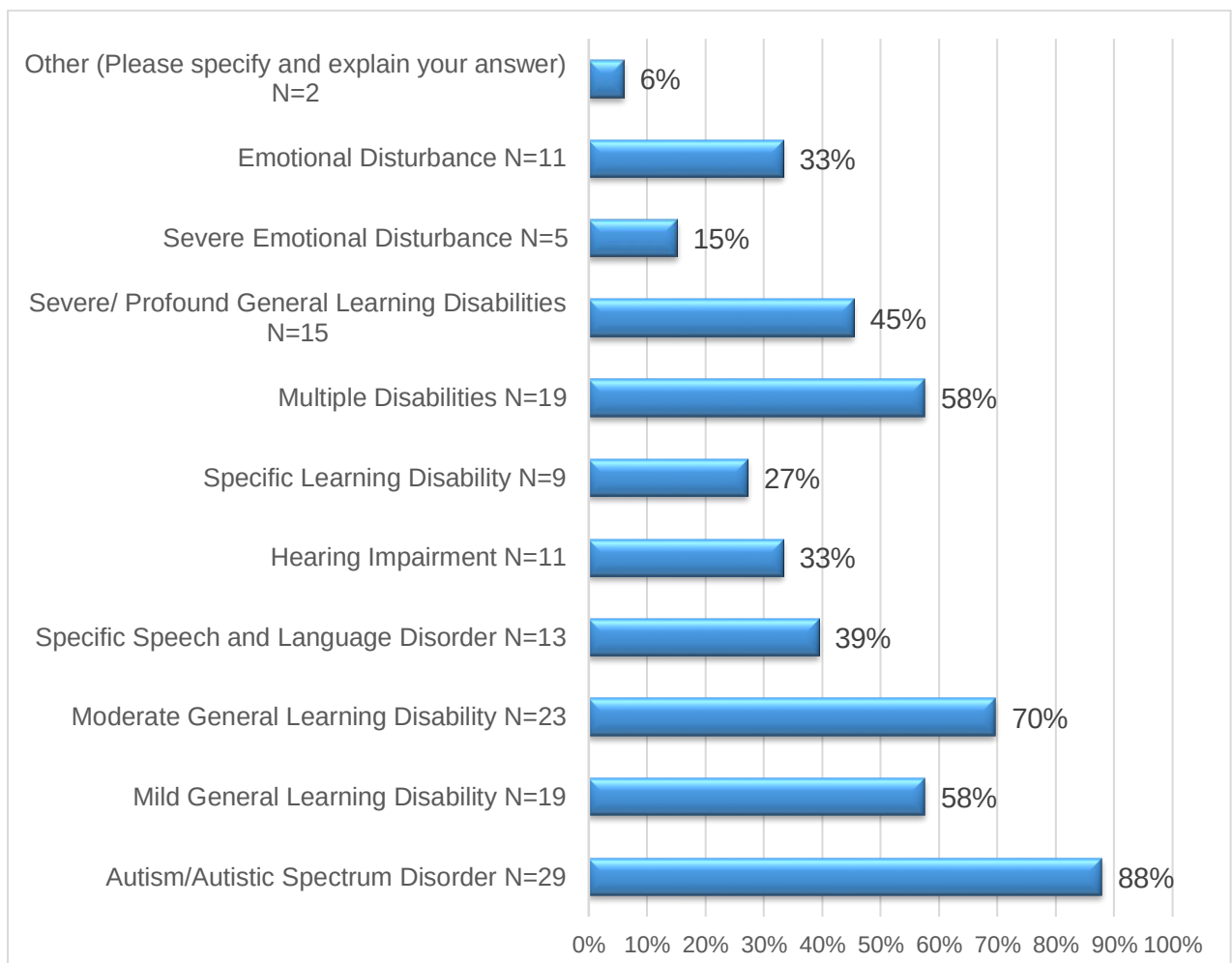
An overwhelming majority (88%, n=34) of respondents described the location of their school as either urban/city or small town while 10% (n=4) described their school as being in a rural location. See Figure 23.



4.2.4 Profile of Students in Senior Cycle

The research focused on special schools catering for students with ID in Ireland. In addition, within these special schools a wide range of disabilities were identified in Senior Cycle students. Figure 24 outlines the breakdown of primary disabilities of students in special schools in Ireland. Thirty-three schools in total responded to this question in Questionnaire 1.

Figure 24: Profile of Students in Senior Cycle



The overwhelming majority (88%, n=29) of schools identified Autistic Spectrum Disorder as a disability of some of their students. Seventy per cent (n=23) of schools identified some of their students as having a Moderate General Learning Disability, while 58% (n=19) reported that some of their students had a Mild General Learning Disability. The majority of schools (58%, n=19) also commented

that their students had multiple disabilities. Fifteen (45%) special schools in Ireland identified some of their students as having Severe/Profound General Learning Disabilities. Other disabilities of students in Senior Cycle in special schools were Specific Speech and Language Disorder (39%, n=13), Emotional Disturbance (33%, n=11), Hearing Impairment (33%, n=11), Specific Learning Disability (27%, n=9) and Severe Emotional Disturbance (15%, n=5).

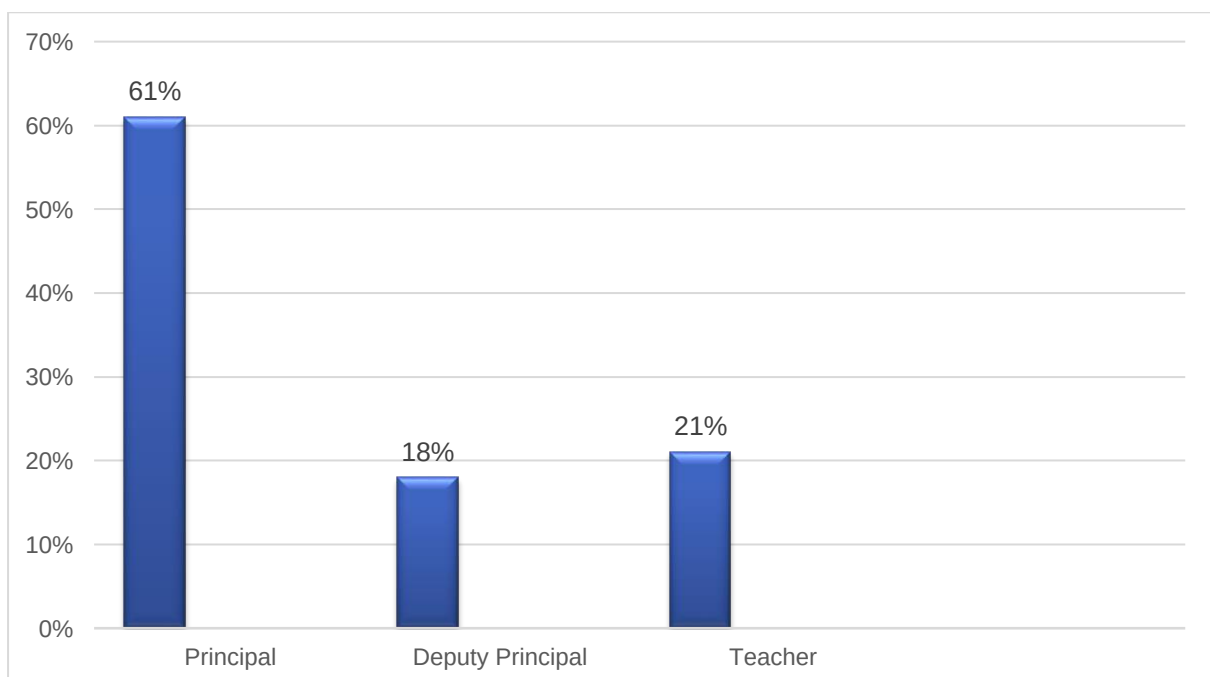
4.2.5 Participant Information

A sub section of the principal Questionnaire in Phase One focused on gathering professional information about the respondents. In Phase Two a section in the student questionnaire and the parent questionnaire focused on attaining knowledge of the length of the student's time in their school.

4.2.5.1 Teaching Career/Experience

The majority (61%, n=23) of principals and nearly one fifth (18%, n=7) of deputy principals completed Phase One - Questionnaire 1. Consequently, over three quarters (79%, n=30) of the respondents to the research hold a senior management position within a special school in Ireland (See Figure 25).

Figure 25: Position within the School

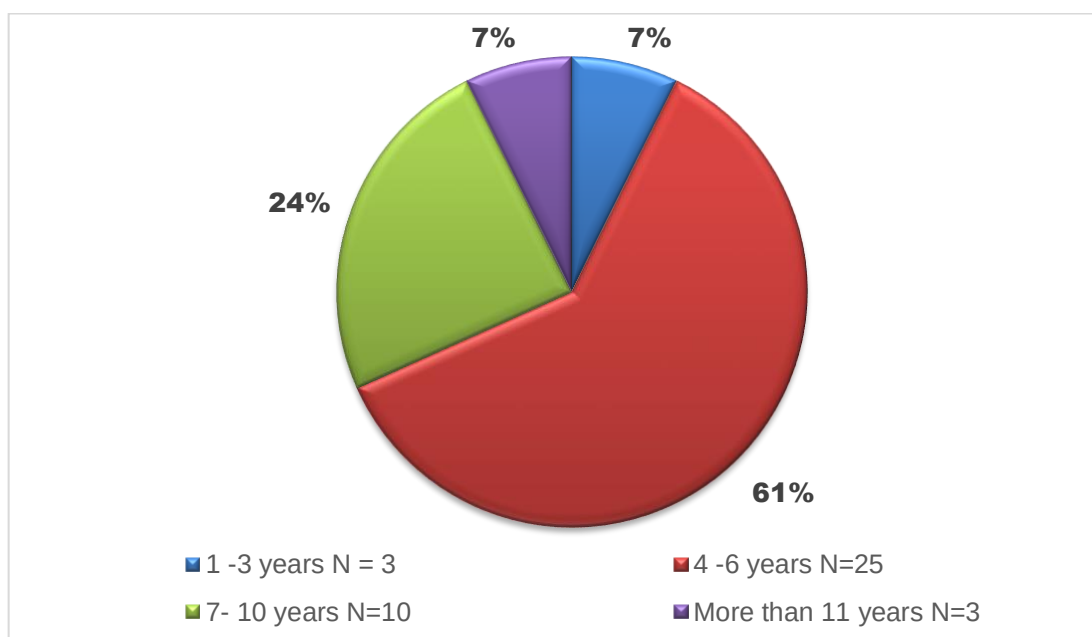


In addition, the majority of respondents (59%, n=23) had more than 20 years teaching experience and 48% (n=16) were teaching in the special school for more than 20 years. The findings from the principal Questionnaire in Phase One indicated a profile of an experienced, long-term professional body of teachers educating students with ID.

4.2.5.2 Student Profile and Background

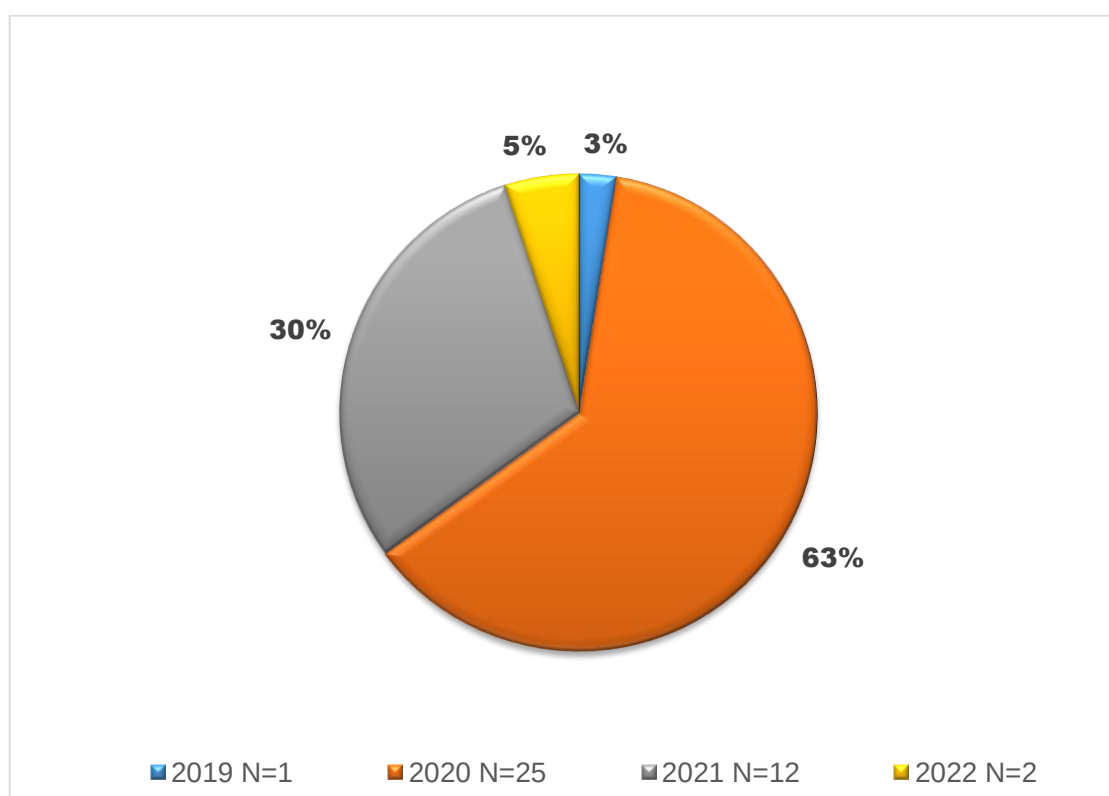
The overwhelming majority 85% (n= 35) of students who responded to Students Questionnaire in Phase Two had been attending their school for 4-10 years (See Figure 26).

Figure 26: Length of Time Student has been Attending School



The participating students were very familiar with how their school operated and the practices within their special school. These finding from Student Questionnaires provides an insight into the students' experiences within special schools in Ireland. The vast majority (93%, n=37) of student respondents from Phase Two were leaving post primary school in 2020 or 2021. (See Figure 27)

Figure 27: In what year will you leave this school?



The respondents from the student questionnaire were senior students in their final years of post-primary education and were participating in a variety of senior programmes available in their schools. Feedback from participating students in Phase Two were from the key cohort on which this research was focused - students with ID in Senior Cycle in post-primary education.

4.3 Curriculum and Accreditation

4.3.1 Introduction

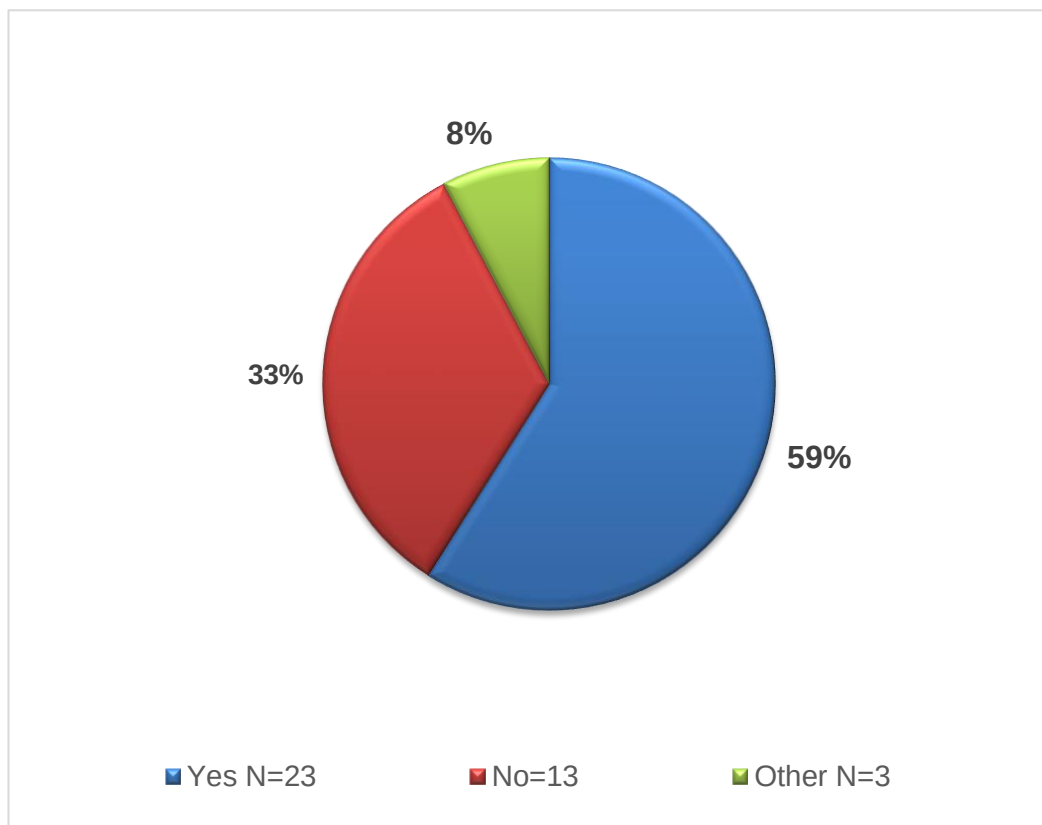
This section begins with outlining the curriculum and accreditation which is available to students in special schools in Ireland. The theme of curriculum and accreditation was investigated through the data collection instruments of a nationwide principal questionnaire (Phase One), students and parent questionnaire (Phase Two) and case study (Phase Three) involving interviews and focus groups of principals, senior teachers and students. The findings are presented under the following subthemes:

(1) Curriculum at Senior Cycle in Special Schools, (2) Curriculum Restrictions, (3) Accreditation Pathways, (4) Levels of Accreditation, (5) Examinations, (6) Academic Culture, (7) Student Voice in Educational Programmes, (8) Parent Voice in Education Programme and (9) Barriers to Participation. Throughout the analysis, data from Phase One will be reported first, followed by data from Phase Two and finally the findings from Phase Three. Feedback from respondents from Phase One, Two and Three will be quoted to provide further clarity, depth and understanding of the questions posed in the research.

4.3.2 Curriculum at Senior Cycle in Special Schools

Curricular pathways refers to the different curriculum components and how they can be altered to adjust to students with different abilities and needs. The curricular pathways available to students reflect students' individual choices and their interests. To begin answering the question around curriculum and accreditation it was important to discover how special schools operate and examine if special schools offer a Senior Cycle programme in their special school. The data gathered in Phase One highlighted that the majority of special schools (59%, n=23) offer a Senior Cycle programme at post primary level. A third (33%, n=13) of special schools in Ireland did not offer senior cycle programmes (see Figure 28).

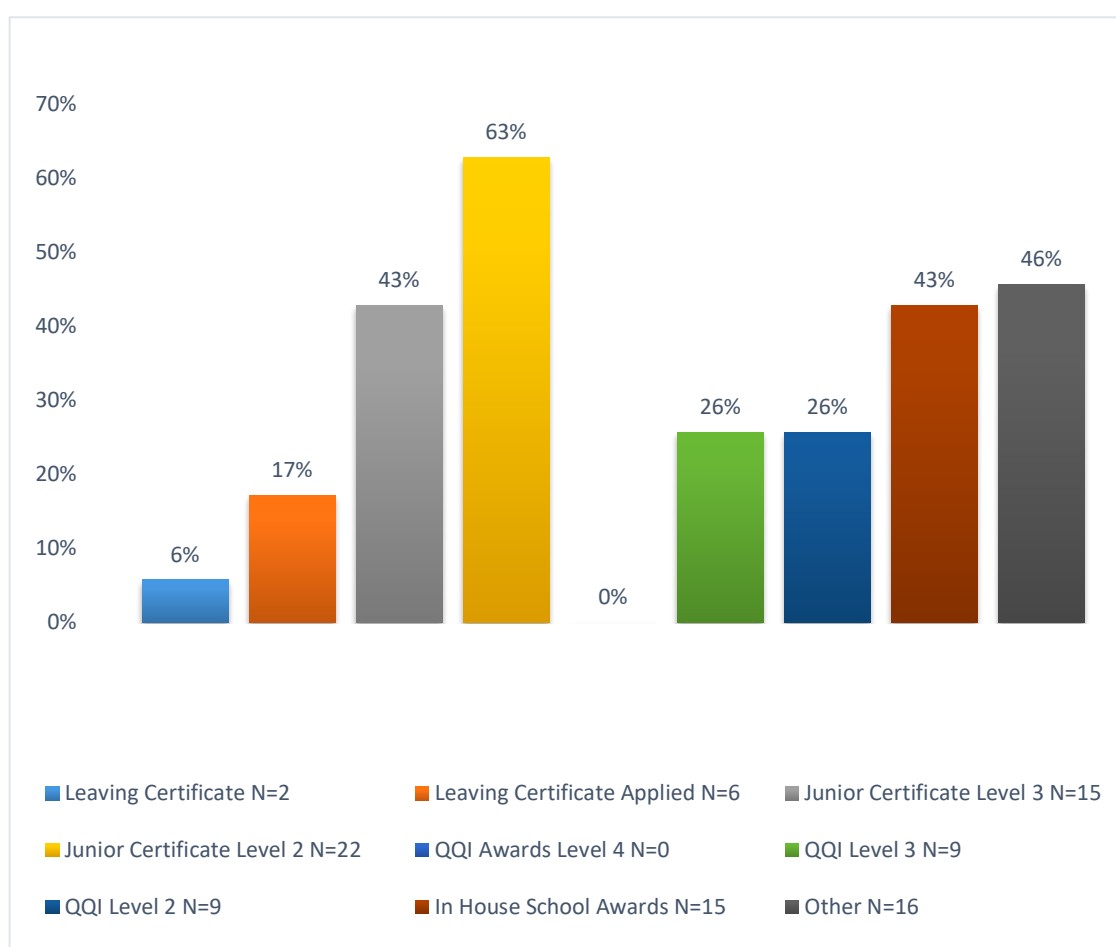
Figure 28: Does your School have a Senior Cycle Post Primary Section?



4.3.3 Curriculum Programmes

Data from Phase One reported that a wide range of curricular programmes were available which students with ID could follow in their schools. These included Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied, Junior Certificate Level 3, Junior Certificate Level 2, QQI Level 3, QQI Level 2 and In-House School Awards. (See Figure 29).

Figure 29: Curriculum Programmes



Principals responding to Phase One could select as many options as possible to represent the variety of programmes available in their schools. In total thirty-five special schools in Ireland responded to this question. The majority of special schools (63%, n=22) follow the Junior Cycle Level 2 curriculum programme while 43% (n=15) of schools offer the Junior Cycle Level 3. The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) was offered as a curriculum programme in 17% (n=6) of special schools while the Leaving Certificate was offered in 2 schools (6%). It should be noted that 46% (n=16) offer awards in the 'other' category and 43% (n=15) of schools offer In-House awards.

In the 'other' category nearly a quarter (23%, n=8) of respondents identified ASDAN as an additional curriculum and accreditation pathway. For their students the ASDAN programme is a pathway to accreditation and post school life. ASDAN focuses less on academic content and more on life skills and social needs. A respondent from Phase One reported that *'in the last 2 years the school leavers have followed an ASDAN accredited programme. We are currently training to enter the JCL2 and JCL3 programmes'*. Another participant highlighted *'how the ASDAN English accredited programme was not recognised by the Irish Department of Education'*.

4.3.3.1 Junior Cycle Level 2

Nearly two thirds of respondent schools (63%, N=22) operate the Junior Cycle Level 2 programme. A principal commented that *'Junior Cycle Level 2 is age appropriate at the level they are at, if they are capable of Junior Cycle Level 3 that's great, they can do some subjects at that level at that age. It's not socially conscious at 18 to do the Junior Cycle Level 3. If they can do it in 6th year as well, it belittles the whole thing'*. Another principal highlighted that the *'Junior Cycle Level 2 finishes at 16 years so we can't offer that anymore. Presumably they (the Department of Education and Skills) will put something in place'*. Feedback from students in the focus group interviews in Phase Three included comments such as *'I did Level 2 – it was good. I enjoyed it and it was easy'*. In addition, a student reported that they *'did Junior Cycle Level 2 – the programme was OK. It was kind of easy'*.

4.3.3.2 Junior Cycle Level 3

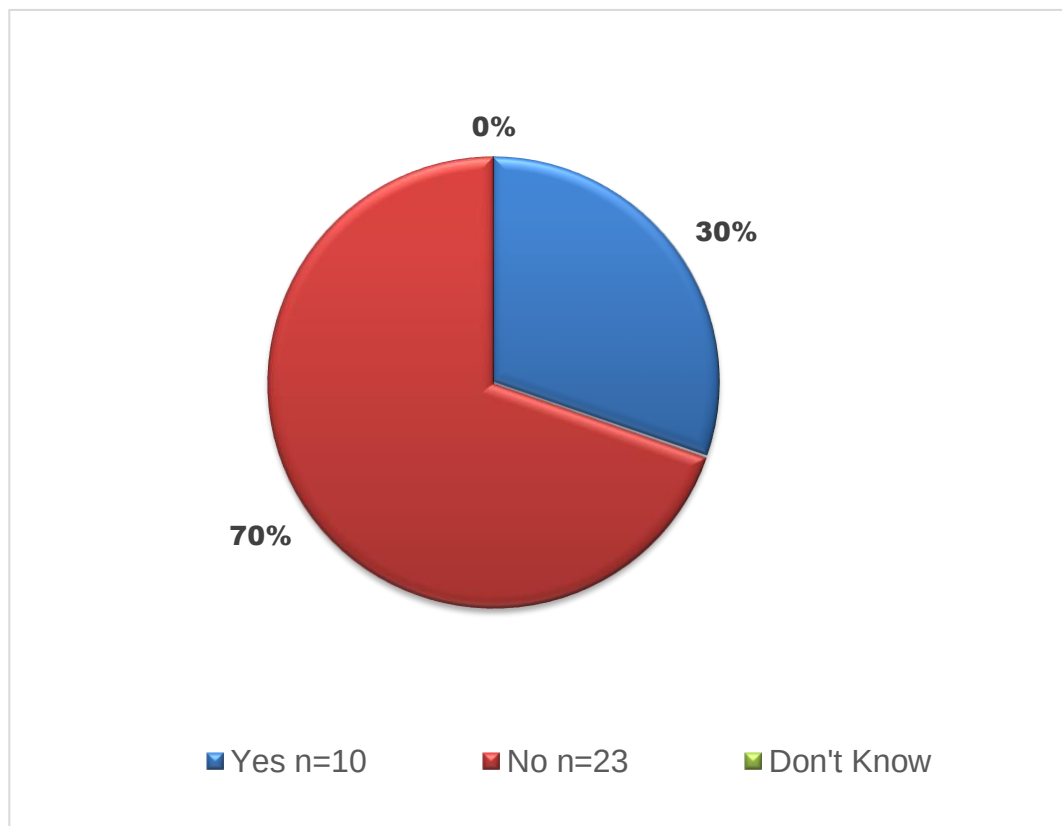
Nearly half of participant special schools (43%, n=15) offer the Junior Cycle Level 3 programme. A principal reported that *'JCL3 is covered at 3rd year. They (the students) sit the exam in the same way other students sit their exams'*. Another principal stated that *'students have done the more practical subjects at JCL3. Students who are within the mild GLD range complete JCSP/JCL3, so they might sit the Home Economics, Woodwork and Art at Junior Cycle Level 3 and then go to LCA. Students with more moderate needs would do Junior Cycle Level 2 Programme as a Finishing Programme'*.

A Junior Cycle Level 3 student reported in the focus group interviews in Phase Three that *‘to be honest I studied over Christmas and Easter to get the result that I got. I kind of dedicated myself towards it. I believe that when you set your mind to something you can do anything. I was very motivated’*.

4.3.3.3 Junior Certificate Schools Programme

The Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) is an initiative by the Department of Education and Skills introduced in 1996 as an intervention within the Junior Cycle, specifically aimed at potential early school leavers. Just less than a third (32%, n=11) of respondents participate in the Junior Certificate Schools Programme initiative, while over two thirds (68%, n=23) were not involved. Figure 30 illustrates the participation rates of schools in the Junior Certificate Schools Programme initiative.

Figure 30: Does your School Participate in the JCSP Programme?



Benefits of the Junior Certificate Schools Programme were noted by respondents in Phase One stating that *'it is a good programme as it allows students to have a clear goal/target each month. The collection of work in folders also allows the students to see how much work they have done'*. In addition, a Principal from Phase One commented that the Junior Certificate Schools Programme is *'an excellent programme, very clear and manageable for most students and staff'*. The Junior Certificate Schools Programme was identified by a principal in the nationwide questionnaire in Phase One as *'a great programme and has a lovely focus of supporting lots of very positive and worthwhile initiatives. I hope that it continues as it's so effective for us. We work a combination of JCSP or whatever Junior Cycle exams are appropriate'*. Also, a respondent from Phase One stated that their school *'finds the JCSP excellent in preparing students for exams, the targets are achievable for students and they feel a massive sense of achievement in completing a statement. Their confidence is increased, and they have a 'can do' attitude when reflecting on study during difficult moments. It is an invaluable resource'*. Further positive endorsements of JCSP initiative from principals in Phase One include *'excellent scaffolding for directing teaching', 'a life saver' and 'brilliant, continued assessment; excellent for SEN students'*. A principal commented that *'the JCSP do a really broad range of subjects - like typical of a mainstream secondary education'*. It must be noted that two thirds of schools did not participate in this initiative in their school. One respondent reported that their school *'tried to get onto it but was not allowed by DES'*. A principal stated that *'we don't do JCSP – there was a time when we couldn't access the programme so, historically, we did other programmes like FETAC which is now QQI'*.

4.3.3.4 Quality and Qualification Ireland Awards

Over half (52%, n=18) of special schools in Ireland participating in this research engaged with the QQI programmes. There was an equal breakdown of special schools participating in QQI Level 2 (26%, n=9) and QQI Level 3 (26%, n=9). It should be noted that no school offered QQI Level 4. In Case Study, School One, the principal explained how *'at the moment we are doing QQI Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3. We aim for QQI Level 3 because we like to give everyone the opportunity.'*

However, some students may be working on the same modules but at a QQI Level 2. Overall, we're not happy with the QQI awards. It's there and it's the best show in town now but it's not right for several different reasons. Mainly what do the students do when they leave here except more QQI and probably at the same level. We don't see a better Leaver's Programme at the moment'. In Case Study, School Two, QQI programmes are not an option within their school. A principal from Phase One commented that 'we did QQI Level 3 and Level 2 but found the paperwork too time consuming and eventually unmanageable. Some students are offered accredited literacy and numeracy programmes through National Adult Literacy Agency'.

4.3.3.5 Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate

Nearly one quarter (23%, n=8) of special schools' respondents to Phase One reported that their school is engaged in the Leaving Certificate Applied and/or Leaving Certificate. However, it should be noted that 17% (n=6) of special schools participated in the Leaving Certificate Applied while only 6% (n=2) offer the Leaving Certificate programme. The Case Study, School One, does not have the Leaving Certificate Applied as an option for their Senior Cycle students - *'We had a huge look at LCA. The minimum was far beyond what our students are capable of doing. It wasn't suitable. The standard that's required for the Leaving Certificate Applied doesn't fit with the school'*. The Case Study, School Two, engages with the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. Table 6 illustrates the number of students and the grades which students received from 2016 to 2019.

Table 6: Leaving Certificate Applied Results from Case Study, School Two

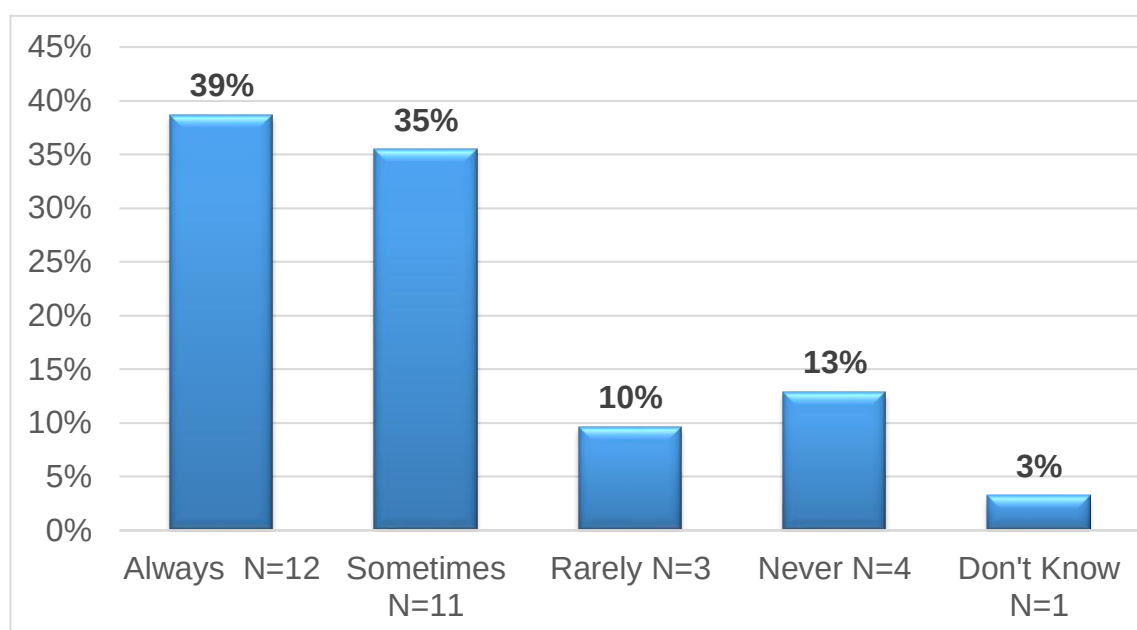
Year	No. of Candidates	Grade Distinction	Grade Merit	Grade Pass
2019	7	4	3	
2018	9		9	
2017	7	4	2	
2016	11		10	1

A senior teacher from Phase Three reflected on the accredited programmes that students were engaged with at Senior Cycle. The senior teacher highlighted that *‘usually students who have completed some state examinations at Junior Cycle Level 3 would go on to do Leaving Certificate Applied. It is quite demanding, and it is academic. Skills such as critical thinking, working with others and a lot of vocational emphasis are embedded in the programme. The Leaving Certificate Applied is a beneficial programme in this school but depends on the needs and profile of the students’.*

4.3.4 Curriculum Restrictions

Nearly three quarters of respondents (74%, n= 23) from Phase One stated that their school always or sometimes restrict the curriculum which would be available in mainstream schools. See Figure 31.

Figure 31: Does your School Restrict the Curriculum?



Special schools in Ireland have an Irish exemption which means that the teaching of Irish is not a compulsory element of the curriculum. Feedback from the Case Study School Two stated that although the curriculum was restricted *‘there is still a broad range of subjects available’.* A senior teacher from Phase Three identified

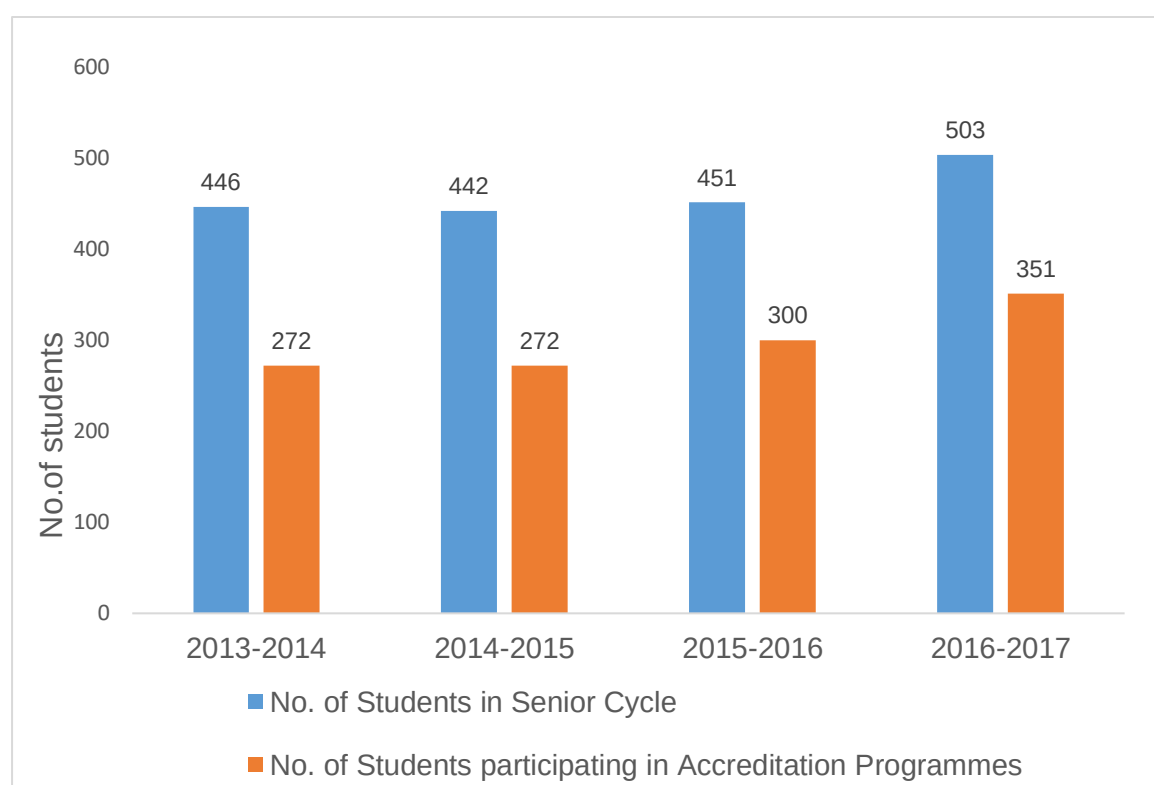
the fact that their school does not have the same facilities as other post primary schools – for example *‘we do not have a science lab’*. In discussions with the principal from Case Study, School One, it was highlighted that special schools do not have the specialised subject teachers that are available in post primary schools. The principal stated that *‘it would be great if students could choose from a menu of courses like in secondary school where they can choose their strengths. Unfortunately, here we don’t have enough teachers and hours’*.

Feedback from the principal in the Case Study, School Two, highlighted that the curriculum available at Junior Cycle (Junior Cycle Levels 2 and 3 and JCSP) met the needs and profile of their students. The Junior Cycle curriculum is designed for students with ID; however, the lack of appropriate curriculum at Senior Cycle was highlighted in the feedback. *‘There needs to be a pathway for students, post 16, after they finish JCL2’*. *The vast majority of students are not JCL3 and LCA is too big a jump. LCA is a steppingstone for JCL3 but not for JCL2’*. Further feedback from the senior teacher in Phase Three recommended that *‘there should be a Senior Cycle curriculum just like the JCL2. There is nothing for Senior Cycle – no curriculum to follow. We are adapting programmes and making our own resources to match learning outcomes’*. *If there is no curriculum, it is very frustrating, very random and not joined up’*.

4.3.5 Accreditation Pathways

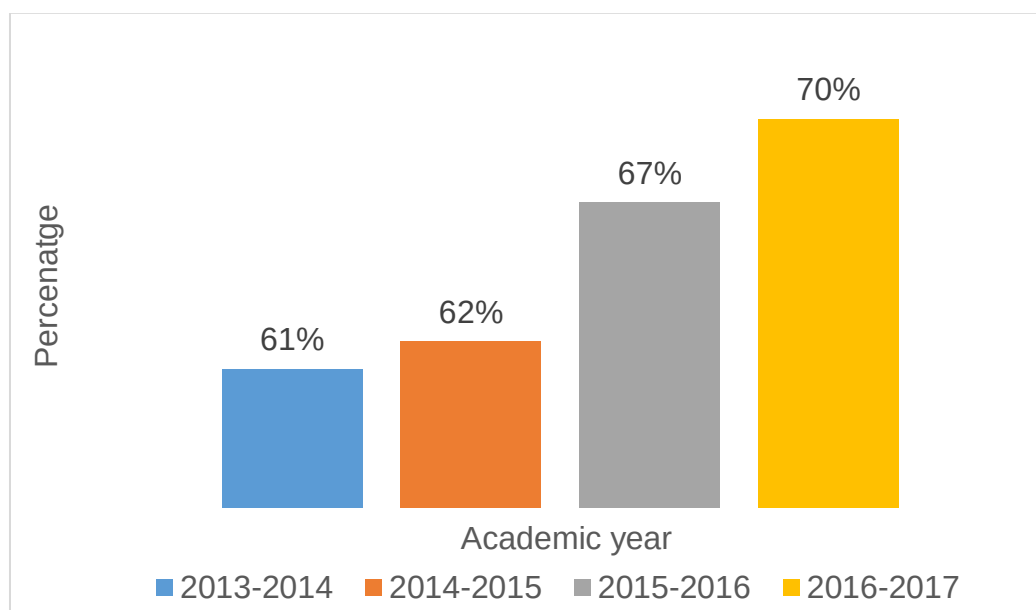
Data received from special schools in Ireland in Phase One (n=21) highlighted the number of students who participated in Senior Cycle and the number of students who participated in accreditation programmes from the academic year 2013-2014 to 2016-2017. Figure 32 illustrates this data in detail.

Figure 32: Students in Senior Cycle and Participating in Accreditation Programmes



Data from over 51% of special schools participating in the nationwide questionnaire reported that from 2013-2017, 1,842 students participated in Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland. During this period 1,195 of these students in special schools in Ireland participated in accreditation programmes. Figure 33 identified the percentage of students from Phase One who participated in accredited programmes at Senior Cycle (n=21).

Figure 33: Percentage of Students Participating in Accreditation Programmes

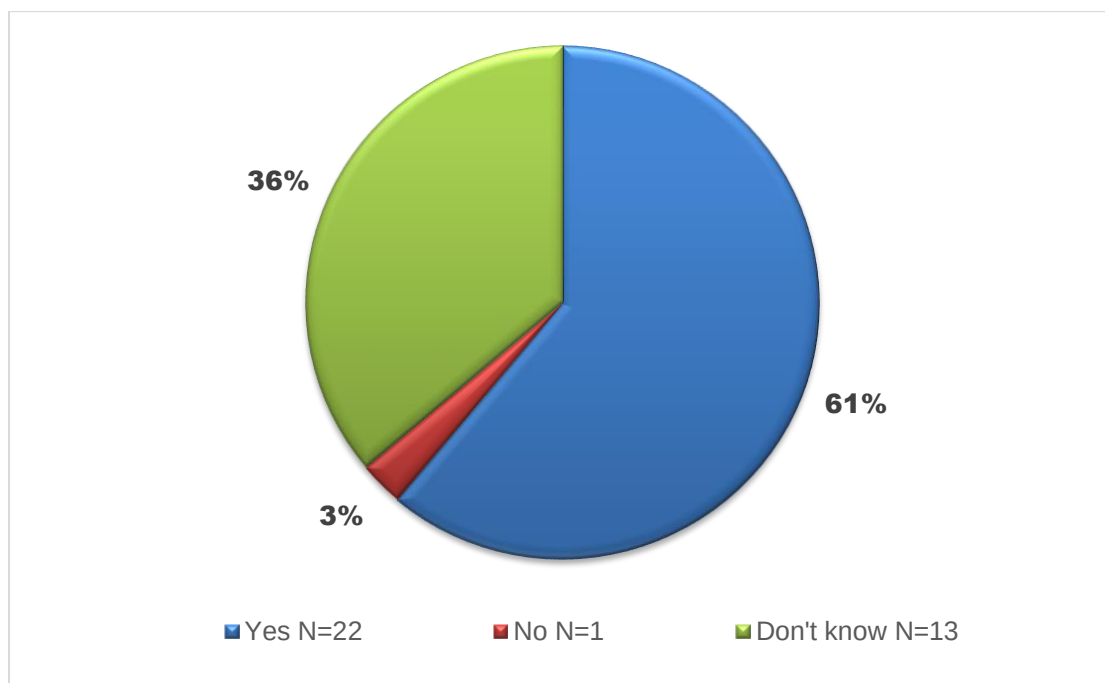


During the academic year 2013-2014, 61% of students participated in accreditation programmes at Senior Cycle, while 62% of students participated in 2014-2015. This increased to 67% of students in the academic year 2015-2016. Finally, in 2016-2017, 70% of students participated in accredited programmes at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland. A Senior Cycle teacher from the Case Study, School One, stated that *'in post primary we focus on Junior Cycle Level 2. Then 2 years in Senior Cycle - we do QQI Level 3, focus on work experiences and preparation for work. We run programmes like a normal secondary school from 12-16 and then from 16-18'*. The principal explained that *'we try to run programmes as close to mainstream as possible. Our students are socially conscious and are hanging around mainstream peers and at home'*. Two different accreditation pathways were followed in the case study schools in Phase Three. In the Case Study, School One, the Junior Cycle Level 3 and Junior Cycle Level 2 accredited programmes are offered and then as a Leavers Programme, QQI Levels 1-3.

In the Case Study, School One, the senior teacher explained that Junior Cycle Level 3 is completed in 3rd year of students post primary education. Students sit

their JCL3 examinations in the local primary school with other mainstream JCL3 students. *'They sit that in the same way other students sit their exams. They sit it in the local post primary school, other students in the class would be following JCL2'*. In Case Study, School 2, the senior students can follow the JCSP programme, which can branch out to JCL2 or JCL3. Students begin a Finishing Programme/LCA when they are 16 years old. *'The Finishing Programme is a 2-year programme. JCL2 is also used as a Leavers Programme for students with more moderate learning difficulties.*

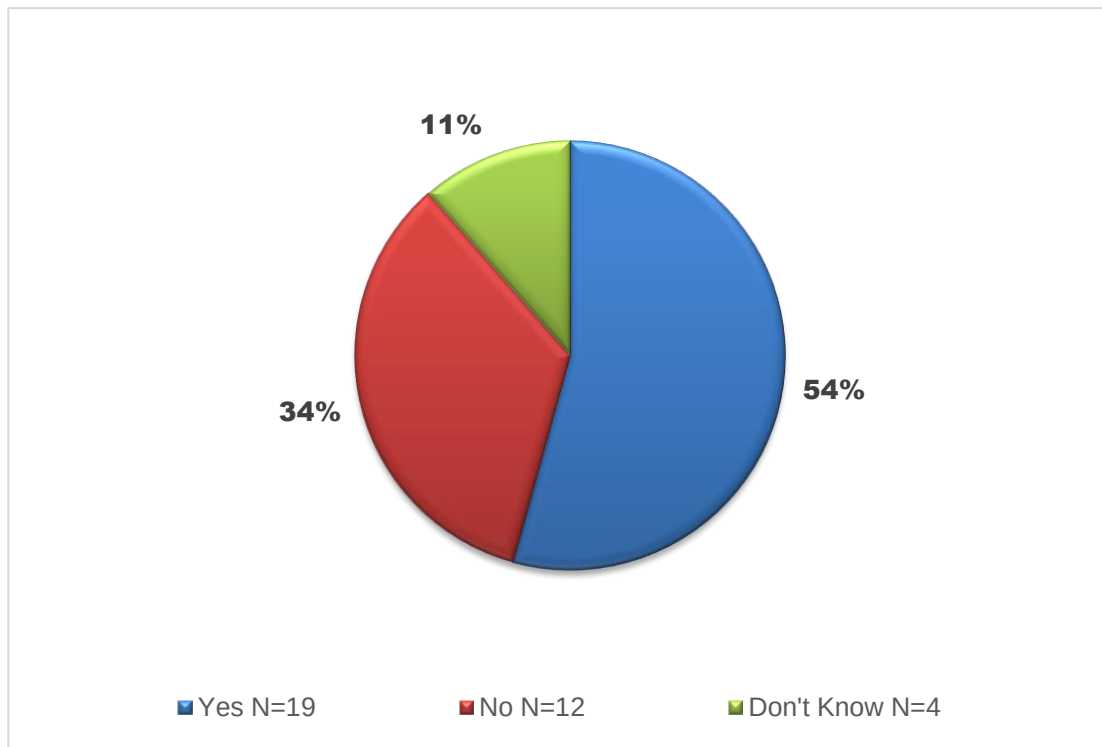
Figure 34: Is your Child Participating in Accreditation Programmes?



Twenty-two parents (61%) reported in Phase Two that their child was engaged in an accredited programme. It should be noted that 39% (n=14) of parents said their child was not participating in any accredited programmes or answered 'don't know' to this question. (See Figure 34).

In the majority (54%, n=19) of special schools, students could follow two or more accreditation pathways at the same time. (See Figure 35).

Figure 35: Can Students Follow Two or More Accreditation Pathways?

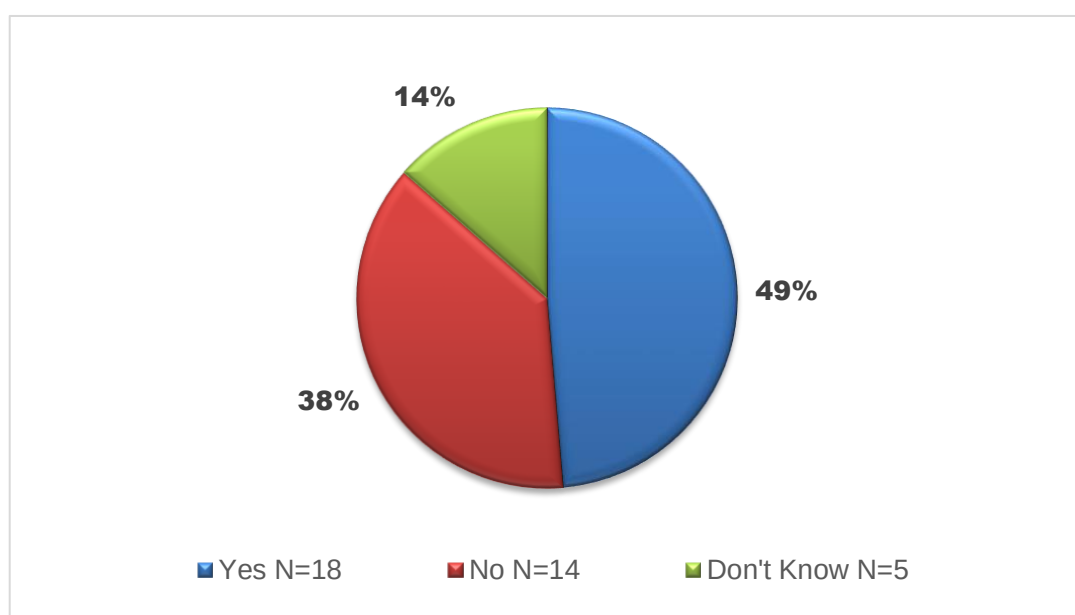


No school offered QQI Level 4. A respondent to Phase One stated that their school *'always prepare students for QQI awards and for state exams e.g. - Food and Nutrition and Food and Cookery are studied at QQI Level 3 along with Junior Cycle Home Economics'*. Another respondent reported how their school runs both the *'new Junior Cycle Level 2 and QQI Level 2 programmes'* while in another special school, students can follow *'JCL2 and specific subjects, that students might have a particular strength in, at Level 3'*.

4.3.6 Levels of Accreditations

Slightly under half of all respondents from special schools in Phase One (49%, n=18) were happy with the level of accreditation available in their school; 38% (n=14) were not happy and 14% (n=5) answered 'don't know' to this question. (See Figure 36).

Figure 36: Are You Happy with the Level of Accreditation Available to Students?

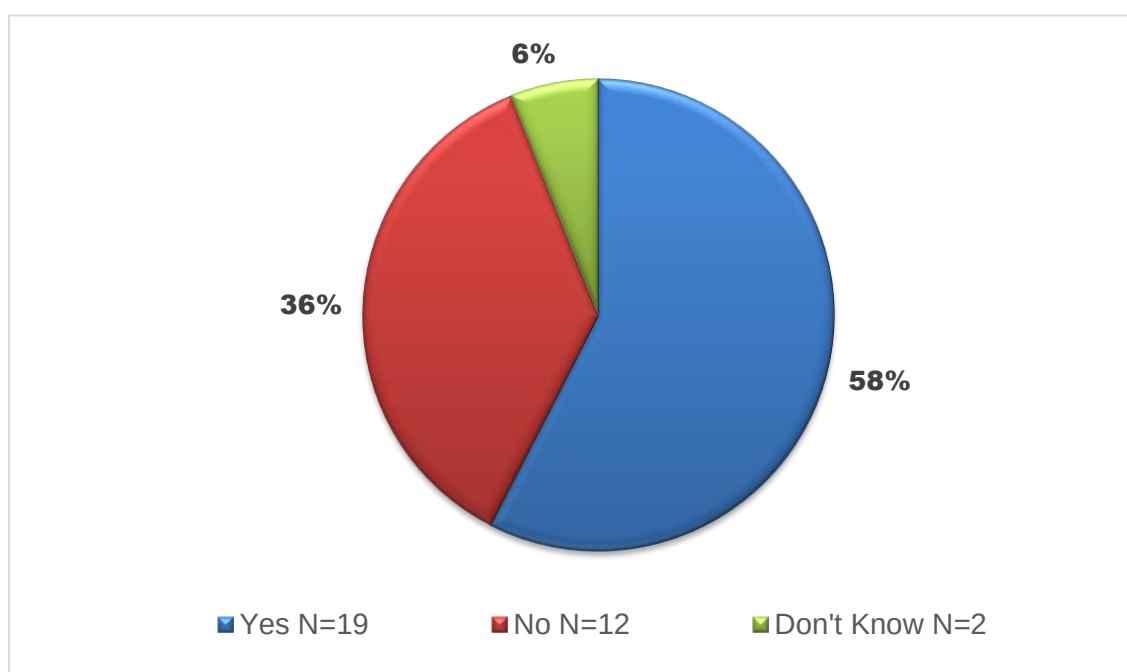


In Phase One, a school explained how they '*hoped to see developments in the curricular programmes in Ireland in the coming years; Junior Cycle and Leaving Cycle programmes that are well tailored to student's needs. ASDAN is very good*'. Another school from Phase One explained how they '*cater for all abilities - yet Level 1 students at present are not properly accredited. Also, those high functioning ID students with behavioural difficulties need more practical hands-on programmes. We are lacking funding, staff and facilities*'. Additional comments from respondents from Phase 1 identified how their school is '*delighted that our entire cohort of pupils are finally being recognised*' and how '*further expansion at Junior Cycle Level 3 & QQI would allow the school to offer a greater range of subjects. The school really regrets the loss of foundation Junior Cycle programmes*'. Feedback from another respondent identified how '*courses offered to our students give them the ability to engage in education whereas they might drop out*'. Another school, participating

on Phase One, explained how they *'have had a small number of students who have left over the years without accreditation. We are currently looking to address that situation by introducing more suitable programmes e.g. Junior Cycle Level 2. Once the accreditation highlights the strengths of each pupil, I feel we will have done our best for our students. Providing future employers and colleges/institutions with a summary of our students' skills will serve them well in meeting our students' needs and matching them with appropriate challenges'*. An overwhelming 89% (n=32) of parents said they were satisfied, very satisfied or extremely satisfied with the accreditation programmes available to their child in school.

Over half (58%, n=19) stated that students, for whatever reason, do not participate in accredited programme in senior cycle. (See Figure 37)

Figure 37: Non-Participation in Senior Cycle Assessment



Feedback from respondents identified other programmes which are available to students. These include ASDAN, Gaisce (The President's) Awards, in-school programmes and life skills programmes. Apart from accredited programmes at Senior Cycle, one special school explained that *'all students would follow the JCSP programme if not operating at JC Level. In the future we may look at Junior Cycle*

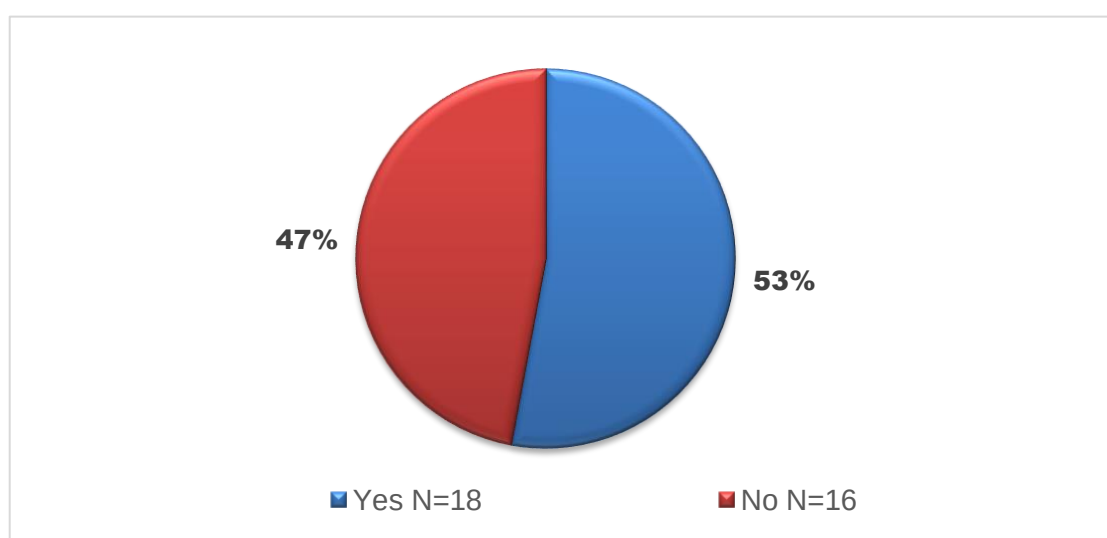
Level 1 as we feel it is very important that each student leaves school with accreditation for what they can do'. A respondent explained that, for a small number of students, participation levels can vary, especially for students with serious behavioural difficulties. Feedback from a respondent in Phase One stated that 'this is an area requiring development for our school in my view'.

In Case Study school One and Two, students participate in accredited programmes at Senior Cycle. In Case Study, School One, all students participate in accredited programmes in Senior Cycle. *'The students all have to participate in Senior Cycle programmes – that's why they are here. The options are QQI Level 1, Level 2 or Level 3. Most of the students have MGLD, but we have had one or two students who have been of lower ability; they would participate in QQI Level 1 to ensure they get success. They are all encouraged to participate'.* Case Study, School two operates a 'two-year Finishing Programme or LCA. *Junior Cycle Level 2 is also used as a Leavers Programme with the students who have more moderate learning difficulties'.*

4.3.7 State Examinations

Figure 38 shows that over half of all special schools, with students with ID, were entered into state examinations (53%, n=18).

Figure 38: Are Students with ID Entered for State Examinations?



A respondent from Phase One stated that *‘we try to ensure all the pupils achieve some State accreditation during their time with us but, unfortunately, this is not always possible’*. Another respondent from Phase One explained that *‘the ID of our pupils is too low – even QQI’s lowest level is too difficult’*.

Further feedback from a respondent in Phase One explained that *‘we have only 8 hours woodwork and cookery teaching, which means we find it difficult to hold on to qualified woodwork teachers. This year, no student will attempt Junior Cycle woodwork’*. These comments highlight the spectrum of the abilities in special schools in Ireland and the wide range of academic programmes in which schools are engaged.

Figure 39: Examination Subjects at Junior Cycle

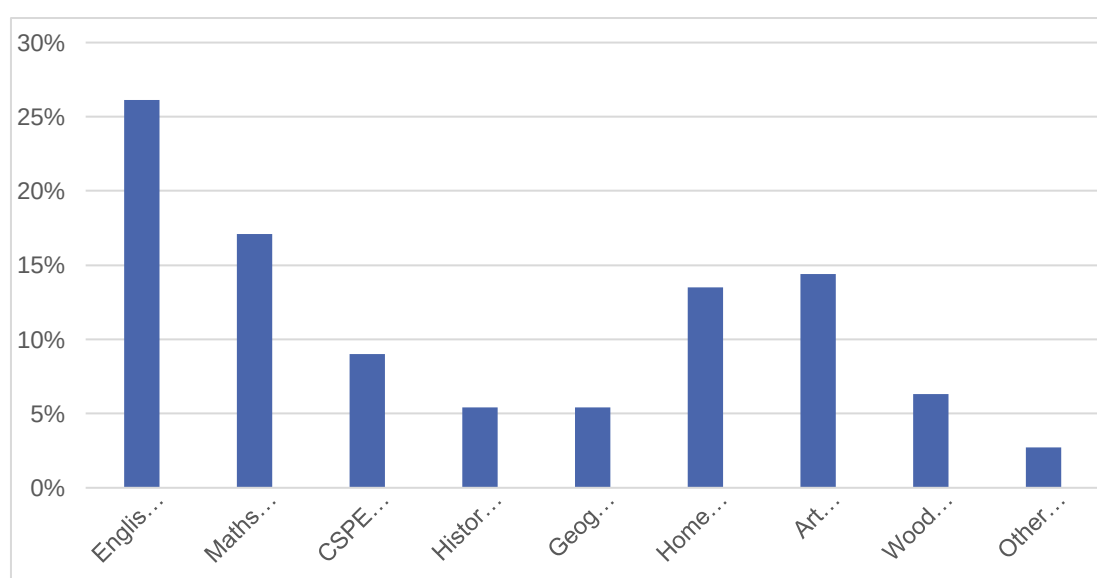
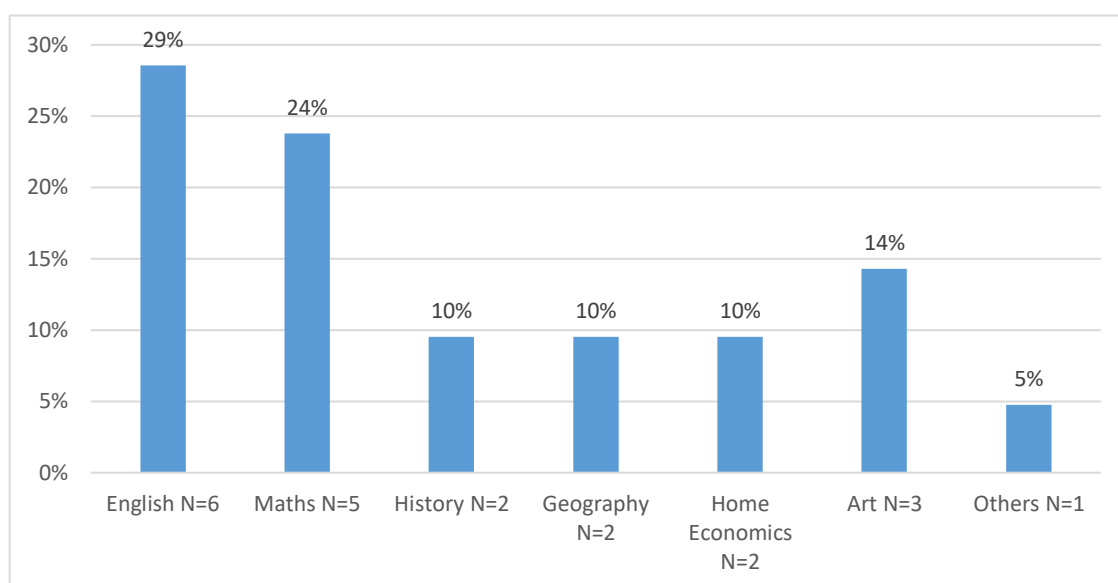


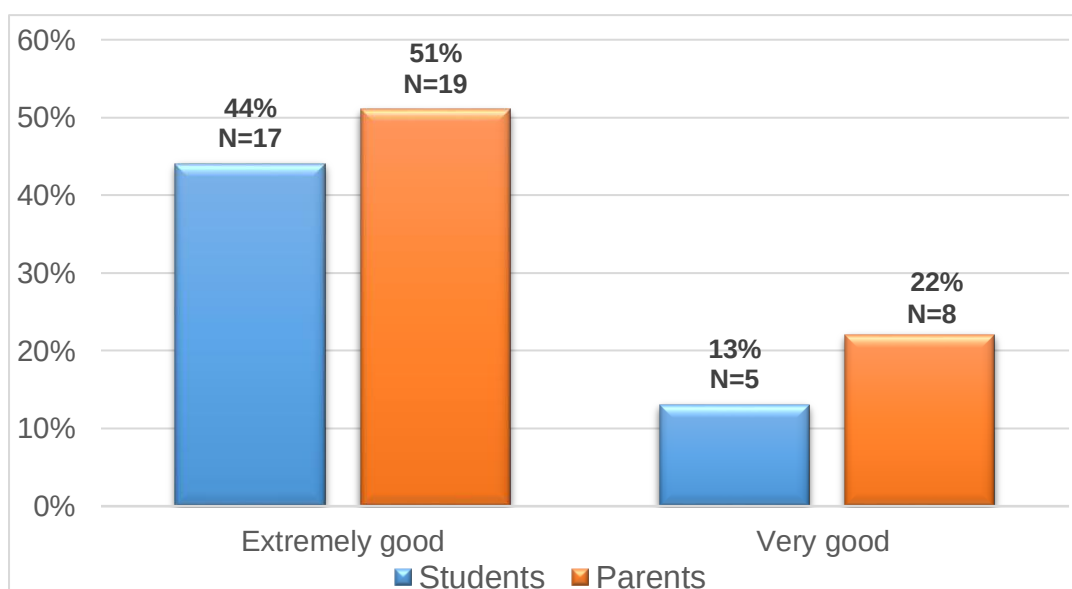
Figure 39 shows feedback from principals in Phase One on the examination subjects which are taken at Junior Cycle level in their school. The graph shows the breakdown of subjects, in which students can participate, at examination level in special schools in Ireland. The most popular examination subjects at Junior Cycle Level 3 are English (26%, n=29), Mathematics (17%, n=19), Home-Economics (n=15, 14%) and Art (14%, n=16). Figure 40 outlines the most popular examination subjects taken at Senior Cycle. These subjects are English (29%, n=6), Mathematics (24%, n=5) and Art (14%, n=3).

Figure 40: Examination Subjects at Senior Cycle



Most students (57%, n=22) and nearly three quarters of parents (73%, n=27) stated that the choice of subjects available to study in their schools was extremely good or very good. Figure 41 illustrates this data.

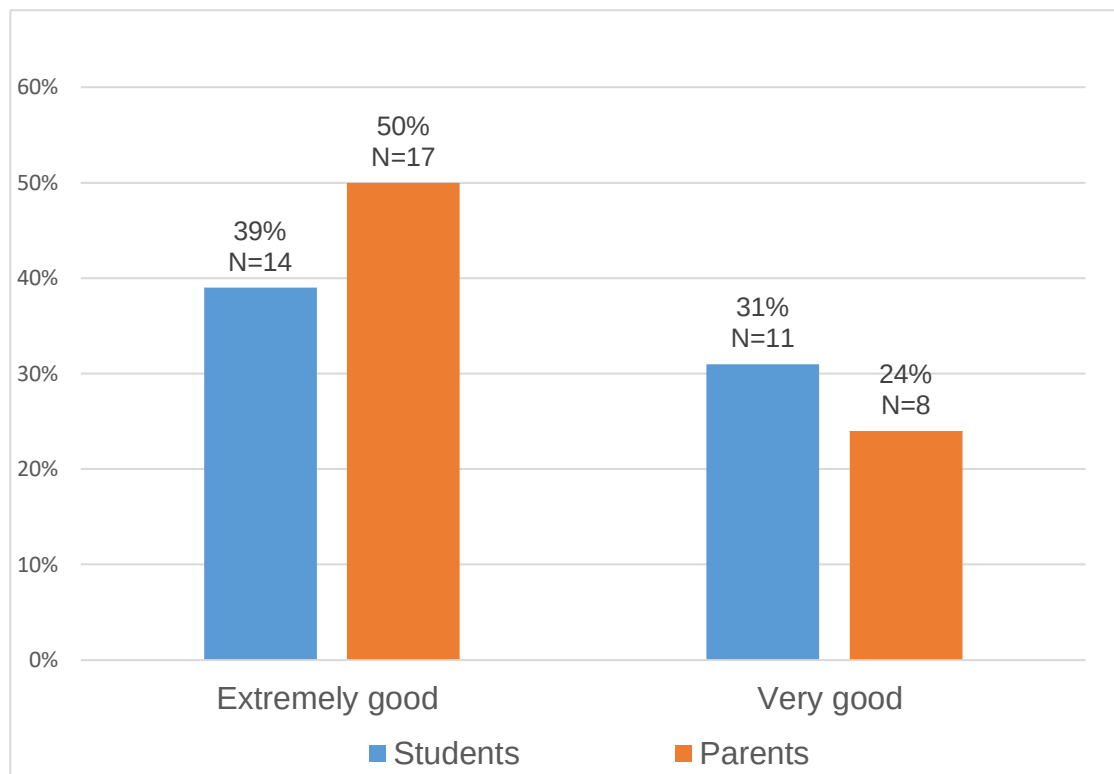
Figure 41: Student and Parental View of Choice of Subjects Available



Over three quarters of students (76%, n=16) stated that there were additional programmes and subjects they would like to study. Feedback on this topic included history, languages, woodwork, music, PE and science.

The majority of students (70%, n=25) and parents (74%, n=25) reported that the school was extremely good or very good at preparing students for examinations. Figure 42 represents the breakdown of this data.

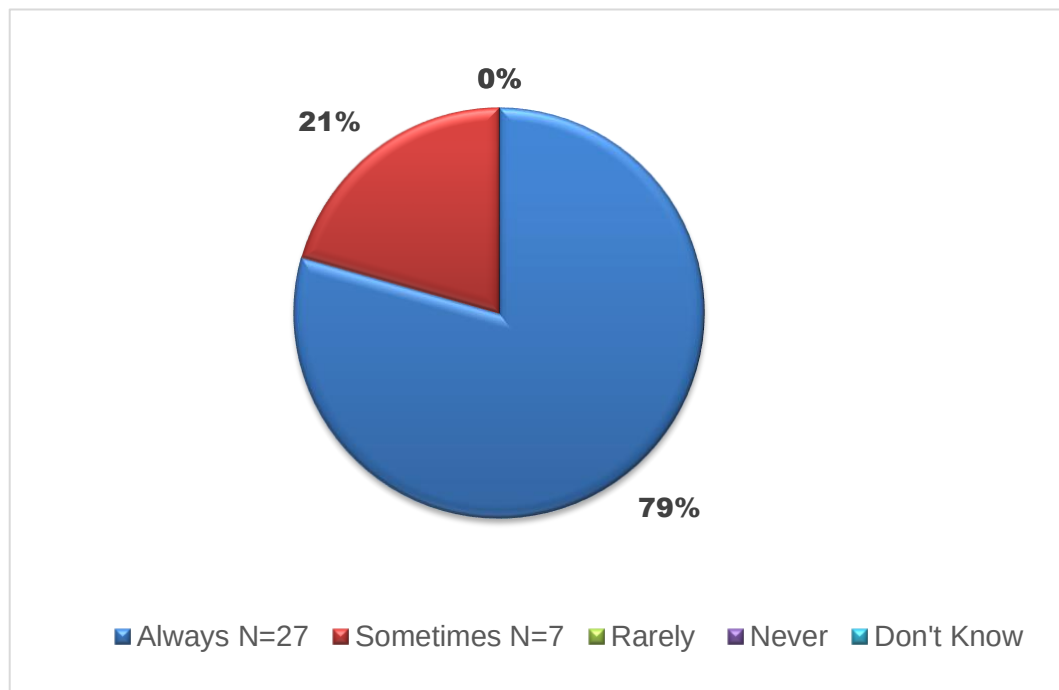
Figure 42: Preparing for Examinations



4.3.8 Academic Culture

All respondent schools stated that the culture within their school, always or sometimes, encourages students with ID to achieve accreditation. This data is illustrated in Figure 43.

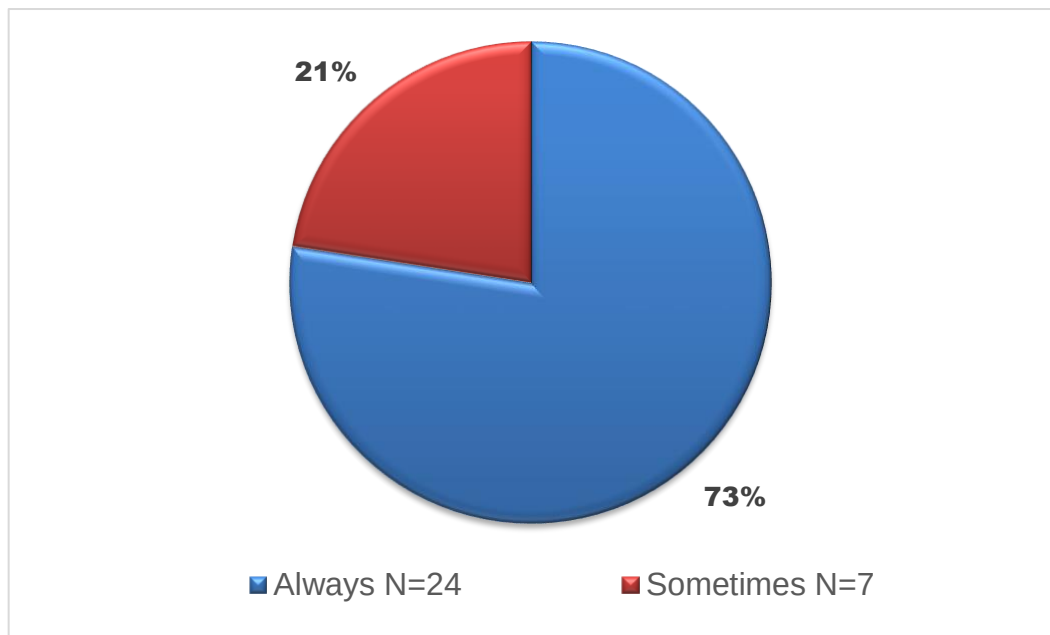
Figure 43: The School Encourages Students to Achieve Accreditation



A respondent from Phase One stated that *'unless there are specific anxiety or behavioural difficulties, all our students will follow some programmes or other'*. Feedback from another special school reported how the staff *'firmly believe that students should strive to achieve the best educational outcome for themselves. We work very hard to facilitate this'*. Another respondent reflected that *'when lower ability dictates not entering state exams then we are likely not to enter a student. They are not entered unless they are guaranteed a pass. We over-teach because we are not in the business of risking the students failing. The JC/LC is as much to do with self-esteem as state accreditation'*. A further school from Phase One explained how they *'encourage all students to achieve and participate in programmes that would give them a sense of fulfilment. All programmes are adapted to meet individual needs. For many students, anxiety is the barrier to achievement'*.

Nearly three quarters of respondents in Phase One (73%, n=24) highlighted that their school always had a good reputation for encouraging academic success. Figure 44 illustrates this data.

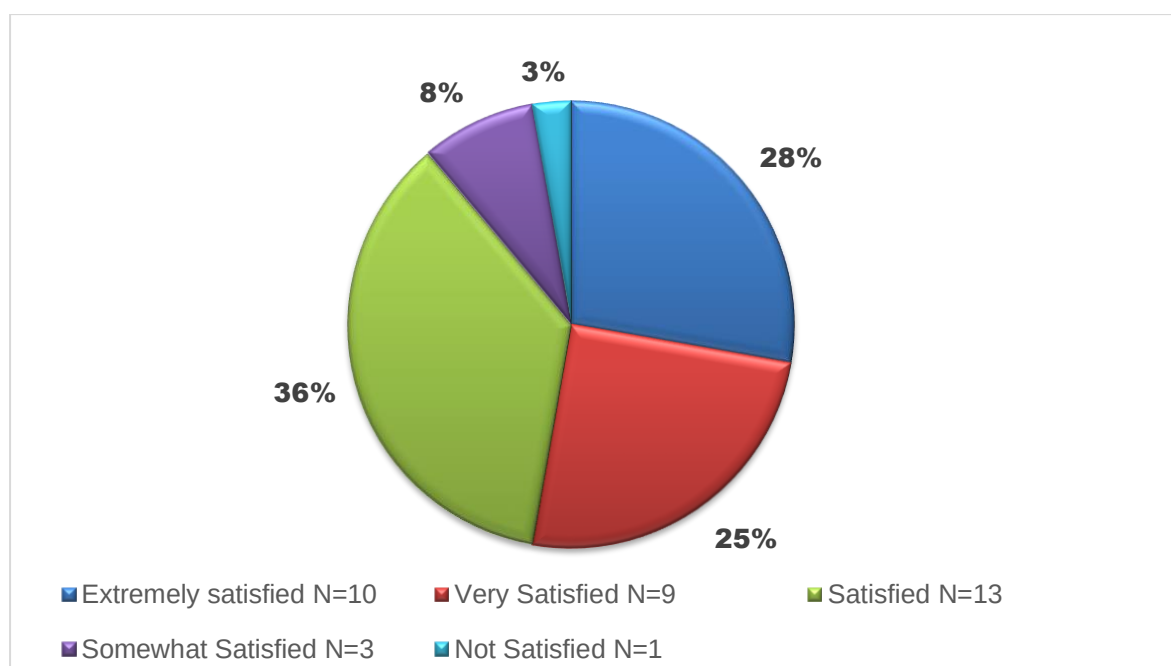
Figure 44: Phase One – The School has a Good Reputation for Encouraging Academic Success



In the focus group interviews in Phase Three, students expressed their thoughts on accreditation for their schoolwork and the programmes in which they were participating. One student stated that *'accreditation is important because it shows what you did and prepares you for your adult jobs'*. Another student replied that *'when you're applying for a job with your CV, it's an advantage to have the QQI Level'*. Further comments from students stated that *'it's important for me as it gives me an idea of what I'm good at and when I'm leaving school it'll give me a little bit of a choice of what to do and how to do it'*. Another student reported that *'it's important because if you get a job someday it shows your skills to an employer'*. Finally a student revealed their thoughts by saying *'it's best when you go for a job that the people there know what you have achieved in your school, what you have done and what level you are at really'*. The overwhelming majority of parents (89%, n=32) reported that they were extremely satisfied, very satisfied or satisfied with

the school's provision of accredited programmes available to their child. (See Figure 45).

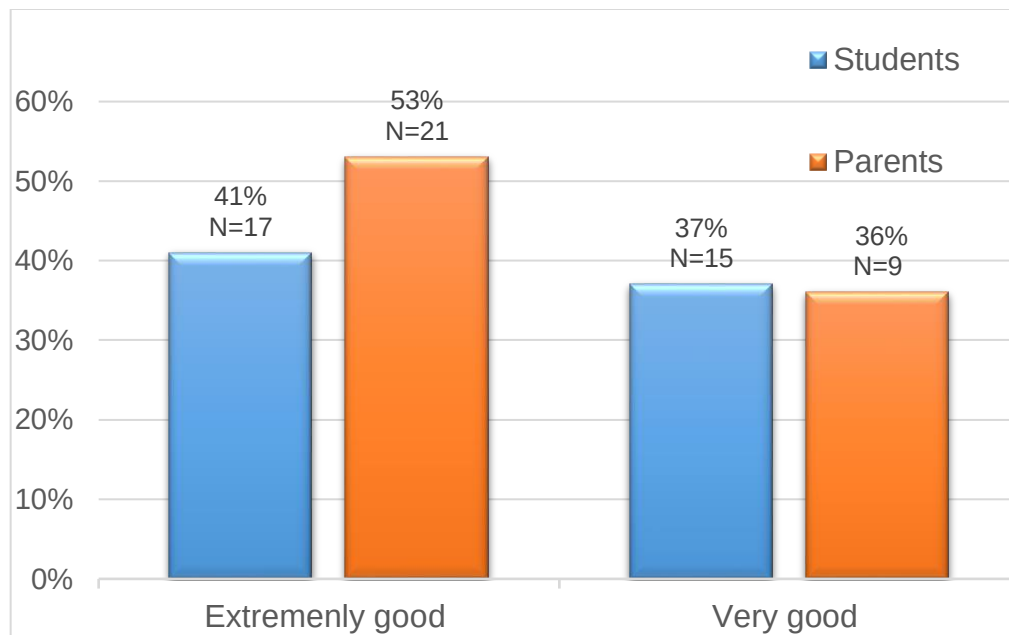
Figure 45: Are you Satisfied with the Level of Accreditation Available for Your Child in Their School?



A parent from Phase Two reported that *'my child has done the subjects she is capable of'*. Another parent commented that there *'was a great choice of programmes available for QQI Level 2 and up'*. While one parent commented that they *'would like if he (their child) was pushed to do more subjects at exam level'*. It should be noted that only one parent (3%) was not satisfied with the accreditation programmes that were available in their child's school.

From Phase Two of the data collection, 78% of students (n=32) and 89% (n=32) of parents rated the teaching in their child's school as very good or extremely good. See Figure 46.

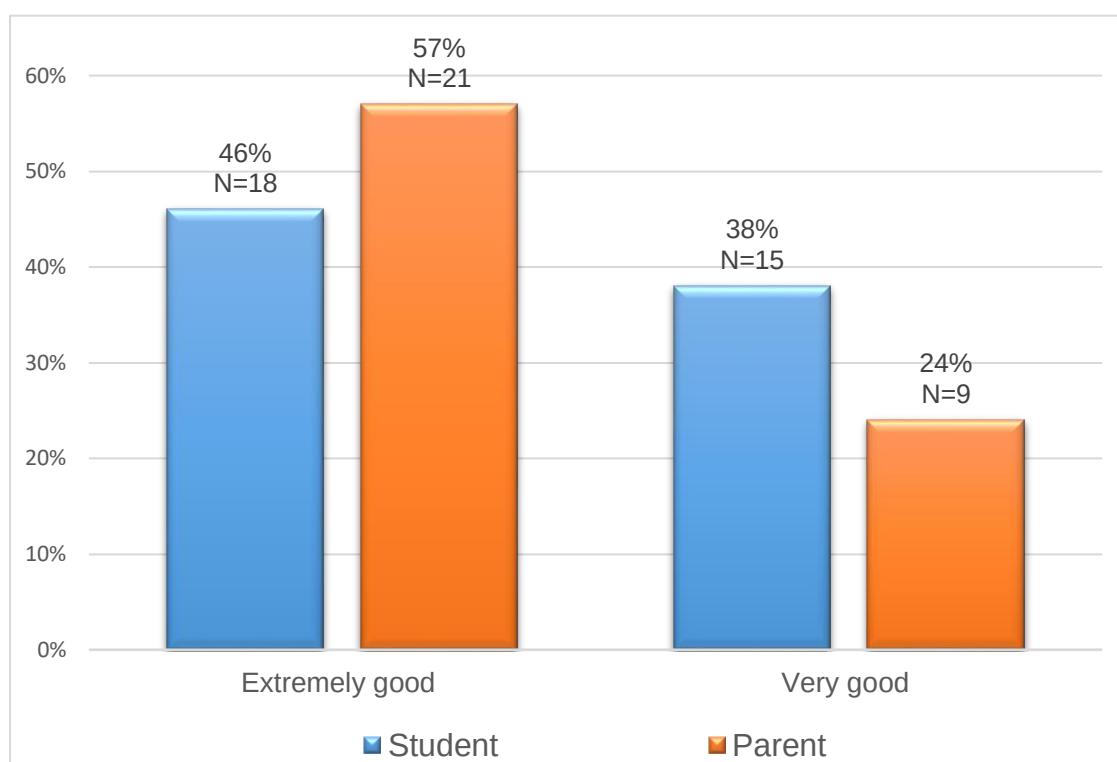
Figure 46: How Students and Parents Rate Teaching in their School?



In the focus group interviews in Phase Three, a student stated that *'now I get a lot of help. My primary school was a lot harder for me because I didn't really understand the work, but I love it here because of help from the teachers and SNAs. They take things slowly'*. Another student commented that *'the teaching is great. When I was in another school, it was all confusing and I never understood much but here I understand more. What works well is that everyone gets the help they need, and works on what they are able to do.'*

Over three quarters of students (76%, n=30) and of parents (76%, n=28) reported that the school was extremely good or very good at developing students' social skills. An overwhelming 78% (n=31) of students and 73% (n=27) of parents rated the development of Independent Living Skills (ILS) as extremely good or very good. The overwhelming majority of students (84%, n=33) and parents (81%, n=30) reported that the school was extremely good or very good at supporting learning. Figure 47 outlines data from Phase Two on the question of supporting students to learn.

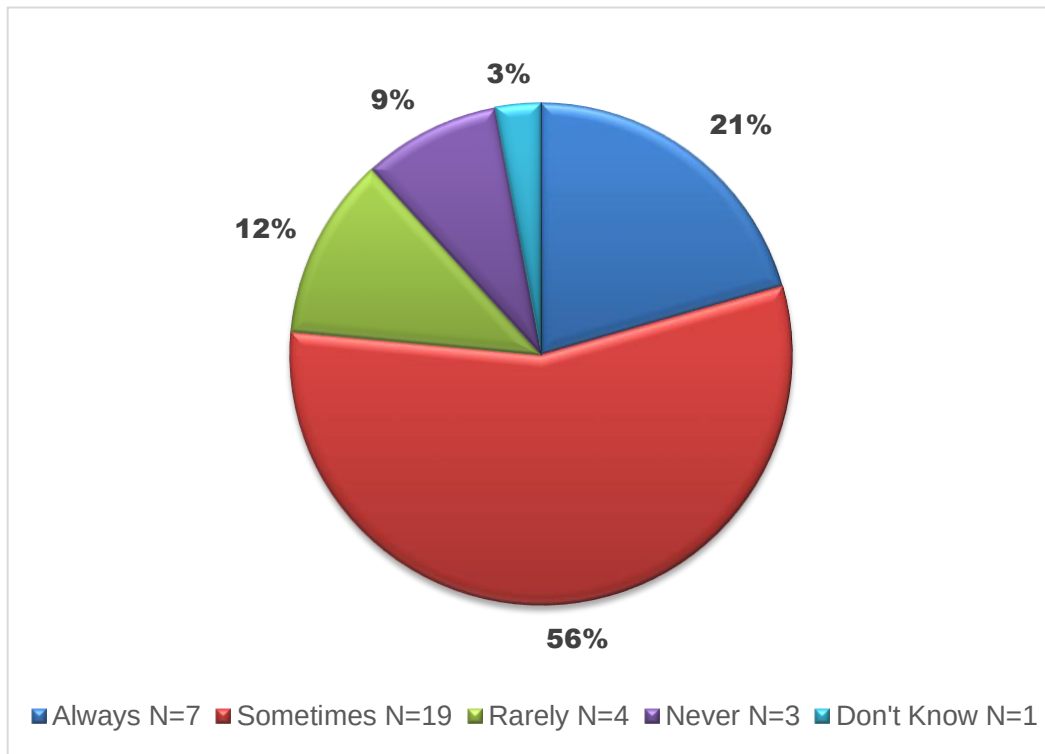
Figure 47: Supporting Students to Learn



4.3.9 Student Voice in Educational Programmes

Over three quarters of special schools in Ireland (77%, n=26) reported that students always or sometimes had a direct input into what education programmes they could participate in. It should be noted that one fifth (21%, n=7) of special schools stated that their students rarely or never had a direct input in to the educational programmes they could participate. (See Figure 48).

Figure 48: Students have a Direct Input into their Education Programme



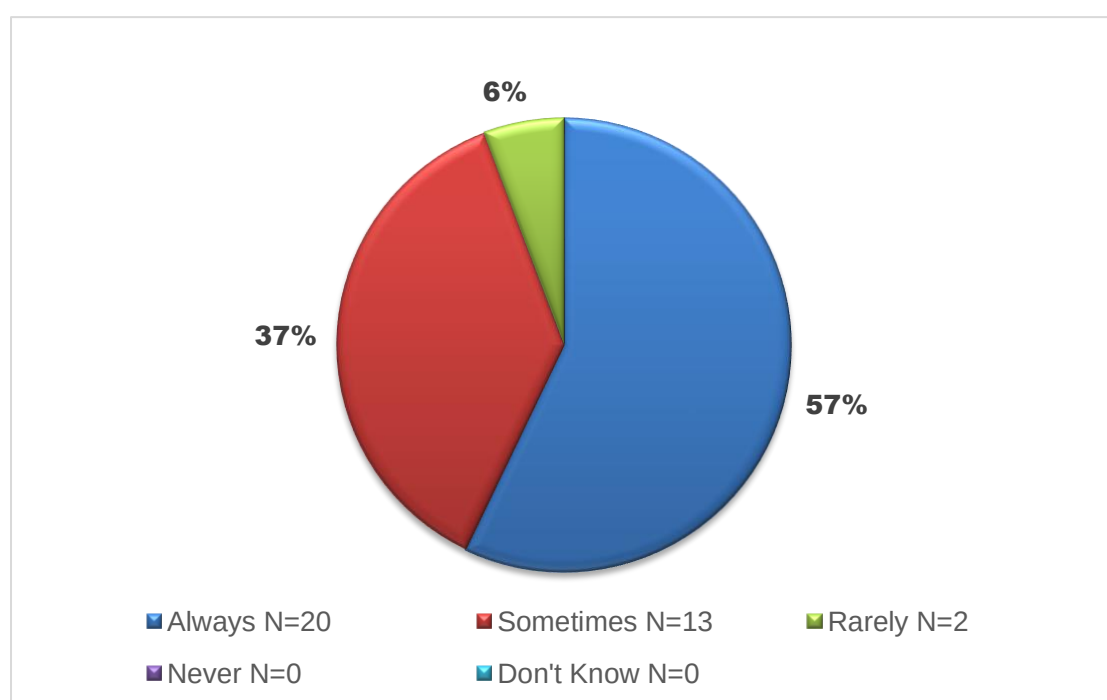
A respondent from Phase One commented that it was *'an area for potential development'* and *'some students can be very assertive in what they want, and this is great. However, many students would prefer to do nothing - so motivation is paramount'*. Feedback from another respondent reported that their *'school must make decisions as numbers are too small for options to be given'*. While another special school stated that their students rarely had a direct input in to the student's education programmes. This school stated that *'we try and match lessons to the students' motivation'*. In the focus group interviews in Phase Three, students expressed that the teacher, the principal and parents make decisions about the courses students will study. One student said *'you don't actually get a choice; you're given the programme and that's that - JCL2 or JCL3. When the teacher saw I was good at maths, the teacher said I needed to do higher level maths. It depends what you're interested in'*. One special school in Phase One explained that *'while we have set programmes and our Individual Education Plans (IEPs) allow for some choice of activities and subjects, we are limited by demands of the curriculum and lack of finance and infrastructure'*.

Further Feedback from Phase One identified that the availability of choices for students was hampered by staffing and limited resources in schools. One respondent stated that *'it is not possible, due to staffing, to offer choice'*. While another respondent explained that it *'depends on what staff are available as we are a special school with a secondary too and do not have teachers for every subject'*.

4.3.10 Parent Voice in Education Programme

Feedback from special schools in Phase 1 indicated that the overwhelming majority 94% (n=33) of parents, always or sometimes, have an input into the education programmes in which their child participated. (See Figure 49).

Figure 49: Parents Have an Input into Their Child's Education Programmes



Data from Phase Two reported that the vast majority of parents (80%, n=29) stated they always, most of the time or sometimes had an input into the education programmes in which their child participated. Feedback from a parent reported that their input is recognised in the *'IEP plans – the teachers and staff are fantastic, and*

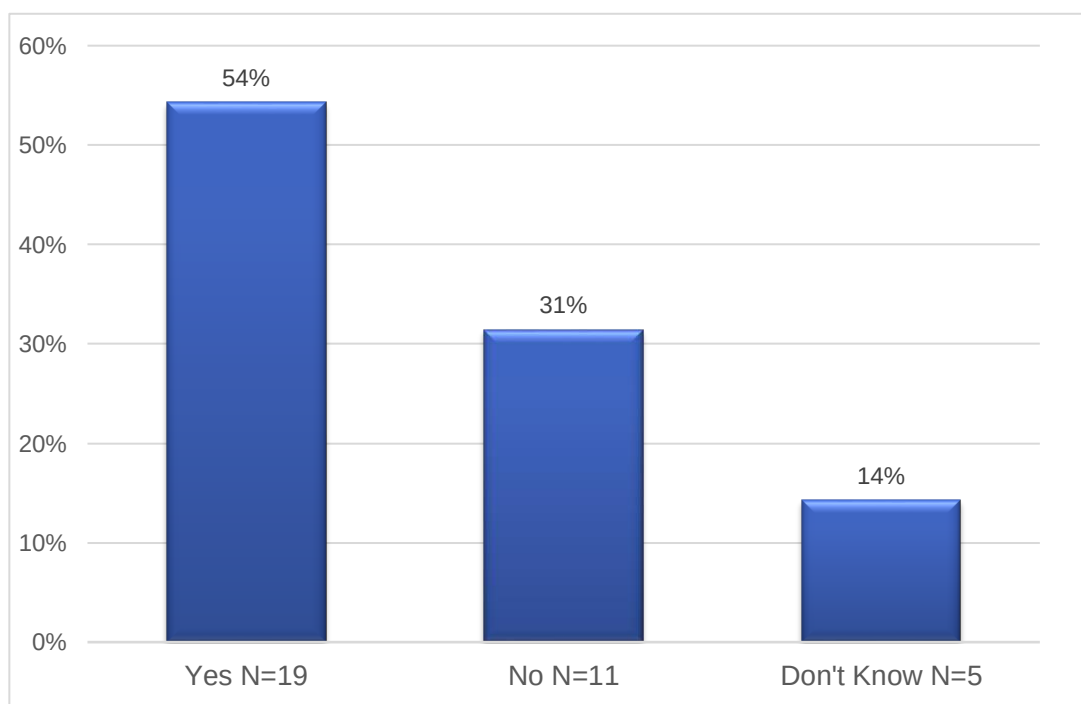
the school is the most appropriate educational setting for my son and his needs'. Another parent stated that 'we have parent teacher meetings to discuss a plan for our child'.

The Case Study, School One reported that parental involvement into the student's educational plan is based on *'Wide Range Achievement Test results and the IEP. The results provide our baseline, and it assesses abilities and strengths. Wide Range Achievement Test results decide how a student gets into a programme at Level 2 or Level 3. We don't want students to fail. Parents can say they don't want their child doing a particular module, but the parents generally go along with what the teacher suggests'*. In Case Study, School Two, parental involvement into their child's educational programmes was through *'IEP process and then induction meetings for LCA programme. This meeting explains all about the programme and what is involved'*.

4.3.11 Barriers to Participation

Just over half (54%, n=19) of special schools in Ireland stated that barriers to participation of students achieving accreditation exist in their schools, while a third of schools (31%, n=11) felt there were no barriers. (See Figure 50).

Figure 50: Do Barriers to Participation of Students Achieving Accreditation Exist in Your School?



A respondent from Phase One explained that *'student's well-being is our priority and at times traditional subjects and programmes do not suit, due to anxiety or behavioural issues'*. Another respondent commented that *'as it may take an extremely long time for most pupils to achieve a skill, it is always a cause for celebration'*. Feedback from a participating special school in Phase One indicated that *'teachers have high aspirations for their students which creates a 'can do' attitude and this reflects in the students' aspirations for themselves'*. Another special school highlighted that *'recognition for achieving personal goals and milestones form an external source would be beneficial for some students'*.

The Case Study, School One reported that *'the only barriers to facilitation in achieving accreditation for students was in options available; not in achieving what we, as a school, can offer'*. Case Study, School 2 identified that *'the barriers are external to the school. The curriculum isn't here in the Senior Cycle. There is no accreditation for students in this school for Senior Cycle'*.

4.4 Transition Pathways

4.4.1 Introduction

This section analyses the transition pathways available to students with ID after they complete their post primary education in a special school. The theme of transition pathways was investigated under the following themes: (1) Transition Pathways in Post Primary Special Schools, (2) Transition Pathways Procedures, (3) Impact of Subject Choice in School on Transition Pathways Options, (4) Decision-Making Regarding Transition Pathway, (5) Student Voice, (6) Parent Voice and (7) Decision Making Process. The following section will explore the data findings from Phase One, Two and Three of the research design. Feedback from principals, senior teachers, students and parents will provide a richness and depth of perspectives for this research.

4.4.2 Transition Pathways in Post Primary Special Schools

In Phase One, principals were asked to provide data on where students transition to after completing their post primary education. In total, 10 special schools responded and the data represents the transition pathways of 566 students in total during the period 2013-2017. (See Table 7).

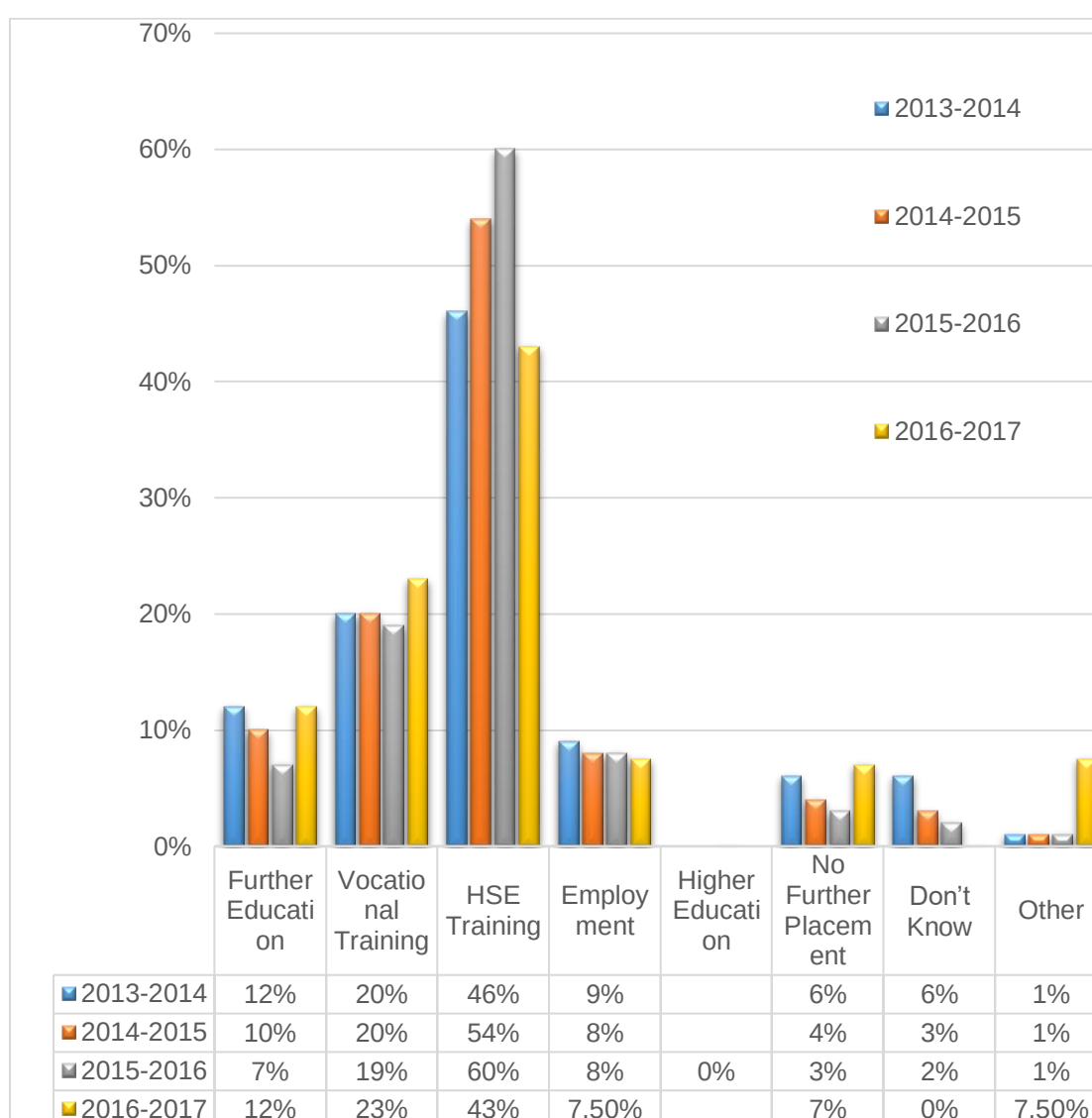
Table 7: Transition Pathways between 2013-2017

Transition Placement	2013-2017
No. of Students	n=566
Further Education	10% (n=57)
Higher Education	0%
Vocational Training	20% (n=115)
HSE Training	51% (n=291)
Employment	8% (n=45)
No Further Placement	5% (n=27)
Don't Know	3% (n=17)
Other	3% (n=19)

During the period 2013-2017, over half (51%, n=291) of all students transitioned to a HSE training programme. A fifth (20%, n=115) of students transitioned to a Vocational Training Programme, while one tenth (10%, (n=57) of students secured a placement in a Further Education course. Less than one tenth (8%, n=45) of students transitioned to employment, while 5% (n=27) did not have a further placement after their final year in post primary education.

It should be noted that no student progressed to a higher education programme and 3% (n=19) transitioned to 'other' placements, not identified in the Phase One questionnaire. Figure 51 illustrates, in further detail, the transition pathways of students following graduation from post primary education.

Figure 51: Transition Placements



Data from principals in 10 special schools was reported in Phase One. This data represents 127 students graduating from their post primary schools in 2013-2014, 153 students in 2014-2015, 152 students in 2015-2016 and 134 students in 2016-2017.

4.4.2.1 Transition Pathways 2013-2014

At the end of the school year 2013-2014, 127 students graduated from their post primary schools. Nearly half of students 46% (n=59) transitioned to HSE placements and 20% (n=25) progressed into a vocational training programme.

While 12% (n=15) of students progressed to further education, 9% (n=11) took up employment after leaving school. It should be noted that 6% (n=8) of students did not transition to a further placement and 1% (n=1) transitioned to an 'other' placement, not identified in the questionnaire. No student (0%, n=0) transitioned to a higher education programme.

4.4.2.2 Transition Pathways 2014-2015

At the end of the academic year 2014-2015, a total of 153 students, in 10 schools, transitioned from their post primary special schools. Over half (54%, n=83) of the students transitioned to HSE training placements, a fifth (20%, n=30) transitioned to vocational training placements and 10% (n=15) had secured placements in further education programmes. While 8% (n=12) of students had employment, 4% (n=6) of students had no further placement to attend and 4% (n=6) of respondents selected 'other' for their response. No student (0%, n=0) transitioned to a higher education programme.

4.4.2.3 Transition Pathways 2015-2016

At the end of the 2015-2016 school year, 152 students were progressing from post primary education in 10 special schools. Feedback from principals in Phase One reported that nearly three fifths, 60% (n=91) of students were transitioning to HSE training while nearly a fifth, 19% (n=29) of students were transitioning to a vocational training programme, 8% (n=12) of students had employment, 7% (n=11) of students transitioned to further education placements. Whereas 3% (n=4) had no further placement, 3% (n=4) of respondents selected the 'don't know' option and 1% (n=2) of students were attending an 'other' option not identified in the questionnaire. Again, no student (0%, n=0) was progressing to a higher education programme after their post primary education.

4.4.2.4 Transition Pathways 2016-2017

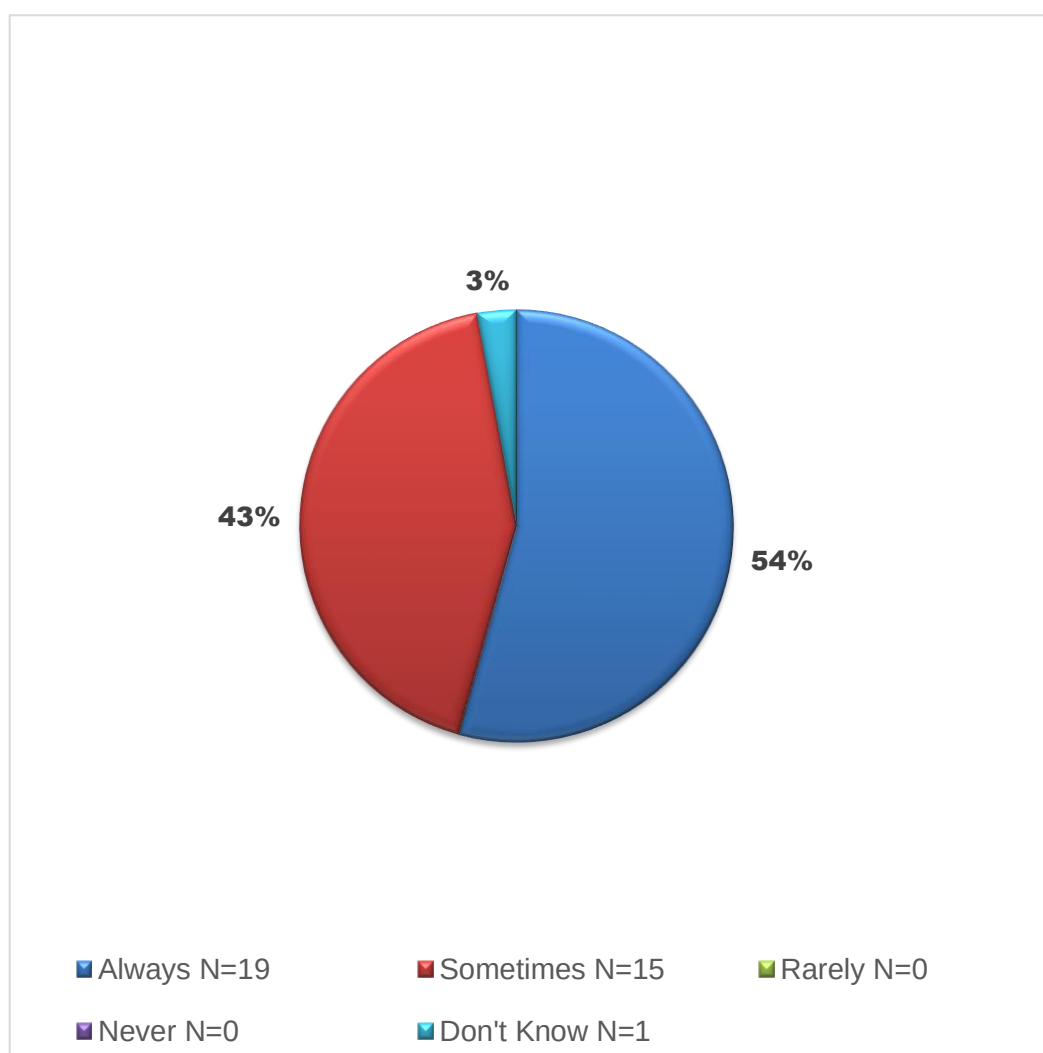
At the end of the school year 2016-2017, there were 134 students leaving their post primary special schools. Data from Phase One stated that 43% (n=58) of students had secured a placement in HSE training programmes, while nearly a quarter, 23% (n=31) of students were transitioning to vocational training programmes and 12% (n=16) of students were transitioning to further education. Ten students (7.5%) were progressing to employment and ten students (7.5%) were attending 'other' transition pathways. Nine students (7%) had no further placement after their post primary education. Again, no student transitioned to any higher education programme.

Feedback from the principal in the Case Study, School One highlighted that '*most transition pathways focused on further education. The main problem is that these placements offer QQI Level 3 programmes, and this matches the finishing programme we operate in our school. Our students have already finished QQI Level 3 and we could be hindering students getting into placements because they have already done the programme*'. Duplication of programmes and qualifications was identified by one case study school as being a weakness in transition pathways available to students after their post primary education. The principal highlighted that '*transition pathways are targeted at QQI Level 3, rather than QQI Level 4, accreditations*'.

4.4.3 Transition Pathway Procedures

Data from Phase One reported that over half (54%, n=19) of special schools stated that the procedures for transitions of students to further placements always operate effectively within their school. (See Figure 52).

Figure 52: Effectiveness of Procedures for Transition Pathways



Data from Phase Three highlighted that in the Case Study, School One, the school holds a yearly *Open Day* and invites all the various transition pathways options to the school. Parents and students in the last two years of their post primary schooling can attend and explore the different transition pathways available. The principal stated that *'the Open Day starts the thinking process of the transition pathways options available'*. A student in the focus group interviews commented that in their school *'the Careers Day was really good because it gave a few options and showed you your good skills and bad skills'*. Another student highlighted how *'doing mock interviews and tying up CV's really gives you an idea of what you want to do after school'*.

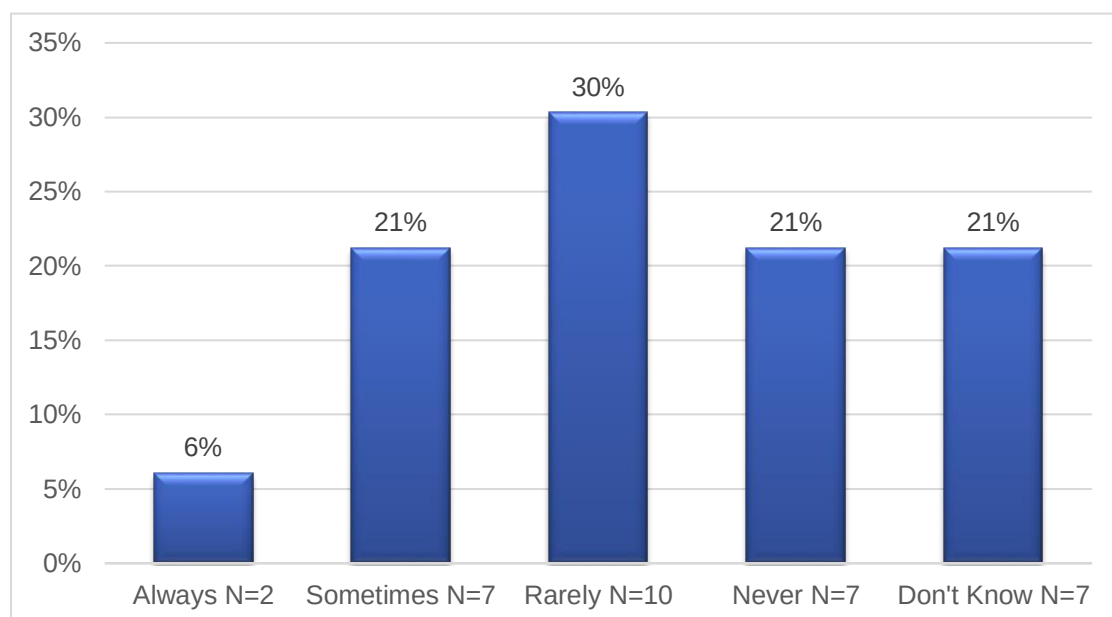
Feedback from Phase Three reported that the discussion around transition pathways to further placements begins in the first term of the student's final year in post primary education. A senior teacher explained that *'the HSE Officer visits the school and, in consultation with family, the school and the needs of the students and arrangements are made to visit families at home. The HSE officer then recommends a placement after this process has been completed'*.

The principal from the Case Study, School Two commented that the HSE Officer develops their own opinions of the student based on an hour-long meeting with students, teachers and family. *'Some sweeping statements can be made simply on a single meeting. The HSE Officer does not know the students and their recommendations for students' future placements are based on very little time spent with the student'*. Another comment from a senior teacher in Phase Three stated that *'the HSE Officer seems to have less focus in the education'*. The principal from Case Study, School One commented that, in their experience, the process of transition from post primary education could be improved by giving parents and students more information about transition pathways prior to the student's final year in school. The principal suggested that *'an information evening could be organised for all leaving students and their families during the summer term of a student's second last year in school. A HSE representative could attend this meeting to inform parents of the options available to them and their child. This would alleviate some of the stress for parents and students'*. The feedback from Phase One reflects a positive picture of the procedures for transitions of students to further placements post schools. However the qualitative data from the case study schools is critical of the process of transition. The Case study schools highlights the role of the HSE Officer when future post school placements are being discussed. It would appear from comments from the case study schools that they seem somewhat critical of the process whereby the HSE Officer makes decisions and recommendations on the future student placement with minimal information and interaction with the school and staff.

4.4.4 Impact of Subject Choice on Transition Pathway Options

Figure 53 illustrates whether the availability of subject choices in special schools can impact on the post school career trajectory of students with ID. Just over half of respondents (51%, n=17) from Phase One reported that the subject choice available in their school rarely or never impacted on the students' post-career trajectory.

Figure 53: Subject Choice Can Impact on Post School Career Trajectory



Over a quarter (27%, n=9) of respondents from Phase One reported that the subject choice always or sometimes impacted on the post school career trajectory of students. It should be noted that a fifth of respondents answered 'don't know' (21%, n=7) to this question.

A senior teacher from the Case Study, School Two reported that *'there is a good continuum of what students are doing in their final year in school and to where they transition after they leave post primary school. The students who are engaging in JCL2 focus on functioning life skills and Sunbeam and Rehab care continue these*

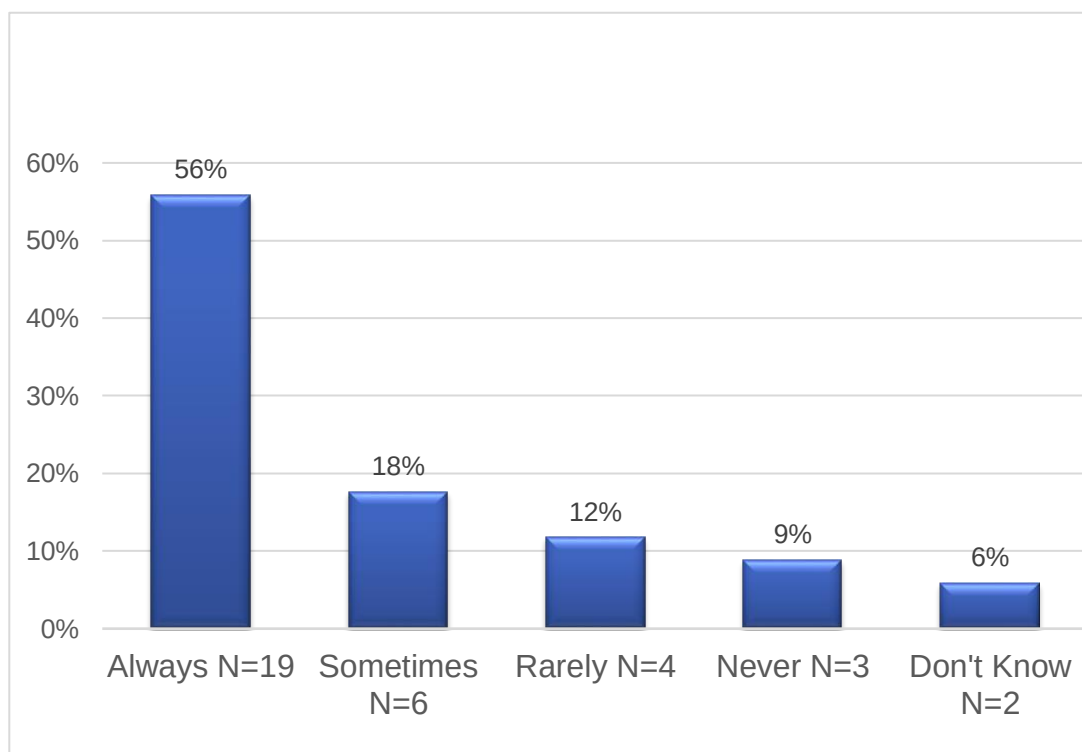
objectives. National Learning Network focuses more on academics and students who completed JCL3 can continue to progress on this academic pathway’.

A senior teacher from Case Study, School One reported that ‘*if we had more teachers and more resources, we could give a broader spectrum of subjects. However, one teacher cannot teach all different subjects. Also, there are not enough hours in the school day to provide such a broad spectrum of subjects’.*

4.4.5 Decision-Making Process

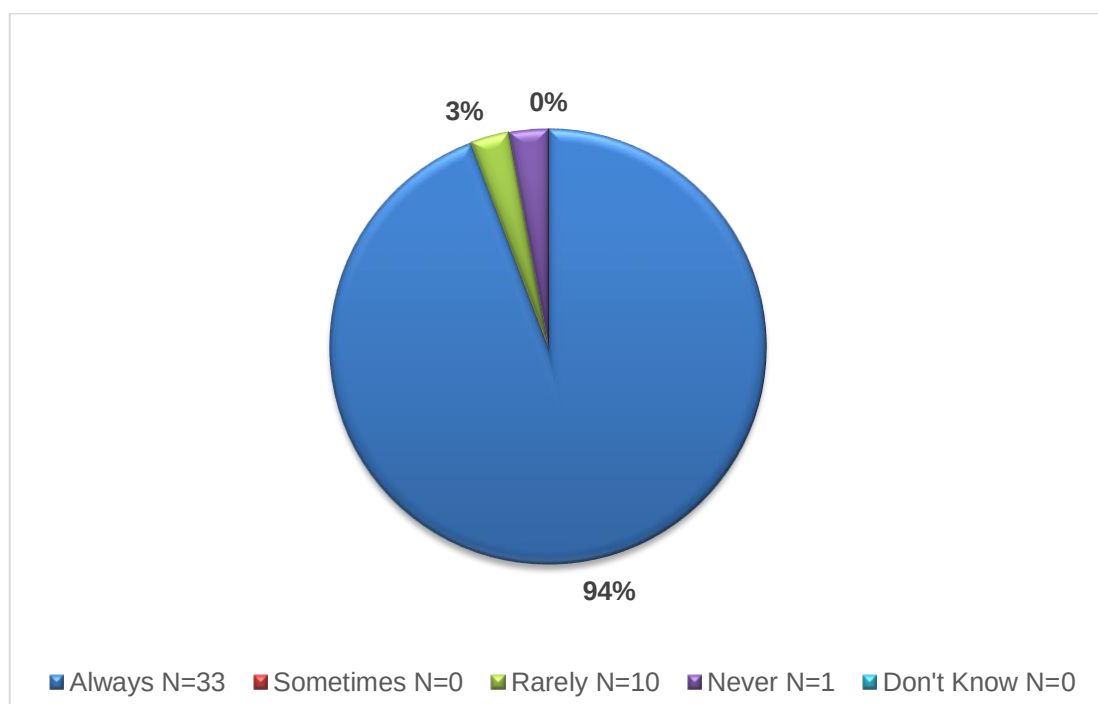
Respondents from Phase One reported that nearly three quarters (74%, n=25) of students were involved in the decision-making process regarding transition to further placement after their post primary education. Over a fifth (21%, n=7) stated that their students rarely or never were involved in the decision-making process. (See Figure 54).

**Figure 54: Students Involvement in the Decision-Making Process
Regarding Transition to Further Placement Phase One**



An overwhelming 94% (n=33) of responses from special schools in Ireland in Phase One reported that in their school parents are always involved in the decision-making process regarding transition of their son/daughter from post primary education. (See Figure 55).

Figure 55: Parental Involvement in the Transition Decision-Making Process



The principal from the Case Study, School One in Phase Three stated that parent involvement in the process of deciding transition pathways includes the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) process and the IEP reviews process. *‘This gives parents and teachers focused targets and there are no surprises for anyone. ‘Every student will know where they are going after this school’.*

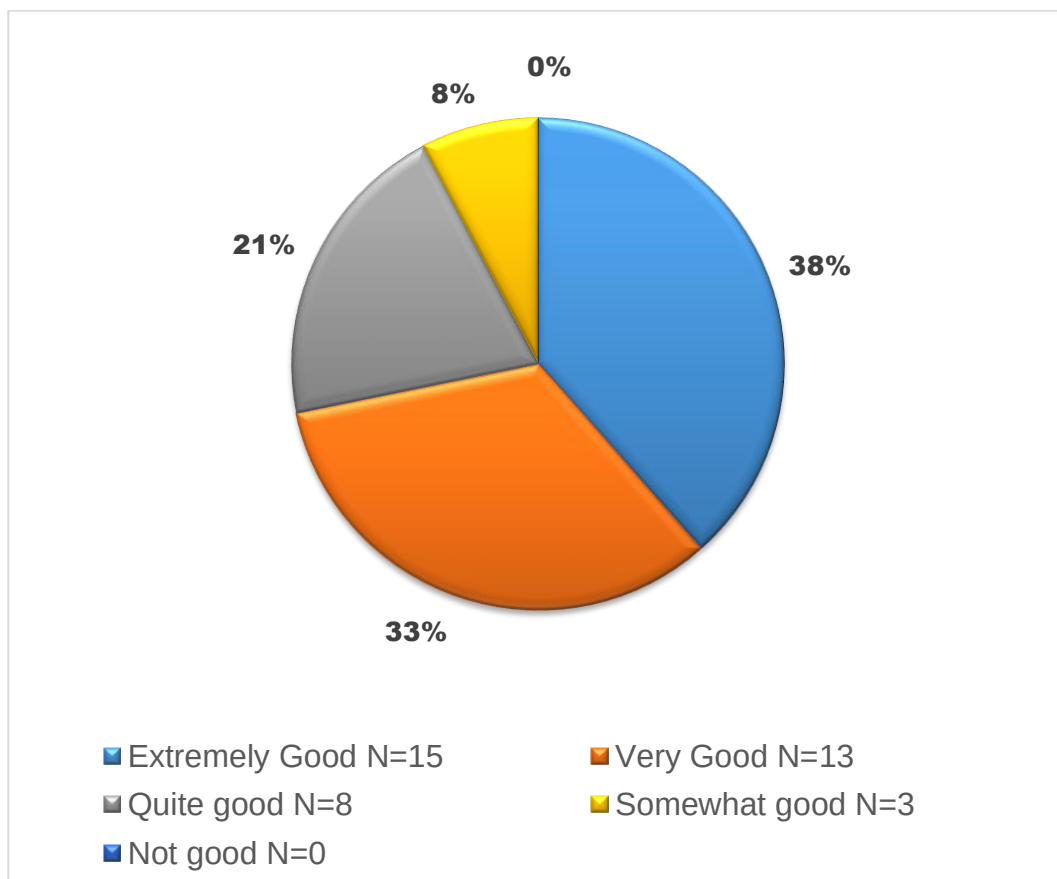
4.4.6 Student Voice

Feedback from students regarding transition pathways and leaving their post primary school was captured in Phase Two of the research. The overwhelming majority (81%, n=29) of students stated that someone had talked to them about the transition pathways available to them after they leave their post primary special school.

4.4.6.1 Preparing for the World of Work

Results from the Student Questionnaire in Phase Two identified that the majority (51%, n= 28) of students believed that their school had prepared them for the world of work when they leave school. (See Figure 56).

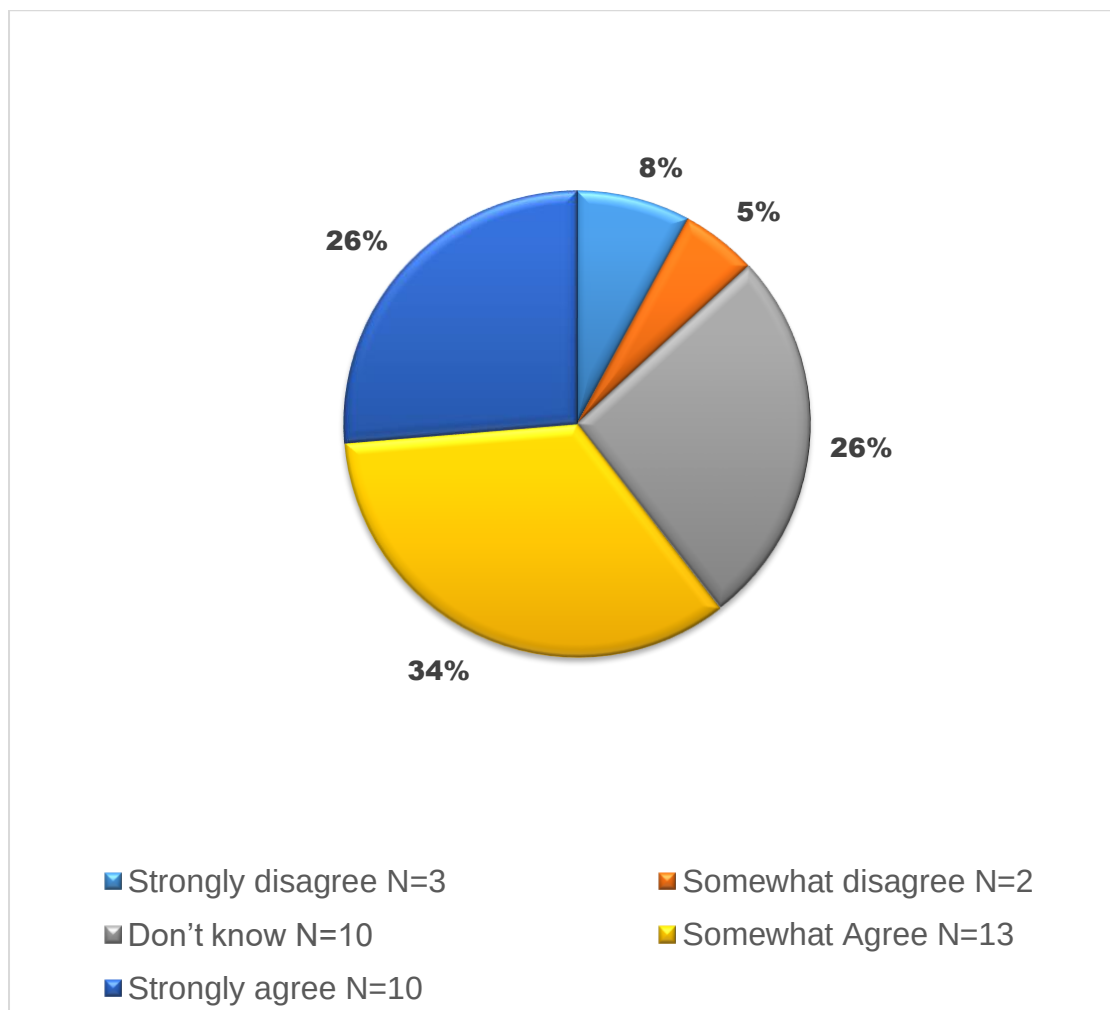
Figure 56: How do you rate this school for preparing you for the world of work?



4.4.6.2 Prepared for Further Study

Students was asked in Phase Two if they felt well-prepared for further study after they leave their post primary special school. Most students (60%, n=23) strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement. (See Figure 57).

Figure 57: I Feel Well Prepared for Further Study When I leave This School

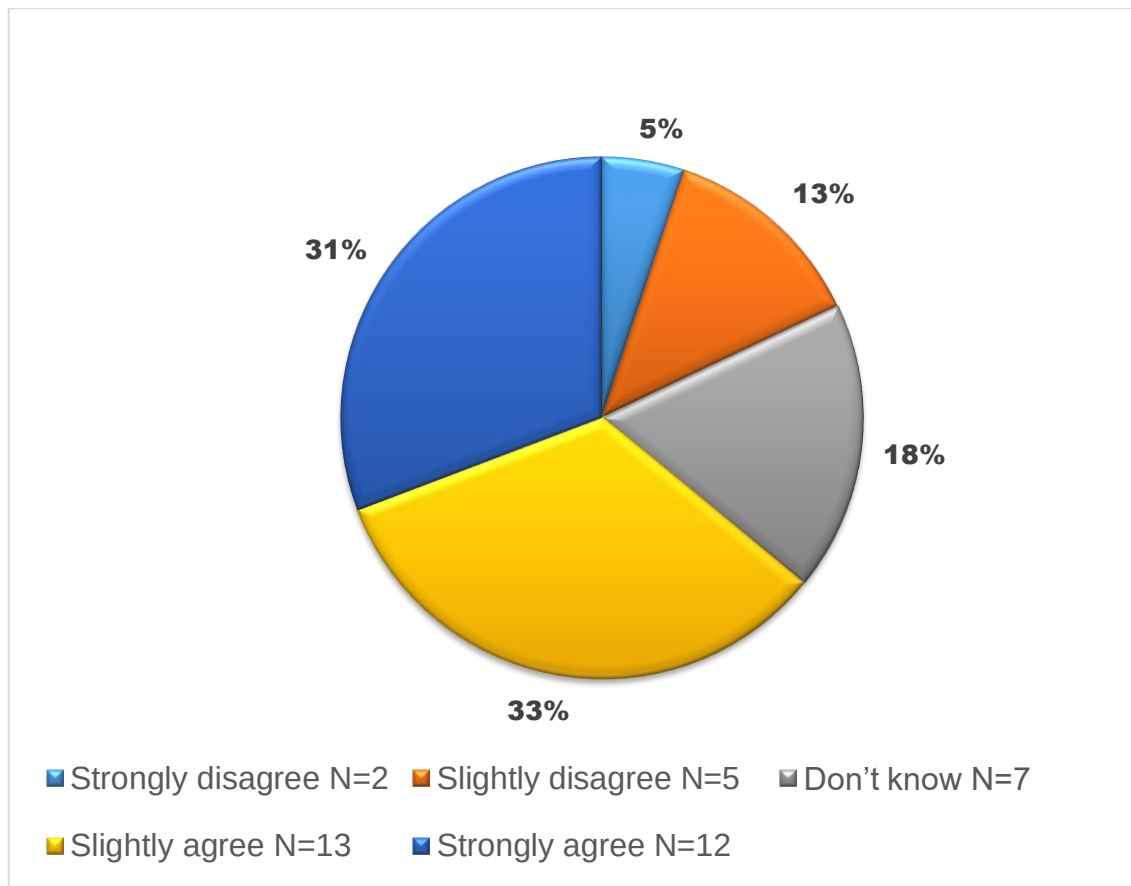


Only 13% (n=5) of students strongly or somewhat disagreed with this statement and over a quarter (26%, n=10) of students did not know if they were well-prepared for further study after they leave their special school.

4.4.6.3 Real Choices

Over three fifths of students (64%, n=25) strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that they had real choices about what they can do after they leave post primary education. (See Figure 58).

Figure 58: I Have Real Choices About What I Can Do After I Leave School



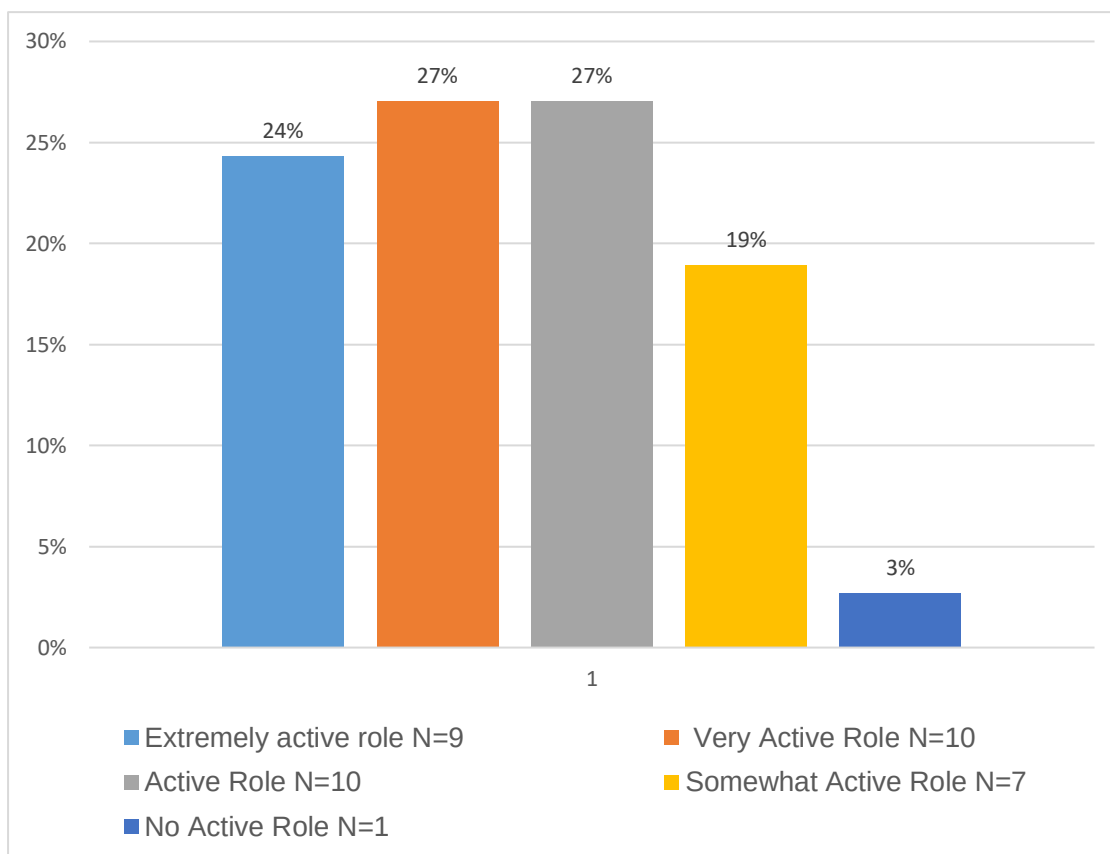
Less than one fifth (18%, n=7) strongly or somewhat disagreed with the statement and 18% (n=7) answered don't know to this question. Feedback from the parent questionnaire in Phase Two highlighted that the majority (55%, n=20) of parents strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that '*my child will have real choices about what he/she can do when he/she leaves school*'. A quarter (25%, n=9) of parents answered 'don't know', while nearly a fifth (19%, n=7) stated that they strongly or somewhat disagreed to this statement.

4.4.7 Parent Voice

4.4.7.1 Decision Making Process

In Phase Two parents were asked if they felt they had an active role in the decision-making process regarding the transition pathways available to their child when they leave their special school. Over three quarters of parents (78%, n=29) described their role as having an ‘extremely active’, ‘very active’ or ‘active’ role in the decision-making process. (See Figure 59)

Figure 59: Do You Have an Active Role in the Decision-Making Process Regarding the Transition of Your Child When They Leave Their School?



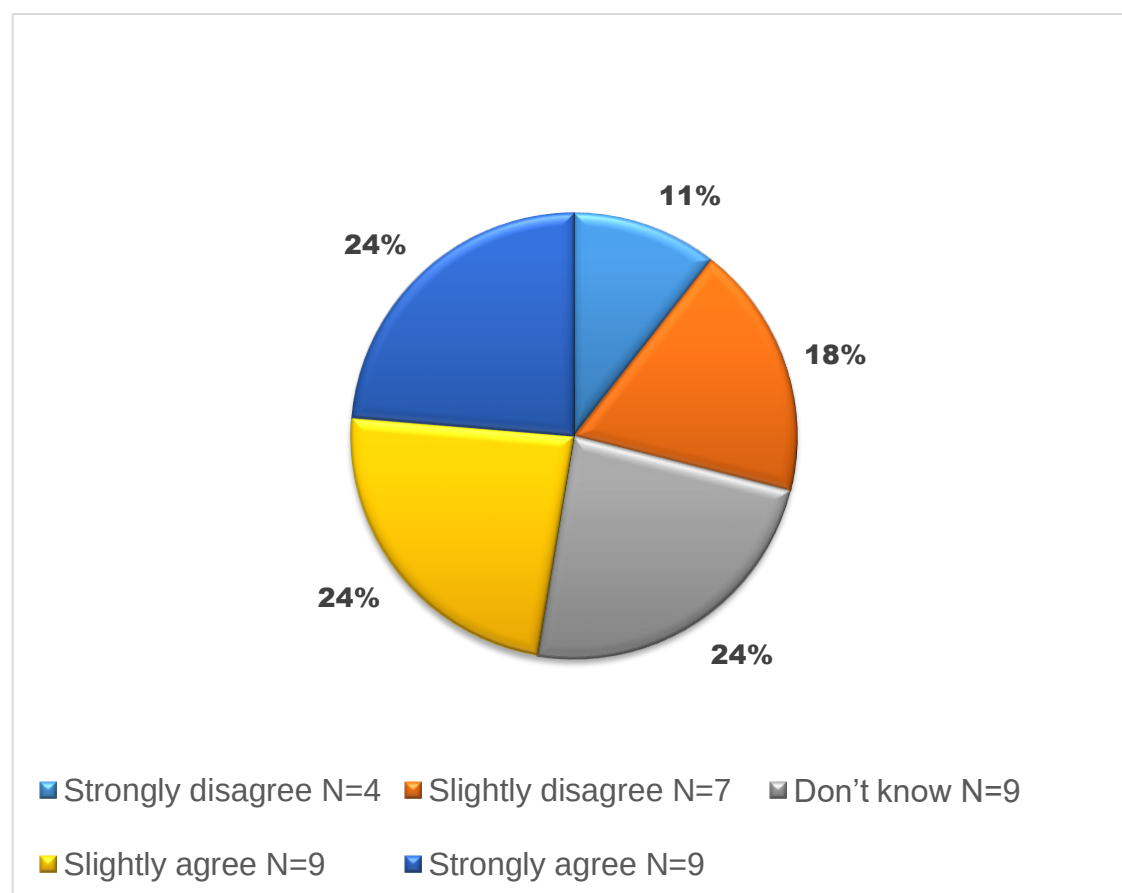
Less than a fifth (19%, n=7) of parents regarded their role in the decision-making process as somewhat active while 3% (n=1) of parents stated they had no active role in the process. In Phase Two, a parent commented that ‘*at the IEP meeting,*

I discussed where my child would be best suited in regard to field of further study which would suit my child's nature and personality'.

4.4.7.2 Prepared for the World of Work

Feedback from Phase Two (student and parent questionnaire) identified that nearly half (48%, n=18) of parents strongly or somewhat agreed that their child's school had prepared them for world of work. (See Figure 60).

Figure 60: My Child is Prepared for World of Work

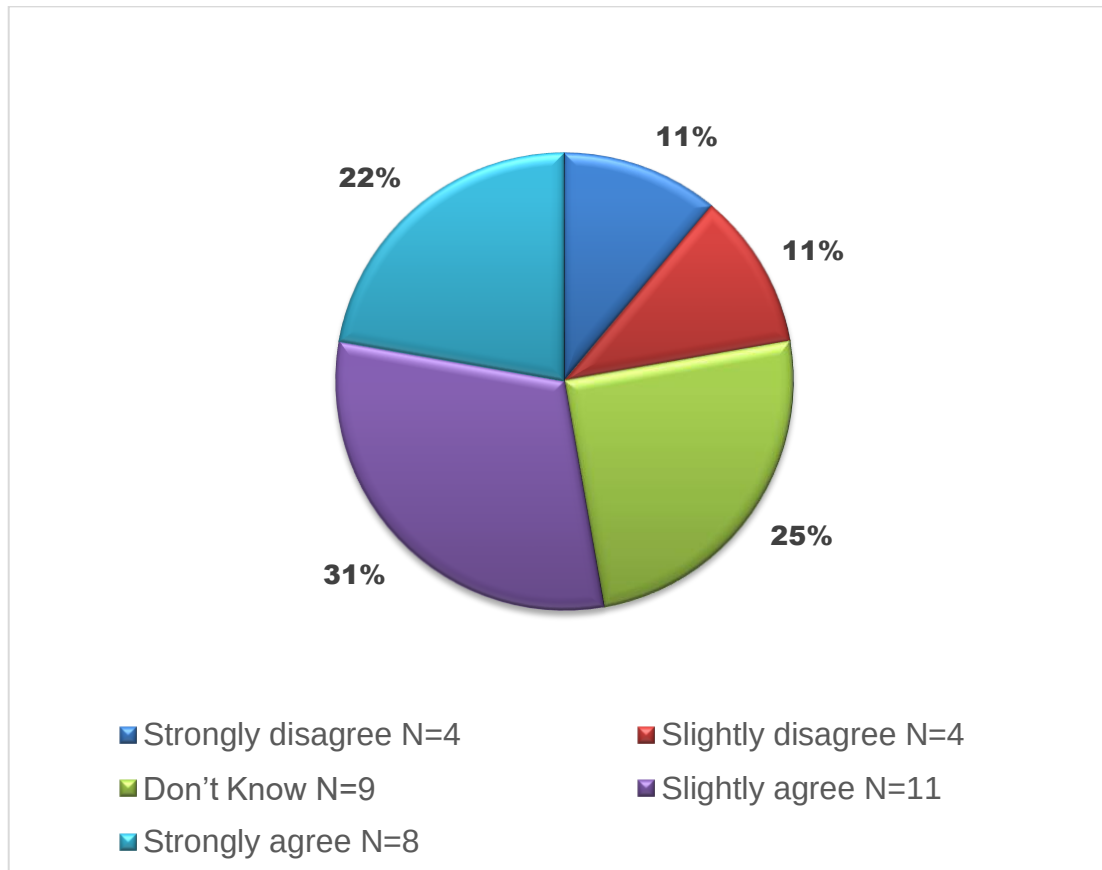


It should be noted that nearly a quarter (24%, n=9) of parents chose 'don't know' to this question, while 29% (n=11) somewhat or strongly disagreed with this statement.

4.4.7.3 Prepared for Further Study

Parents were asked in Phase Two if they felt their child well-prepared for further study after they leave their school. Figure 61 illustrates the findings.

Figure 61: My Child is Well Prepared for Further Study When He/ She Leaves This School

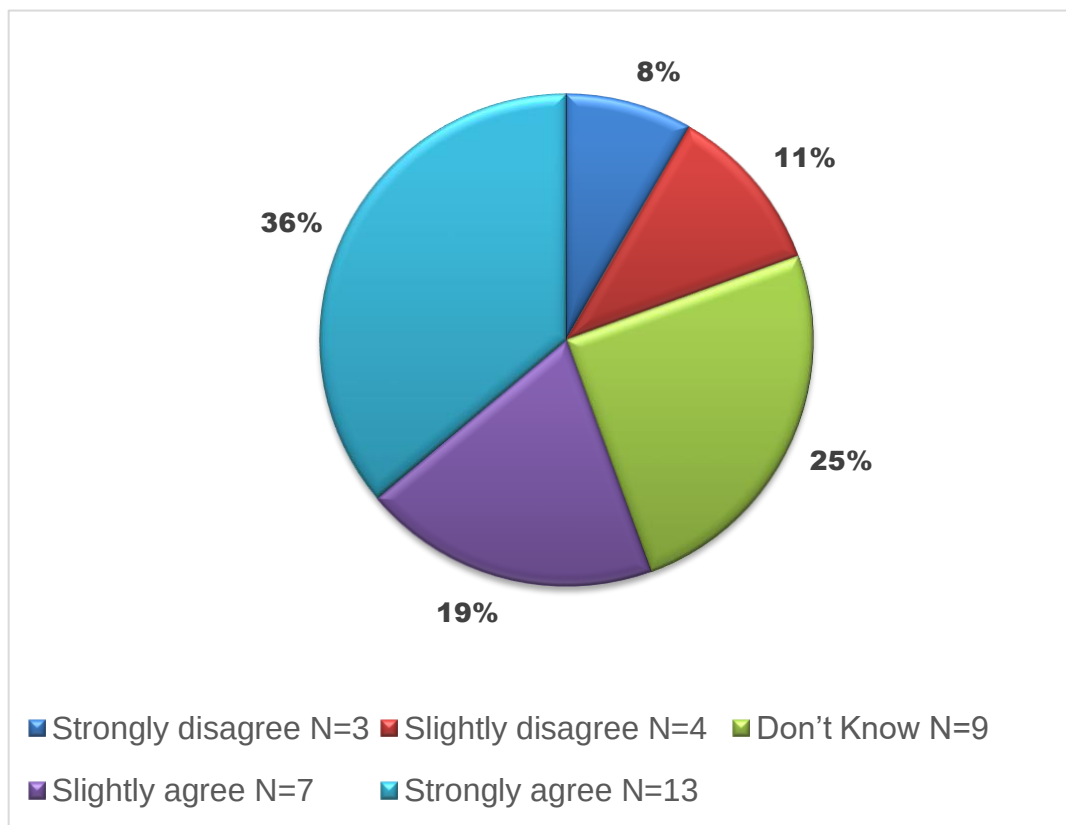


The majority of parents (53%, n=19) strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement. A quarter (25%, n=9) of parents selected 'don't know' while just over a fifth (22%, n=8) of parents commented that they strongly or somewhat disagreed with the statement. A quarter of parents (25%, n=9) answered 'don't know' to this statement while a third of parents (33%, n=8) strongly or somewhat disagreed with this statement.

4.4.7.4 Real Choices

Most parents (55%, n=20) strongly or slightly agreed with the statement that their child had real choices about what they can do after they leave post primary education. (See Figure 62).

Figure 62: My Child has Real Choices About What He/ She Can Do When They Leave School



A quarter of parents (25%, n=9) answered 'don't know' to this statement while under a fifth of parents (19%, n=7) strongly or somewhat disagreed with this statement.

4.5 Personal Experiences

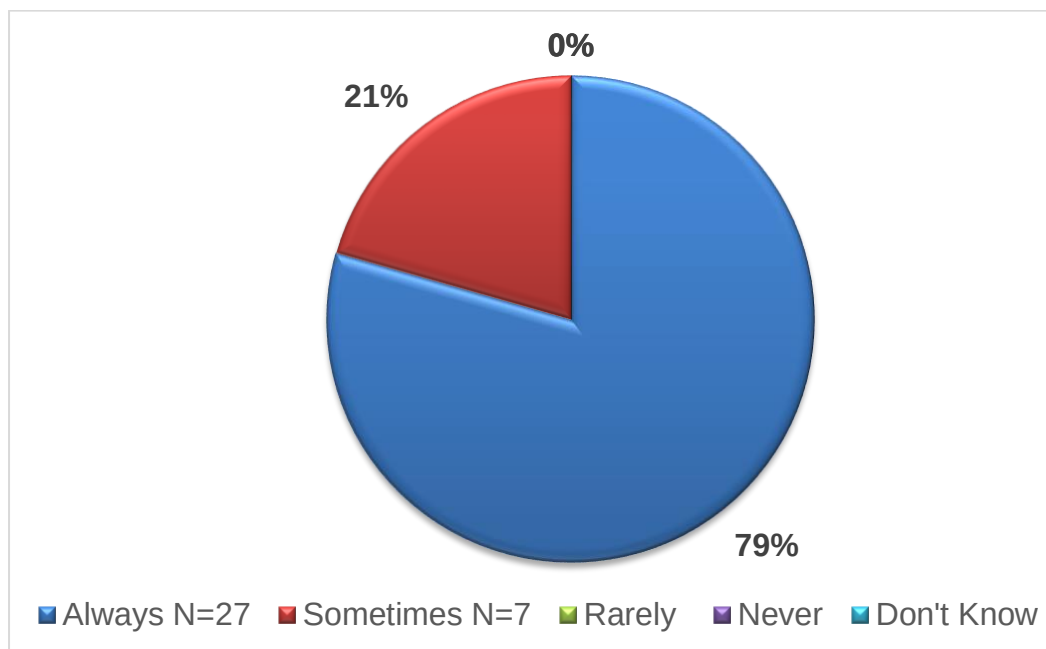
4.5.1 Introduction

This section analyses the personal experiences and opinions of students, parents, teachers and principals in post primary education in special schools in Ireland. The theme of personal experiences was investigated under the following themes: (1) Culture within Special Schools in Ireland, (2) Level of Accreditation, (3) Aspirations about Students' Learning, (4) Barriers to Participation in Achieving Accreditation, (5) Encouraging Academic Success, (6) Student Voice and (7) Parent Voice.

4.5.2 Culture within Special Schools in Ireland

In Phase One all responses from Principals (100%, n=34) stated that their school always or sometimes had a culture of encouraging participation of their students to achieve accreditation. (See Figure 63).

Figure 63: School Culture Encourages Students with ID to Achieve Accreditation



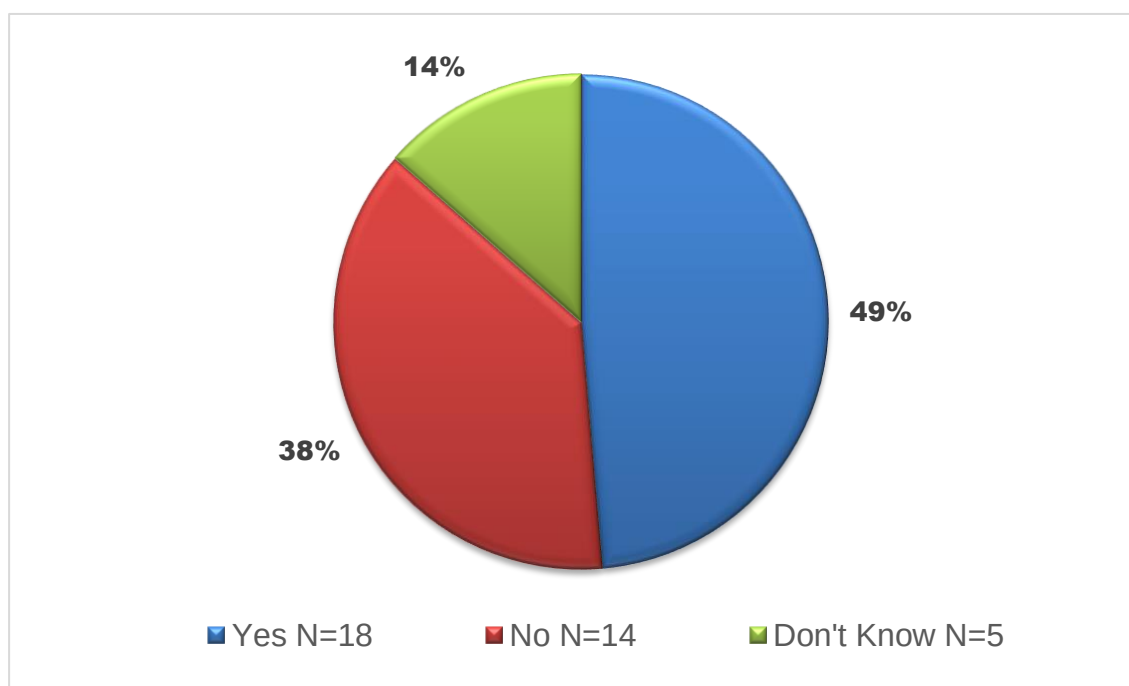
In these results, 79% of principals reported that the school always encourages students to achieve accreditation. No principal selected the options rarely, never or don't know. Key points from respondents from Phase One include delivering

the best educational outcomes for students and building self-esteem and fulfilment. A respondent from Phase One stated that *'our school is very excited that our pupils will eventually receive state accreditation'*. Another respondent from Phase One commented that *'we firmly believe that students should strive to achieve the best educational outcome for themselves. We work very hard to facilitate this'*. Another respondent stated that in their school *'we encourage all students to achieve and participate in programmes that would give them a sense of fulfilment'*.

4.5.3 Level of Accreditation

In Phase One, principals were asked their opinion on the level of accreditation available for students in their post primary school. (See Figure 64).

Figure 64: Are You Happy with the Level of Accreditation Available for Students in Your School



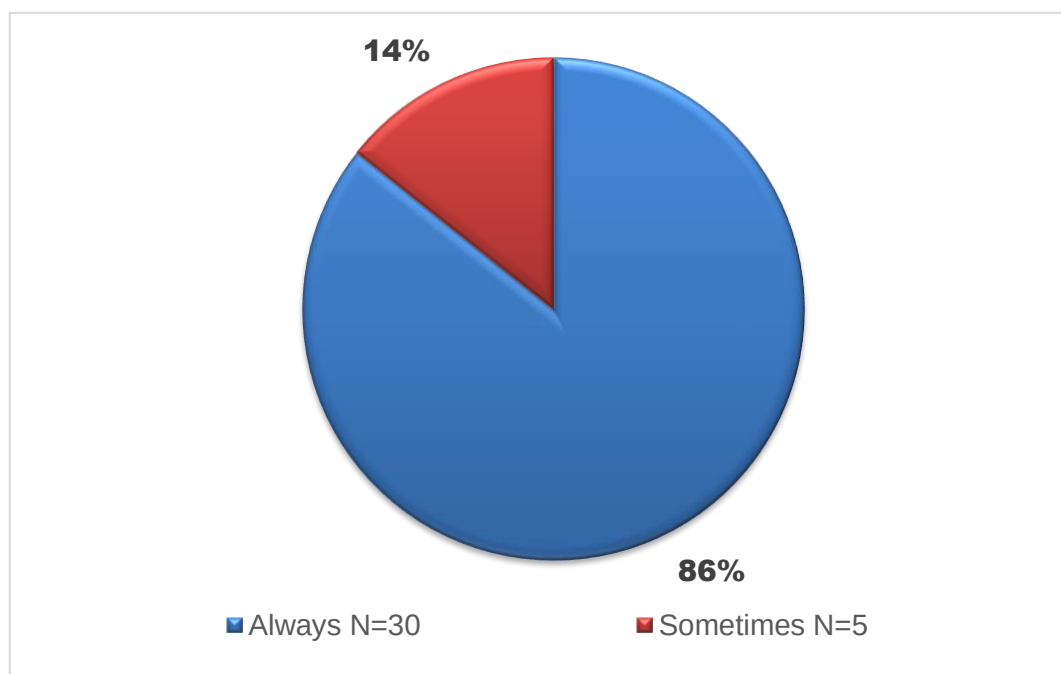
Nearly half of respondents (49%, n=18) from Phase One reported that they were happy with the level of accreditation programmes available to students in their school. Over a third (38%, n=14) of respondents stated they were not happy and 14% (n=5) selected the option 'don't know' for this question. A respondent from

Phase One commented that *'QQI suits the needs of our pupils in the senior area of the school at present'*. Another respondent stated that *'both the JCL1 and JCL2 learning programmes are relatively new and staff are eager to 'learn' and 'further expansion at JCL3 and QQI would allow schools to offer a greater range of subjects. Our school really regrets the loss of Junior Cycle Foundation Level programmes'*. A further comment from Phase One highlighted that *'at present students at a Junior Cycle Level 1 ability are not properly accredited'*.

4.5.4 Aspirations about Students' Learning

In Phase One, principals were asked whether students were encouraged by their school to have high aspirations about their learning. Figure 65 illustrates the findings from the nationwide questionnaire to principals in special schools in Ireland.

Figure 65: Students are Encouraged to Have High Aspirations About Their Learning



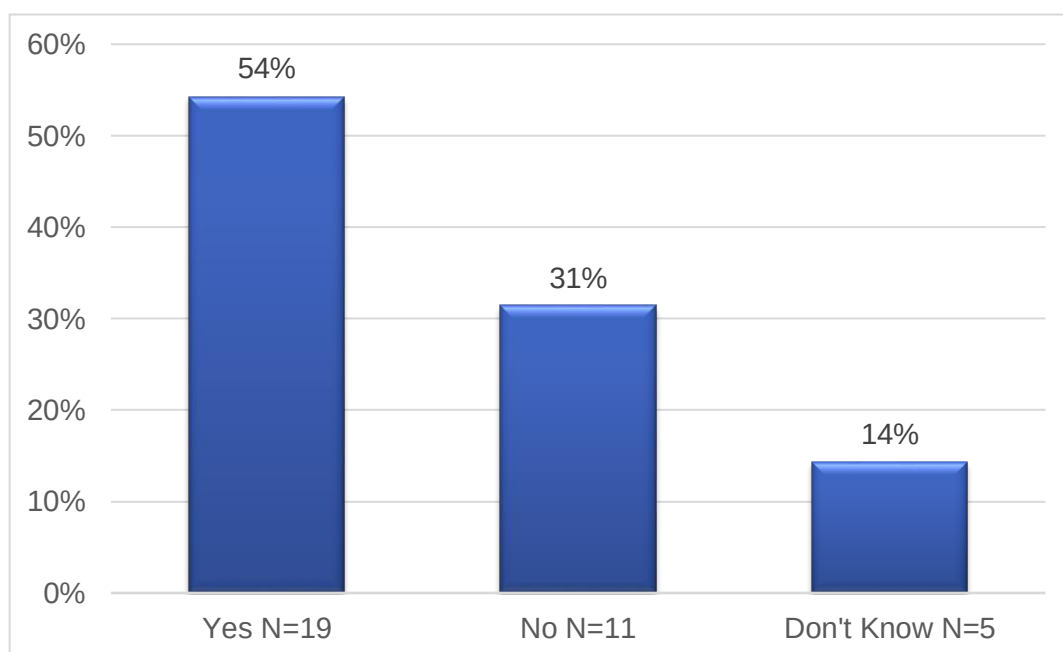
All (100%, n=35) respondents from Phase One reported that their students were always or sometimes encouraged to have high aspirations about their learning in

school. No respondents selected rarely, never or don't know for this question. A respondent from Phase One reported that *'all students are encouraged to reach their full potential'*. Feedback from another special school stated that *'we have 'do your best' as one of our 3 school rules. This applies to everything our students do'*. A respondent explained how their school *'celebrate the smallest achievements on a regular basis and display samples of student's achievements around our school. Through continuous assessment and regular feedback, we endeavour to help our students feel like they are constantly making progress; we share their celebrations with parents and invite parents to see the pupils' great work'*.

4.5.5 Barriers to Participation in Achieving Accreditation

In Phase One, principals were asked whether barriers to participation of students achieving accreditation exist in their school. Figure 66 illustrates the findings.

Figure 66: Barriers to Participation of Students Achieving Accreditation



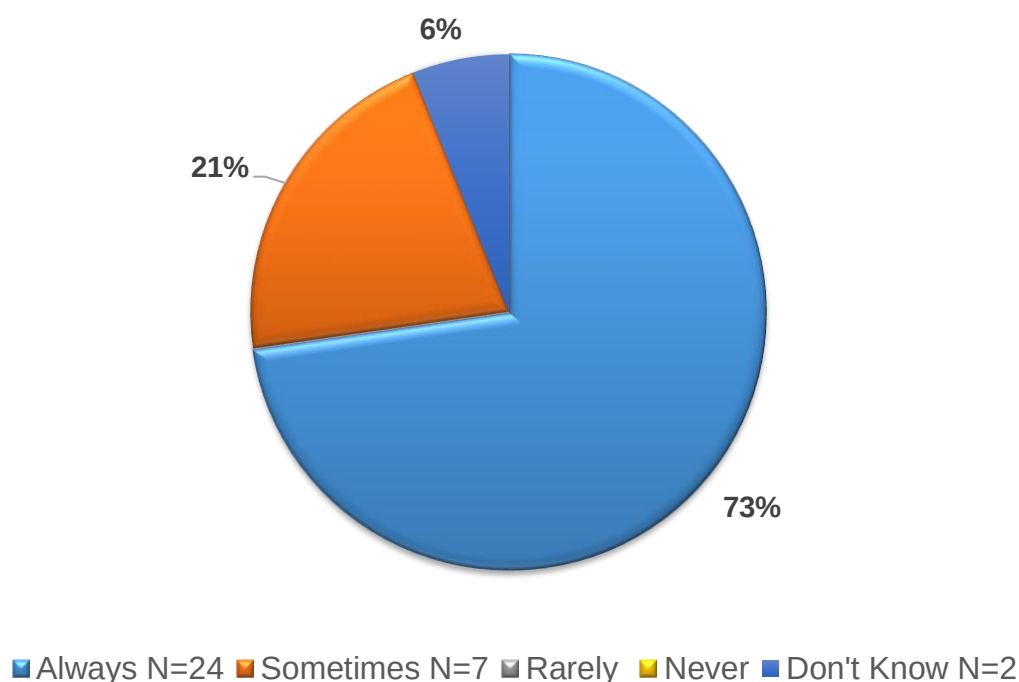
The majority (54%, n=19) of respondents from Phase One stated that barriers to participation of students achieving accreditation exist in their school. Nearly a third (31%, n=11) reported that no barriers to participation exist in their school, while

14% (n=5) selected the option 'don't know' to this question. A respondent from Phase One reported that barriers to participation in achieving accreditation include *'peer pressure, lack of parental support, anxiety levels, behavioural difficulties and health issues'*. Another respondent stated that *'not having a full Leaving Cycle Programme available'* can be a barrier to accreditation for students with ID. Further comments from a respondent in Phase One stated that *'students can have challenges with academics, social skills, friendship skills, organisation, confidence, physical disabilities and emotional behaviour. While we would like to provide as many different courses as possible, timetabling and resources act as barriers to some students achieving accreditation. The challenge of meeting all our students' needs in the classroom is a difficult task'*.

4.5.6 Encouraging Academic Success

Principals were asked whether their school had a good reputation for encouraging academic success. Figure 67 illustrates the feedback from Phase One.

Figure 67: Your School has a Good Reputation for Encouraging Academic Success

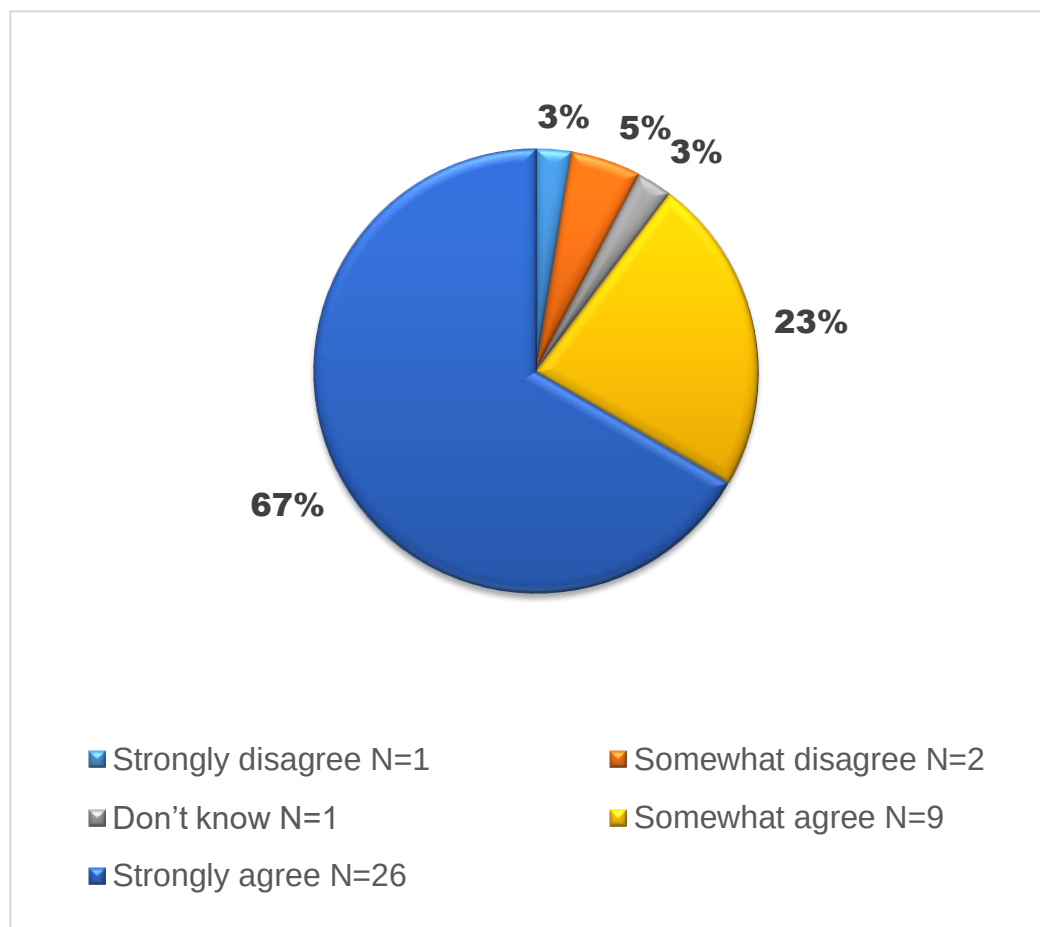


The vast majority (94%, n=31) of respondents from Phase One stated that their school always or sometimes had a good reputation for encouraging academic success. No respondents selected rarely or never to this question while 6% (n=2) answered 'don't know'. Feedback from a respondent in Phase One highlighted that their school *'is committed to promoting a child-centred approach to education where a child's worth is validated but not measured by academic achievement alone'*. While another respondent also highlighted that the school motto in their school was *'Enlightenment, Empowerment and Enjoyment'*. A respondent from Phase One commented that *'our school has a good reputation for supporting the holistic needs of each student and encouraging students to achieve at their own level of ability. All achievements are celebrated. The priority for our students is that they are 'happy and well (mentally) and safe in their school environment and in life'*. Further feedback from Phase One highlighted that *'as a special school, parents understand that academic success is not paramount. The well-being of our students comes first and we will help students to achieve academic success'*.

4.5.7 Student Voice

In Phase Two of the research design students were asked to express their experience of the post primary school they had attended. The following section will explore those responses from students. Students (n=39) were asked to respond to the statement '*This school has been a good school for me*'. Figure 68 illustrates the responses from students to this statement.

Figure 68: This School Has Been A Good School For Me



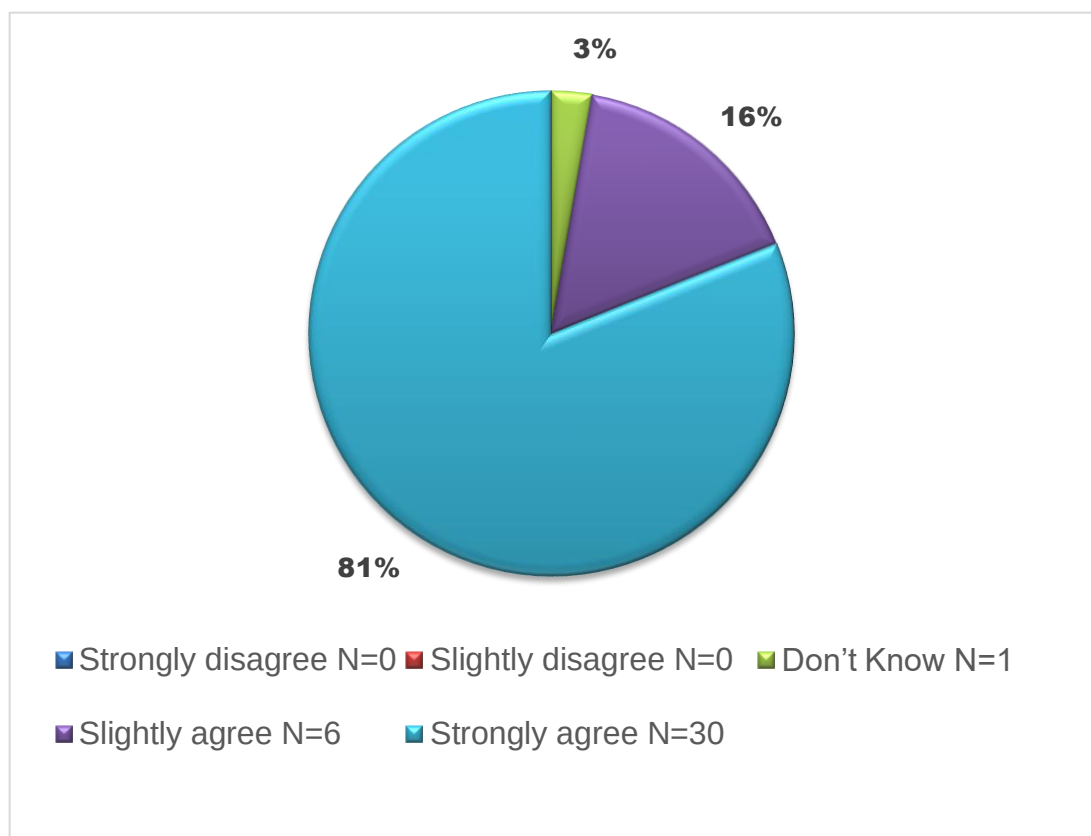
The vast majority (90%, n=35) of students strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement. Less than a tenth (8%, n=3) strongly or slightly disagreed that their school had being good for them, while 3% (n=1) of students selected 'don't know' for this statement. A student commented in Phase Three that 'in my other school

I didn't get the attention I needed'. Another student explained how they 'love school, getting all the work done and seeing my friends'.

4.5.8 Parent Voice

In Phase Two of the research, parents were asked to express their experiences on the post primary school their child attended. Parents (n=37) were asked to respond to the statement – '*This school has been a good school for my child*'. Figure 69 illustrates the feedback from parents (n=37).

Figure 69: This School Has Been A Good School For My Child



An overwhelming 97% (n=36) of parents strongly or slightly agreed with this statement. It should be noted that within this finding, 81% (n=30) of parents strongly agreed that their child's school has been a good school for them. No parent selected strongly disagree or somewhat disagree to this statement, while

3% (n=1) selected 'don't now to this statement. Feedback from a parent in Phase Two explained how in the special school which their child attends '*all programmes in the school are very relevant*'. Another parent who answered, 'strongly agree' to this statement highlighted that in their child's special school '*teaches in a way that suits the ability of the child*'.

4.6 Conclusion

Chapter 4 provided a detailed outline of the data collected from a nationwide questionnaire for principals of special schools, a student and parent questionnaire and feedback from interviews from two case study schools. This research focused on seventy-seven schools, from DES Special Schools List 2017, who were pertinent to the research as they cater for students with ID in post primary education. A response rate of 51% was achieved from the nationwide school questionnaire and the overwhelming majority of respondents hold a senior management position within a special school in Ireland. The vast majority of student respondents were leaving post primary school in 2020 or 2021.

Chapter 4 offered an insight into the findings on curricular and accreditation programmes available to students in special schools and the transition pathways available to students with ID post school. The findings highlighted that there is a wide range of curricular programmes which students with ID could follow in their schools. These programmes included, Junior Certificate Levels 2 and 3, QQI Levels 2 and 3, Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied and In-House School Awards. This research found that the majority of special schools offer the Junior Cycle Level 2 and QQI Levels 2 and 3 curriculum programmes while nearly all schools offer the Junior Cycle Level 3. A significant minority of special schools offer awards in the 'other' category and In-House awards. The curriculum programmes offered to students in special schools attempt to reflect the students'

individual choices and their interests. However, the majority of principals recognised that their school restricts the curriculum, while the majority of students with ID stated that there were additional programmes and subjects they would like to study.

This chapter also highlighted that the majority of students with ID participated in accredited programmes at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland and over half of all participating special schools stated that their students were entered into state examinations. Nearly half of principals reported that they were happy with the level of accreditation programmes available to students in their school.

All respondent special schools stated that the culture within their school encouraged students with ID to achieve accreditation and that their school had a good reputation and high aspirations for encouraging academic success. The majority of special schools stated that there were barriers to participation of students achieving accreditation in their schools.

Finally, this chapter focused on examining data on the transition pathways available to students with ID, post school. During the period 2013-2017, over half of all students transitioned to a HSE training programme. While one tenth of students secured a placement in further education and no student transitioned to higher education. There was evidence that the overwhelming majority of both students and parents were involved in the decision-making process regarding the education programme in which students were engaged and the transition to further placement after their post primary education. The majority of students and parents felt that they had real choice about what students could do post school. The following chapter will analyse these findings and discuss them in the context of current national and international literature in the area of special education.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 provided an overview of the findings of this research following a nationwide questionnaire to special schools, principal, senior teacher, student and parent questionnaires and case study interviews. This research was constructed around Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986, 1999, 2005) ecology system which recognizes the fluid and dynamic influences on an individual, their experiences and their development from the microsystem through to the meso, exo, macro and chrono system. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system informed the literature review and the research design and was a guiding framework for the critical review of existing research on inclusion, inclusive policies, inclusive education, inclusion, and special education. This theoretical framework also guided and consolidated the findings of the research data into a comprehensible summary for review.

This chapter provides an insight and discussion into the findings of this research, focusing on the curricular provision students with ID can engaged with in special schools, the accreditation programmes students can pursue and the transition pathways available to students with ID post school. This chapter will discuss the curricular options available to students, the subject choices, the restrictions, and barriers to curricular programmes some special school experience. This section also examines Senior Cycle accreditation pathways, preparation for examinations, teaching, the school culture, and barriers to accreditation programmes experienced by special schools. Finally, this chapter will provide an overview of the transition pathways options available to students with ID post school. The transition procedures and planning, the decision-making process and the role of guidance counsellors will also be examined and discussed.

5.2 Curriculum

Óskarsdóttir (2019) explored inclusive schools' policy across Europe and stated that all learners should have access to relevant learning opportunities within a single coherent curriculum framework and assessment that informs learning and recognises academic achievement and wider learning. The Government of Ireland is now examining educational provision in Ireland 'in light of their obligations and responsibilities under the UNCRPD (NCSE, 2019, p4) which recognises that the best interests of children and their needs should be fundamental (Merrigan and Senior, 2021). Banks and Shevlin (2021) highlight the assumption that special schools and special settings are better resourced and capable of delivering better quality academic and social outcomes for their students. However, both internationally and nationally there is very little evidence that attendance at special schools produces greater academic and social outcomes for their students (Banks and Shevlin, 2021). The NCSE (2019) stated that it is timely to consider the educational journey of students who attend special schools and to investigate the programmes and outcomes students experiences.

A key question of this study was to investigate what academic programmes are available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland. This new research is small in breadth and depth so there is a need to be cautious of over-generalising its findings. However, this research provides data on the variety of curricula options with which students with ID are engaging and participating in in special schools in Ireland. O'Mara et al. (2012) highlighted that substantive gaps exist in the evidence on how the curriculum should best be designed, developed, adapted, and delivered for post-primary students with special educational needs. This view echoes the findings of Squires et al. (2016) who reported that the international literature exploring the views of students with SEN about the curriculum offered is limited. This research summaries the finding of current practice concerning what curriculum post primary students with ID are engaged with in special schools in Ireland. This section will discuss the following themes: (1) Senior Cycle Programmes, (2) Additional Curriculum Options, (3) Subject Choice, (4) Restriction

of Curricular Programmes, (5) Limitations of Curricular Programmes, (6) Challenges to Curricular Programmes, (7) Student Voice on Curricular Programmes and (8) Parent Voice on Curricular Programmes.

Farrell (2010) identified that the priority for students with SEN must be to have access to curricula which are appropriate for them, not that they are fitted into a national curriculum which was designed for the mainstream population. One of the key research questions of this study was to establish what students with ID transition to post school. There is evidence from this research to suggest that the majority of special schools offer a Senior Cycle programme at post primary level. Feedback from this study identified that special schools engage in a variety of curricula which includes the Junior Cycle Levels 2 and 3, JCSP, QQI Levels 2 and 3, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Established. In addition, school-specific 'Leavers Programmes' are uniquely designed as Senior Cycle programmes, which special schools offer to students with intellectual disabilities.

5.2.1 Senior Cycle Programmes

There is evidence from this research that a significant majority of special schools follow the Junior Cycle Level 2 curriculum programme, while just under half of special schools offer the Junior Cycle Level 3. Principals commented that the more practical subjects such as Home Economics, Art and Woodwork were engaged with at JCL3.

The evidence of popularity of special schools to engage with the JCL2 programme corresponds with the findings of Project Iris (2015) which reported that JCL2 qualifications can address the difficulties experienced by some pupils with ID in achieving nationally recognised certification.

This research found that slightly less than one third of special schools participate in the Junior Certificate Schools Programme initiative. Feedback from this research highlighted many positive endorsements for the JCSP programme which

are echoed by the finding from Project Iris (2015). The JCSP was valued by students with ID as it enabled them to successfully complete some Junior Certificate programmes in their special school (Project Iris 2015). Over half of special schools in this research engaged in QQI programmes at Levels 2 and 3.

The LCA was offered as a curriculum programme in one fifth of special schools, while the Leaving Certificate was only offered in two schools. The results of this study concur with the findings of Project Iris (2015) which reported that the development of appropriate programmes and associated nationally recognised awards within Leaving Certificate represents an urgent task. Banks et al. (2010) and Rose et al. (2015) reported that students involved in the LCA programmes appeared to enjoy the smaller class sizes, more individual attention and group-based project work. Evidence from this study identifies similar findings from Squires et al. (2016) which reported that there seemed to be less opportunity to do the Leaving Certificate with QQI being offered as an alternative. Interestingly, this study identified that nearly half of special schools (46%) offered awards in the 'other' category and 43% offered in-house awards.

5.2.2 Additional Curriculum Options

In this research, nearly a quarter of principals identified Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) as an additional curriculum and accreditation pathway. This research concurs with the findings of NCCA (2019) and Smyth et al. (2019) which highlighted that some special schools, to meet the needs of their students, have diversified the curriculum they offer to include Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and ASDAN qualifications and/or school developed completion programmes to follow on from the learning achieved in Junior Cycle at Levels 1 and 2. Smyth et al. (2019) identified that, in an effort to fill the gap in provision, a special school had developed their own 'leavers' programme', tailored to the needs of their students. Special schools await the outcome of the Senior Cycle review by the NCCA, which has indicated that there was an appetite among students, parents, and teachers for greater flexibility

in subject and programme choices and more learner-centred approaches in teaching, learning, and assessment at Senior Cycle. The ongoing Senior Cycle review by the NCCA highlighted that many believe that the current senior cycle provision is too narrowly focused on students' academic ability. This means many students, including those with special educational needs are left without pathways post school (NCCA, 2019).

5.2.3 Subject Choice

Findings in this research reported that the majority of students and parents agreed that the choice of subjects available to study in their schools was extremely good or very good. Evidence from this study reported that the most popular examination subjects at Junior Cycle Level 3 were English (26%), Mathematics (17%), Home-Economics (14%) and Art (14%). In addition, this research reported that the most popular examination subjects taken at Senior Cycle were English (29%), Mathematics (24%) and Art (14%). There is evidence from this research to suggest that most curricula followed by students with ID in special schools are practically based subjects or assessed through the compilation of portfolios.

The adoption of the Bronfenbrenner's ecology system as a theoretical framework for this research to analyse the multi-layered, interconnected influences on students with intellectual disabilities. Curricular programmes shape the students' educational provision and the choices that are subsequently available for post-school transitions. The structure of the traditional end of year examination can limit the opportunities student with intellectual disabilities have in achieving appropriate accreditation. NDA/NCSE (2017) stated that curricula inflexibility in Senior Cycle, apart from Leaving Certificate Applied, and a lack of resources, sometimes resulted in an overly academic focus when a more practical course would have been more appropriate for some young people with disabilities. Smyth et al. (2019) identified the need for more project and practical work and a combination of academic and vocational learning was also mentioned in this respect. Squires et al. (2016) highlighted that many students preferred accreditation which involved a portfolio

rather than a written examination. In some cases, the choice of qualification was an important contributing factor for motivating students. Coogan and Farrell (2017) suggest that the successful engagement of students with JCSP is due to the delivery of the programme as opposed to the curriculum. This study echoes the findings of Coogan and Farrell (2017), Squires et al. (2016) and the NDA/NCSE (2017) and suggests that curricula which focuses on practical subjects and on assessment through portfolios are more successful in engaging students, as opposed to traditional curricula with the focus on end-of-year examinations.

Evidence from this research suggests that just over half of principals reported that the subject choice available in their school 'rarely or never' impacted on a student's post-career trajectory. Feedback from principals highlighted that the decisions on post school pathways are not based on the subjects in which students participate during their Senior Cycle programme. This is unlike their mainstream peers where subject choice can influence the courses a student wishes to pursue post school. The findings from this research suggest that very little importance is placed on the subjects which students with intellectual disabilities follow at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland. Does this suggest that the opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities and the transition pathways available to them post school are predetermined? Does it matter what subjects students with intellectual disabilities choose or engage with and receive accreditation for if pathways post school are already decided? The inclusion debate and the concept of equality in education for all learners, appears to fall short when the education provision and opportunities available to students with intellectual disabilities in their Senior Cycle are examined.

5.2.4 Restriction of Curricular Programmes

Nearly three quarters of principals in this research (74%) stated that their school 'always or sometimes' restrict the curriculum which would normally be available in mainstream schools. This result concurs with Squires et al. (2016) which reported that a more restricted choice of subjects was mentioned by students in special

schools. Smyth et al. (2019) highlighted that students commented on the focus in schools on academic subjects to the detriment of other subject areas and skills. Several students' feedback referenced the absence of pathways or accreditation for those who were more vocationally oriented. This research reported similar findings and the data highlighted that more than three quarters of students stated that there were additional programmes and subjects they would like to study: these included Woodwork, Music, PE and Science. The addition of more practically based subjects to the curriculum is in line with the findings of NDA/NCSE (2017) which identified that some participants expressed a view that the current Senior Cycle curriculum, apart from Leaving Certificate Applied, was considered overly academic in its focus, when a more practical course might have been more appropriate for some young people with disabilities. The findings of Squires et al. (2016) coincide with these findings.

5.2.5 Limitations of Curricular Programmes

Project Iris (2015) identified that some pupils experience major difficulties accessing the current curriculum or do not have the opportunity to gain a nationally recognised certification. Students with intellectual disabilities have a right to an education. Inclusion policies have dominated recent national and international policies. This research would suggest that students with ID cannot avail of the same educational opportunities as their mainstream peers. Limitations of subject choice and restrictions of curricular programmes negatively influence the educational opportunities for students with ID. Inclusion policies at the macro level of the ecological system does not appear to have filtered down to practice in the class. Rose et al. (2010) noted that, although the climate for inclusion was evident in national policy documents, there lacked comprehensive evidence of inclusion policy on the ground in classroom and educational settings.

NCCA (2019) also identified challenges with the current senior cycle curriculum. These challenges included lack of access to technical, vocational, creative, and professional learning; over-emphasis on a single pathway (the Leaving Certificate

Established) and a lack of flexibility to combine aspects of different programmes. Greater flexibility to allow students to navigate different pathways through Senior Cycle was seen as desirable. The results of this research concur with Watson et al. (2015) which stated that a broadening of the curriculum is likely to be helpful, including greater availability of programmes such as the Junior Cycle Schools Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied Programme.

The findings from feedback from principals and senior teachers in this research identified similar challenges to Senior Cycle programmes available and operating in special schools. NCCA (2019) highlighted that mixed views were expressed about continuity between the new Junior Cycle and the existing Senior Cycle. The changes to Senior Cycle should align fully with developments at Junior Cycle. Feedback from principal and senior teachers identified the absence of a follow-on pathway for students who access learning through Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes in Junior Cycle. The NCCA (2019) findings were echoed in the feedback from this research. Principals outlined their frustration at the lack of continuity of programmes for Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle. The results of this research highlight the lack of steppingstones available to students with ID. The jump from JCL3 to LCA can be too big for a lot of students to navigate. There is evidence in this research which concurs with existing findings in Farrell et al. (2010) in the need for a balance between exam focused national post primary curriculum and the flexibility focusing on student needs and ability. Feedback from principals and senior teachers in this study highlighted that presently there is no pathway to follow, after a student completes JCL2. Special schools are keenly awaiting the outline of curricular options and accreditation for the new Senior Cycle review.

5.2.6 Challenges to Curricular Programmes

There is evidence from the findings of this research that half of special schools in this research stated that challenges to participation of students achieving accreditation exist in their school. This research concurs with the findings of O'Mara et al. (2012) which reported that challenges to delivering a broad curriculum to students with ID included the responsibilities, attitudes and skills of educational staff, a lack of specialised teaching materials and aids, and a shortage of specialised staff to meet standard criteria for accreditation and certification. In this research, it was noted in feedback from one senior teacher that their school does not have the same facilities as other post primary schools, such as a science laboratory, or specialised teachers and additional teaching hours. This research would suggest that these factors hinder a broad curriculum at post primary level, available to students with ID and therefore a narrower curriculum exists.

5.2.7 Student Voice on Curricular Programmes

O'Mara et al. (2012) highlighted how very few studies went to the trouble of assessing students' views and Squires et al. (2016) reported that students want to be involved in making curricular choices. This research found that the vast majority of principals in special schools reported that students 'always or sometimes' had a direct input into education programmes. Squires et al. (2016) highlighted how students like being involved in decision-making around subject and curriculum choices. Students expressed a desire for their curriculum to be meaningful in terms of their aspirations and expressed a preference for practical subjects. Feedback from students also reported that the majority of them felt that the subjects that were available to them were 'extremely or very good'. In addition, most stated that there were other subjects/programmes they would like to pursue in school. These additional subjects were wide ranging and included Languages, Woodwork, PE, Music and History. The scope of this study did not rank these additional subjects, which was suggested in the programmes feedback.

5.2.8 Parent Voice on Curricular Programmes

Data from this research found that the principals in special schools stated that most parents ‘always or sometimes’ have an input into the education programmes in which their child participated. Most parents agreed with this finding and stated that they ‘always, most of the time or sometimes’ had an input into the education programmes in which their child participated. From the literature, there are mixed views as to the involvement of parents in their child’s schooling. Bronfenbrenner’s ecology system, adopted by this research, reflected the different levels of influence that might impinge upon student experience in their educational setting. The micro system, which includes parents, is most influential for the student. This research concurs with Kenny and Mihut (2020) reporting how parents of students with additional needs are typically highly engaged in their children’s education, in terms of attending school meetings or events and supporting homework completion. However, Smyth et al. (2019) reported that schools were not seen by parents as catering adequately for the needs of young people with special educational needs.

5.3 Accreditation

5.3.1 Introduction

The NCCA (2019) reported that certification is an essential steppingstone, not only to individual success, but to building a productive and competitive economy and society. Douglas et al. (2014) reported that there is a gap in the knowledge of attainment of students with SEN and recommended that school and classroom-based assessments of pupil attainment needed to be examined. O’Mara et al. (2012) identified substantive gaps in the evidence of how the curriculum is best designed, developed, adapted and delivered for post-primary students with special educational needs. Educational outcomes for this cohort of students are very sparse and data is not systematically reported or tracked in Ireland (NCSE, 2006). Squires et al. (2016) reported that the curriculum must be relevant to students and have an appropriate accreditation route. Rose et al. (2015) identified that developing appropriate programmes and associated nationally recognised awards within the Leaving Certificate represents an urgent task. A key question of this

study was to investigate what the academic outcomes are for students with ID in special schools in Ireland. Due to the limited depth and breadth of this research, caution should be exercised about making sweeping over-generalising comments regarding the findings. However, this research does provide data on the academic accreditation outcomes which students with ID achieve in special schools in Ireland. This research presents evidence of good practice concerning the access and engagement with accreditation programmes. This section will discuss the following themes: (1) Senior Cycle Accreditation Programmes, (2) Challenges to Accreditation, (3) Preparation for Examinations, (4) Teaching, (5) School Culture, (6) Student Voice on Accreditation and (7) Parent Voice on Accreditation.

5.3.2 Senior Cycle Accreditation Programmes

O'Mara et al. (2012) reported how the views of teachers and support staff were often used as outcome measures rather than robust objective assessments. This research is in line with the findings of O'Mara et al. (2012) which suggest that accreditation programmes which are part of the National Framework of Qualifications, allow for standards of different qualifications to be compared in a consistent manner, as well as accurately providing comparison with international qualifications. Data from this research provides evidence to suggest that the participation rate of students with ID engaging with accreditation programmes has increased over the last number of years, from 61% in 2013 to 70% in 2017. With the implementation of the Junior Cycle Level 2 Programme, this may account for the increase in engagement of students with ID with nationally accredited programmes.

Squires et al. (2016) identified various academic awards in special schools for post-primary students with ID. These accredited awards can be placed within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The awarding bodies for NFQ include Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the State Examinations Commission (SEC), Institutes of Technology and Universities. These accreditation awards included Junior Cycle Levels 2 and 3, QQI Levels 2 and 3 and Leaving Certificate.

In addition, ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) was identified as an accredited programme outside the NFQ.

Rose et al. (2015) noted that the Junior Cycle Level 2 programme has the potential to address the difficulties experienced by some pupils with intellectual disabilities in achieving nationally recognised certification. The findings in this research reported similar accreditation and awards programmes which students with ID were engaged with in special schools. Two thirds of special schools follow the JCL2 accreditation pathways, while under half of special schools offer the JCL3 curriculum. Squires et al. (2016) highlighted that there seemed to be less opportunity to do the Leaving Certificate, with QQI Levels 2 and 3 being offered as an alternative. The findings of this research concur with Squires et al. (2016) as the Leaving Certificate programme was only followed in two schools. The Senior Cycle review by the NCCA may extend the accreditation programmes available to students with ID.

There is evidence in feedback from principals in this research to suggest that the majority of students in special schools participated in accreditation programmes at Senior Cycle. In addition, over half of all special schools with students with ID were entered into state examinations. These findings concur with evidence from Project Iris (2015) which highlighted that most pupils had experienced a degree of academic achievement. This data will be insightful for policymakers when reviewing Senior Cycle at post primary level for students with ID.

There is evidence in this research from feedback from principals and senior teachers which concurs with Smyth et al. (2019) who reported there was a lack of continuity for young people with SEN at Senior Cycle who had taken Level One or Two courses at Junior Cycle. The NCCA (2019) identified a lack of continuity between the new Junior Cycle and the existing Senior Cycle programme. The NCCA (2019) reported that the potential changes to Senior Cycle should align fully

with developments at Junior Cycle. Smyth et al. (2019) highlighted that some special schools have developed their own leavers' programme, tailored to meet the needs of their students.

This research would suggest that the misalignment of the Junior Cycle and the present Senior Cycle for students with ID which highlights the ad hoc nature of government policies in relation to providing inclusive equitable education for all. Providing an inclusive curriculum and accreditation programmes for all students to participate and engage in seems to fall short of including students with ID. Government policy under UNCRPD is committed to inclusion but this policy has not been implemented when it comes to curriculum design for all learners.

This research concurs with Smyth et al. (2019) as there is evidence from feedback from special schools which suggests that, following completion of Junior Cycle Levels 2 and 3 accredited programmes, some special schools offered a school-designed Leavers or Finishing Programme. These individual school-designed senior cycle programmes generally are centred around QQI accreditation programmes. Over half of special schools in Ireland are engaged with QQI accreditation programmes. The findings of this research highlighted that slightly under half of all respondents from special schools were happy with the level of accreditation available in their school. This research correlated with the findings of Smyth et al. (2019) who reported that special schools were diverse, not only in the profile of their students but also in the programmes they offered at Senior Cycle.

5.3.3 Challenges to Accreditation

Feedback from principals and senior teachers in this study stated that slightly over half of special schools believe that there are challenges to participation of students achieving accreditation in their special school. Smyth et al. (2019) highlighted that in the majority of schools, the Senior Cycle programmes did not adequately cater for those students who are less academically oriented. There is evidence in this research to agree with Smyth et al. (2019) as slightly over half of special schools stated that students, for whatever reason, do not participate in an accredited programme in Senior Cycle. These findings are also in line with the OECD (2020) which highlighted that in the European Union, students with SEN are still less likely to obtain advanced academic certifications and qualifications and that this consequently hinders their access to, and retention in, the labour market.

Smyth et al. (2019) reported that student feedback from their research stated that there was an absence of pathways or accreditation for those who were more vocationally oriented. O'Mara et al. (2012) points out the need to balance any potential benefits of flexibility against the need for students. Hornby (2015) stated that an important issue in inclusive special education is to achieve the right balance for each child with special educational needs between (1) an academic or developmental curriculum, which is focused on the needs of the majority of children, and (2) a functional curriculum which addresses the specific educational needs of children with SEN. Florian et al. (2017) explores how inclusion now involves considerations of how all students might be meaningfully included in national curricula and system of assessment and how their participation might be judged. Evidence from feedback received from principals and senior teachers in this research reported similar findings and suggests that a balance needs to be constructed between the demands of accreditation programmes and the needs of the student.

5.3.4 Preparation for Examinations

Student experiences and development are at the centre of Bronfenbrenner's microsystem. Squires et al. (2016) reported that students' value qualifications and they wanted courses to be meaningful in terms of their aspirations to college and employment. Many students preferred accreditation that involved a portfolio rather than a written examination. Squires et al. (2016) stated that older students were able to talk about their aspirations and how examinations would help them. There is evidence of similar attitudes prevailing in this research as the majority of students and parents reported that their special school was 'extremely good or very good' at preparing students for examinations. Feedback from principals and senior teachers in this research reported that nearly three quarters of principals of special schools highlighted that their school 'always' had a good reputation for encouraging academic success.

Banks et al. (2010) emphasised that the LCA is often recommended to students as being the most suitable option if they have special educational needs. This research suggests that the LCA is not a popular Senior Cycle programme, as less than one fifth of special schools offered the programme to their students. The NDA/NCSE (2017) identified that the current Senior Cycle curriculum may be considered to have an overly academic focus when a more practical course might have been more appropriate for some young people with ID. The existing Senior Cycle curriculum design focuses on state examinations which by design makes it more challenging for students with ID to participate in.

5.3.5 Teaching

Bronfenbrenner's ecology system, which provided the theoretical framework for this research, has captured the connectedness and influences between teachers in the exosystem and the individual student with ID. Squires et al. (2016) identified that school enjoyment is often linked directly to students' experiences of relationships with their teachers. This research identified that the vast majority of

students and parents rated that the school was 'extremely good or very good' at teaching and supporting learning. Squires et al. (2016) commented that the role of teachers is crucial and having inclusive attitudes and a flexible, supportive approach in which good relationships are engendered seems important to student engagement and learning. Societal ideology and cultural influences are located in the macrosystem of Bronfenbrenner's ecology system. Doyle et al. (2017) identified that the ethos and culture of the school influences teacher attitudes towards achievable goals for students with SEN. Feedback from this research found that all special schools stated that the culture within their school 'always or sometimes' encourages the participation levels of students with ID to achieve accreditation.

5.3.6 School Culture

Culture, at the level of the macrosystem influences the educational experiences of students (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1999, 2005). Squires et al. (2016) stated that the school culture and the climate in terms of teacher attitudes, values and attributes are very important in promoting student engagement and encouraging participation. There is evidence from this research that nearly one half of principals from special schools were happy with the level of accreditation available in their school. Special schools involved in this research stated that their students were 'always or sometimes' encouraged to have high aspirations about their learning in school.

5.3.7 Student Voice on Accreditation

Barnes-Holmes et al. (2013) found that special school staff provide a strong supportive environment, which is accepting for students with SEN and attributed this as the reason why students attending special schools appear happier than their mainstream counterparts. Evidence from feedback from students in this research reported that most students stated that their school was a good school for them. Squires et al. (2016) reported that some students in special schools felt that they did not have the same examination opportunities as peers in mainstream.

Squires et al. (2016) reported that students liked being involved in making choices and preferred this to when teachers made choices for them. This evidence equates with the findings of this research, as over three-quarters of students stated that there were additional programmes and subjects they would like to study. These included Woodwork, Music, PE and Science. This research concurs with O'Mara et al. (2012) who stated that there needs to be a balance between meeting the standard criteria for accreditation and certification and preventing adapted curricula from becoming too narrow.

5.3.8 Parent Voice on Accreditation

Kenny and Mihut (2020) explained that parental expectations about the future educational achievement of their children had been found to impact children's academic achievement. Findings in this research revealed that most parents reported that their child was engaged in an accredited programme. In addition, the overwhelming majority of parents indicated in their feedback that they were 'satisfied, very satisfied or extremely satisfied' with the provision of accreditation programmes available to their child in their school. The findings of this research do not fully align with Smyth et al. (2019) who highlighted that, in discussion with parents, it was reported that parents were equally divided between feeling that the provision of learning experiences suited their child while also commenting on the neglect of broader skills in current structures. One possible reason for the disparity in the findings of this research and Smyth et al. (2019) may be because of the small sample in this research and the tendency for involved and committed parents to volunteer to participate in the data collection.

McCoy et al. (2019) highlighted that parental expectations may inhibit students from maximising their potential, which is likely to stem from how parents view the opportunities their children have for further and higher education. Kenny and Mihut (2020) highlighted that parental educational expectations of students with SEN may perhaps be a reflection of traditional stereotypes and lack of information about

post-school opportunities and supports available. This research did not have the scope to delve deeply into the question of parental expectations.

5.4 Transition Pathways

5.4.1 Introduction

In this section, the different components of the study are combined to address one of the central questions of this research, which is to explore what transition pathways are available to students with ID post school. Young people with disabilities face many of the same challenges and opportunities as their peers in mainstream. However, in many cases these challenges are exacerbated (NDA/NCSE, 2017). This can be due to the interaction between the nature and severity of their disability and the demands posed by complex post school environments (NDA/NCSE, 2017). The findings and discussion of this research are structured through the lens of the stakeholders involved in the education of senior cycle students with ID in special schools in Ireland. The key questions have been sub divided into the following: (1) Transition Pathways, (2) Transition Procedures and Planning, (3) Decision-Making Process and (4) Role of Guidance Counsellor.

5.4.2 Transition Pathways

One of the key research questions of this study was to establish where students with ID transition to post school. Aston et al. (2021) highlighted that people with intellectual disabilities are significantly underrepresented within the workforce and within further and higher education in Ireland. McGuckin et al. (2013) reported that internationally there is considerable evidence of a significant increase in the number of people with SEN participating in higher education. Similar findings were reported by Wagner et al. (2006) and the OECD (2003). Feedback from principals in this research reported that during the period 2013-2017 over half of students, from a total of 566 students and 19 special schools, transitioned to a HSE training

programme. One fifth of these students progressed to a vocational training programme while only one in ten students transitioned to further education. No student transitioned to higher education. In this limited sample of students with ID there is strong evidence to suggest that the transition pathway to further and higher education is not generally followed by students with ID from special schools in Ireland.

This research would suggest that by far the most popular post school pathway for students with ID in special schools in Ireland is attending a placement on a HSE training programme. AHEAD identified an increase in the number of students with SEN attending higher education, although specific SEN groups remain underrepresented. This research suggests that students with ID fall into this underrepresented group. A possible reason for these differing viewpoints, between the findings of this research and with existing international and national evidence, may be due to the specific cohort of students who were the focus of this research. Previous research has focused on students with SEN which can incorporate a variety of motor, sensory, physical and intellectual disabilities. This research focused specifically on the experiences of students with ID in special schools which may account for the majority of graduating students transitioning to HSE placements post school.

Grigal et al. (2012) stated that high quality transition services for all students with disabilities should incorporate collaboration with external partners, community services and organisations who might be involved in supporting students post school. Best practice would suggest that if Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are used for transition planning, the process should capture current and future transitional events (Scanlon and Doyle, 2017; OECD, 2011; Redpath et al. 2013). Scanlon and Doyle (2017) states that, when planning for transition, people with disabilities cannot be viewed as a homogeneous group, but rather as individuals who all have their own strengths, weakness and experiences. Findings in this research identified that principals, senior teachers, parents and students reported

that successful transition procedures were often due to the IEP process, parent/teacher meetings, information nights and organised careers days within the school. The IEP can be a very effective strategy in the successful transition for students with SEN (Grigal et al. 2012; McGuckin et al. 2013). Evidence in this research concurs with Scanlon and Doyle (2017) regarding the importance which special schools place on the IEP process. In this research, feedback from principals, senior teachers and parents suggests that the IEP was identified as the key document for planning student objectives and targets.

This research suggests that students may not have participated in a transition plan which incorporated further and higher education as a realistic option for students with ID post school. Grigal et al. (2012) highlighted that if attending a further and higher education programme is seldom or never listed as a goal on a student's IEP and transition plan, then it is doubtful that the outcome will ever occur. The scope of this study did not involve scrutinising and evaluating students' IEP's. The OECD (2011) and McGuckin et al. (2013) recommended developing bridges between stakeholders that foster continuity and coherent paths between education at all levels and all sectors and strengthening local synergies among everyone involved in the transition process. Aston et al. (2021) stated that improvements in awareness and knowledge among teachers, Guidance Counsellors, students and their families could be achieved by developing formal linkages between schools and colleges. Formulating an IEP and transition planning should involve negotiating a plan that respects students' personal choices and opens up, rather than closes down, possibilities for them (EADSNE, 2002).

Rose et al. (2015), O'Brien et al. (2011) and McGuckin et al. (2013) reported that in the majority of schools the process of transition required greater structure and support for parents. However, Rose et al. (2015) reported that special schools are more likely to follow a consistent approach to developing IEPs, which includes setting targets that can be regularly reviewed, having parental and student input into educational planning and providing information on academic and social progress and achievements. Findings of this study concur with Rose et al. (2015)

and the effective use of IEPs transition planning. Deciding what constitutes successful transition planning for each student and who decided if the transition placement has been successful are issues that were raised in the findings of this research. Being offered a placement to attend a post school programme does not mean the placement is successful or appropriate. In addition, having a limited number of transition options from which to choose is also not an indicator of a successful transition placement. McConkey et al. (2017) reported that there are limited choices available to Irish school leavers with ID. Also, Aston et al. (2021) highlighted that the future education, training and careers options are limited for these students based on a lack of suitable progression options outside of the traditional health service based adult day centres or vocational training centres.

The findings of this research are in line with McConkey et al. (2017) and Aston et al. (2021). This research suggests that being allocated a placement or having limited options does not equate with a successful transition placement. The scope of this research did not involve follow-up interviews with students and their parents after they graduated from their post primary special school.

5.4.3 Transition Procedures and Planning

By constructing this research on the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecology model, it enabled the research to investigate all variables of influence on the development of the individual and their experiences. For example influences on the individual and their education can include funding issues within a school to resources additional educational support for students with intellectual disabilities or if government policy is not progressively implementing an inclusion policy which can be seen on the ground in classrooms. This section will explore transition procedures in special schools and the planning for students transitioning to placements post school. These procedures and plans have a direct effect on individuals and their opportunities post school.

Aston et al. (2021) highlighted that it is generally accepted that transition processes for all students can be complex; it is particularly problematic for students with ID. The transition from schools to post school settings is of particular concern to parents of children with special educational needs (Barnes-Holmes et al. 2013). Scanlon and Doyle (2019) reported that successful transition planning needs to take account of strategies specifically designed to enhance the autonomy of the young person to ensure that they are centre stage in the transition process. The NDA/NCSE (2017) report highlighted that transition supports need to be very carefully tailored to address the needs of the young people with disabilities and the requirements and challenges posed by the post school environment.

Aston et al. (2021) identified the genuine concern of school management, personnel and parents to support young people with ID to make suitable transitions which will allow them to achieve their potential. Evidence from this research reported that the majority of special schools stated that their school's procedures and plans for the transition of students to further placements operated effectively within their school. This evidence concurs with the findings of the NDA/NCSE (2017) report which stated that many school staff felt that, given the resources and capacity within schools, much was done to help prepare young people with disabilities for life after school. In contrast the OECD (2011) highlighted that young adults with disabilities generally have a more difficult transition to tertiary education than other young adults. It should be noted that the OECD (2011) findings were not exclusive to students with ID and included students with a sensory, physical, motor or mental impairment or psychological problems in their report. Aston et al. (2021) highlighted that the transition planning for students without ID is very well established, supported by expertise from guidance counsellors, has an abundance of information about post school options and a structured pathway designed to access the many options available.

McConkey et al. (2017) identified that continuity of education and access to either training courses or employment opportunities is often not available to the same extent to students with ID as for their non-disabled peers. This research would suggest that a two-tiered system appears to be operating for mainstream students and for students with ID. Students with ID in special schools receive limited guidance from professionals, and more limited options of appropriate courses and programmes than their counterparts in mainstream and have additional concerns regarding funding and HSE support. Aston et al. (2021) emphasised that barriers to successful transition from school for students with ID centre around a perceived loss of supports by parents and students and a fear that suitable appropriate places may not be available.

Feedback from a principal in this research suggested that the process of talking about transition should begin two years before the student leaves school. This

suggestion corresponds with the findings of the NCSE report (2016) which recommended that transition planning to post-school options should begin two years before the student leaves school to assist and guide the student in post school decisions. Scanlon and Doyle (2019) reported that international research has emphasised the importance of developing a personal transition plan for students who have ID. In addition, evidence and feedback from this research agreed with the findings of NDA/NCSE (2017) which stated that it can be helpful to explore the need for transition planning to begin early in the post-primary school career of students with disabilities to adequately prepare them for life after school.

There is evidence from this research to suggest that, following the involvement of and contributions from students, parents, teachers and the principal, the local HSE Guidance Officer offers the student with ID a placement on a programme post school. This finding is in line with the NCSE (2014) which reported that the HSE occupational guidance service aims to provide one-to-one advice, support and guidance to enable individuals with disabilities to make an informed choices about their rehabilitative training and occupational services. Feedback from some principals reported an area of concern with this transition process. There is evidence from this research to suggest that the main cause of concern from principals was the process by which the HSE Officer drew conclusions regarding future student post school placements which were based on relatively short interviews with teachers, students and their families. Aston et al. (2021) identified that there was little evidence of any formal tracking system to monitor the progression of students with ID in post-school settings. The scope of this research did not pertain to investigating the process of transition to HSE placements after students leave post primary education. Aston et al. (2021) identified several barriers to successful transitions from school, which include a fear of a loss of supports in further or higher education institutes, a fear of a lack of suitable places for students with intellectual disabilities and a lack of access to relevant information and awareness of post school options among teachers, SENCOs and school Guidance Counsellors. This research would concur with Aston et al. (2021) and suggest that being offered a place by the local HSE Officer on a programme post school, may not reflect the most appropriate or successful placement available for

each particular student. Issues such as funding, location and resources may dictate post school placements for students with ID as opposed to continuing accreditation programmes.

5.4.4 Decision-Making Process

In this research, there was considerable evidence that most special schools reported that parents and students were always involved in the decision-making process regarding transition to further placements post school. Scanlon and Doyle (2019) stated that traditionally young people with SEN have not been active decision-makers in their own lives as professional opinions and family priorities can, often unintentionally, marginalise and disempower this cohort. The student, as well as their family, needs to feel they are a full part of the transition planning process (EADSNE 2002).

Evidence from this research found that the vast majority of parents believed they were active in the decision-making process of their child transitioning to post school pathways. This research found that the overwhelming majority of students with ID stated that someone had talked to them about the transition pathways available to them post school. Feedback from students highlighted that family, friends, teachers, SNA's, information days and the local HSE Guidance Officer were identified as offering support and advice to students with ID about transitioning to future placements post school.

The vast majority of students with ID in this research believed that their school had prepared them for the world of work or for further study and they believed they had real choices post school. In contrast to this finding, the NDA/NCSE (2017) found that young people with a disability in adult day services stated that they had not received sufficient practical support in school, including life-skills, to prepare them for life in this post school environment. This research suggests that students with ID may have overestimated their abilities and the transition pathway options

available to them post school. Feedback from over 90% of students stated that their school had been a good school for them. Feedback from students and parents in this research reflected a positive experience of their post primary education and that their special school provided a supported, educational environment.

It was evident from this research that students had progressed, developed and benefited from the educational programmes in which they were engaged and believed they were well-prepared for their transition to new pathways and programmes post school. This research suggests that this positive and sheltered environment where success, support and achievements are recognised, may amplify a student's view of their abilities.

5.4.5 Role of Guidance Counsellor

In Ireland special schools are classified as primary schools. The Department of Education and Skills do not currently sanction the post of guidance counsellor within special schools, even though some special schools are providing subjects and accreditation beyond the national school curriculum. Aston et al. (2021) highlighted that little is known about the type of career guidance they receive and the extent to which they make successful transitions from school. McGuckin et al. (2013) stated that guidance counsellors are an essential support for all students. The guidance process involves access to and provision of up-to-date information and consideration of personal, educational and vocational experiences and of hopes and dreams (McGuckin et al. 2013). The NDA/NCSE (2017) reported that staff from further and higher education agreed that there was a need for focused career guidance to be provided in schools.

Young people with disabilities, who attended further or higher education institutions, agreed that they required more specific one to one career guidance at an early stage of their school career, which they had not received, and relied heavily on support from family and friends in making course choices NDA/NCSE

(2017). Aston et al. (2021) highlighted that students with ID are not yet supported nationally with targeted progression into further education or training that builds on their own achievements. Aston et al. (2021) identified that students with ID require a spectrum of additional supports to complete post primary school and consider their future education, career and life options. Sometimes people with a disability may have difficulty getting clear information and advice on the options and pathways that are available and appropriate for them and about the supports available for their needs (NCSE 2014).

This research concurs with the findings of the NDA/NCSE (2017), NCSE (2014), McGuckin et al. (2013) and Aston et al. (2021) and the need for access to suitably qualified Guidance Counsellors in post-primary special schools, who would explore future options in post school environments. Feedback from principals and senior teachers in this research suggested that establishing a guidance counsellor role within special schools in Ireland would be of immense benefit to students and parents as they negotiate their way through the transition pathways available post school. Aston et al. (2021) suggests that instead of encouraging these students to make transitions to health-based settings, policy needs to ensure that these students participate more fully in further and higher education. This research suggests that providing information and guidance to all stakeholders in the transition process would help bridge the gap between post primary school and the transition pathways available post school.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter offers an insight into the findings of this research focusing on curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways students with ID have access to in special schools in Ireland. The research explored the Senior Cycle programmes in which students with ID can participate. A significant majority of special schools follow the Junior Cycle Level 2 curriculum while slightly under half of special schools offer the Junior Cycle Level 3. In addition, the majority of special schools engaged in QQI Levels 2 and 3.

This research suggests that curricula which focuses on practical subjects and on assessment through portfolios are more successful in engaging students. Most special schools restrict the curricular programmes they offer to students. This research also provided a discussion on the accreditation programmes available to students with ID. Junior Cycle Level 2 and 3, QQI Level 2 and 3 were by far the most popular accreditation pathways for students with ID to pursue while the Leaving Certificate was generally not offered in special schools. This research identified a lack of continuity between the Junior Cycle and the existing Senior Cycle programmes, which resulted in special schools offering a unique school-designed 'Leaver's Programme'.

This research found evidence to suggest that most students with ID transition to HSE placements post school. The key components of where a student with ID progresses to post school needs to be identified as a target in the students' IEP in order to have a chance that it may become a reality. There is general satisfaction among schools about the effectiveness of their transition planning procedures. Parents and students are satisfied overall with their level of involvement in the decision-making process.

Due to the limited option of transition placements available to students with ID post school, this research cannot make general statements about the success or otherwise of these transition placements. However, it is very evident that transition post school operates differently for students with and without ID. The lack of choice and options available post school, the lack of a coherent transition pathways, the lack of targeted IEP planning for transition and the lack of Guidance Counsellors in special schools are hurdles which students with ID and their parents must contend with when trying to negotiate the challenging decision of post school transition pathways.

Placing the development of students with intellectual disabilities within contexts has been an important challenge for this research. Bronfenbrenner's ecology

model helped to focus on the broad context in question which was inclusion and on the continuous interactions between individual and systemic factors, including curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways. The following concluding chapter will provide a detailed insight into the conclusions of the findings of this research and will reflect upon the research as a whole. Chapter 6 will summarise the findings of this study and will review them in the context of current national and international literature on policy and practice of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with ID in special schools in Ireland.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

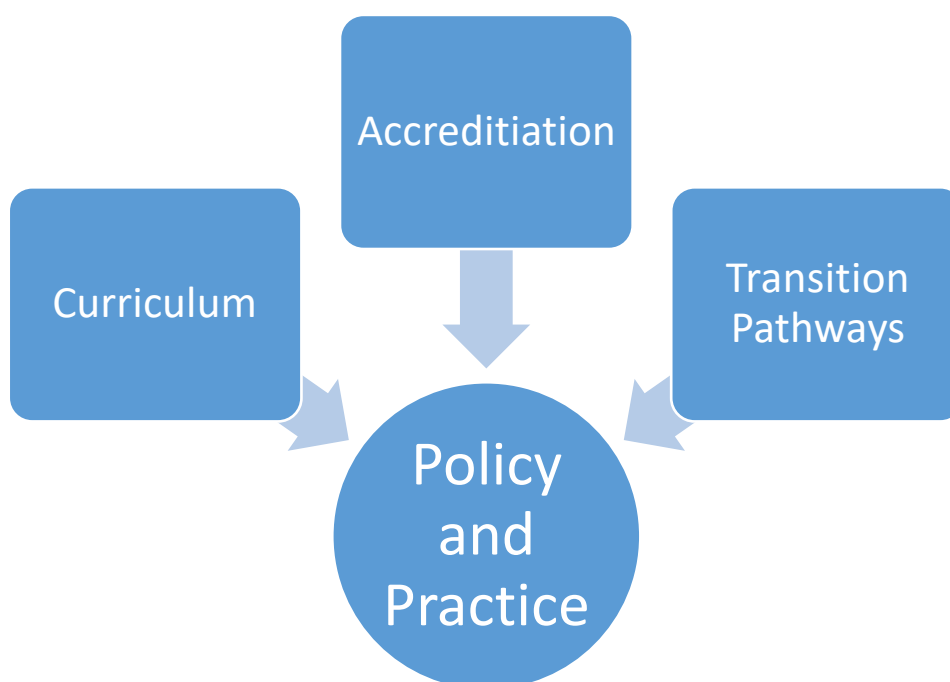
6.1 Introduction

This final chapter aims to reflect on the research in its entirety, with emphasis on the new knowledge gained from the findings of this study. The focus of this study was to explore three questions:

- Firstly, what curriculum is available for students with ID, at Senior Cycle, in special schools in Ireland?
- Secondly, what are the accreditation outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland?
- Thirdly, what are the transition pathways available to students with intellectual disabilities post school?

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems was used throughout this research, as a framework and guide to outline the many layers of influence on the education provision of students with ID and the curriculum and accreditation programmes they participate and engage in at post primary level. The literature review outlined the significant changes which have occurred in the past three decades and which have seen a shift in the cultural and societal view of students with intellectual disabilities (macrosystem). Bronfenbrenner's ecology framework is fluid and dynamic and shows the influences, direct and indirect, on education provision for students with intellectual disabilities. Their education and lives have been effected due to the dramatic changes internationally and nationally. This chapter will highlight how the findings of this research could inform policy and practice in the provision of inclusion and special education in special schools in Ireland. Figure 70 provides an overview of the key research questions.

Figure 70: Research Themes



The key themes of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways are interlinked and provide a picture of the educational outcomes for students with ID and the reality of the policy and practice of inclusion on the ground in special schools. This study aimed to address the dearth of research which currently prevails in curriculum, accreditation, and transition pathways for students with ID attending special schools in Ireland. This chapter will also address the strengths and limitations of the research study and will outline the contribution this new body of knowledge has made to the specialised field of special education within the Irish education system.

6.2 Research Overview

This research focused on exploring, highlighting, and reflecting on existing knowledge which was central to the research themes of curriculum, accreditation, and transition pathways available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland. Chapter 1 detailed the rationale, aims and objectives behind this study and posed the research questions which provided the framework for the entire research. The

cohort of this research were students with mild intellectual disabilities in Senior Cycle, attending special schools in Ireland. Chapter 2 provided an outline of the theoretical framework which this research was constructed and review of pertinent literature on inclusion, inclusion policies, inclusive education, and inclusion and special education. The themes of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with ID in special schools emerged as key themes within the research. Shifts in societal and cultural views on disability have emphasised the fundamental right to education for all children. A more equitable system of education has developed. The UNCRPD has widened the evolving and ongoing international debate about how students with disabilities should best be educated. The Government of Ireland are now required to examine educational provision in Ireland considering their obligations and responsibilities under the UNCRPD (NCSE, 2019). Due to legislative changes, parental advocacy, and international developments since the 1990's the policy of inclusive education has shaped the landscape for special education in Ireland. However, significant gaps remain, in existing Irish education policy, regarding curricular programmes and accreditation pathways in which students with ID can engage at Senior Cycle and in the transition pathways available to students with ID post school. Ireland now faces the fundamental question about whether it wishes to implement a full inclusion policy, with investment and reconfiguration of supports and focus on how inclusive learning environments can be established.

Chapter 3 focused on exploring the design of the research methodology used to capture data throughout this study. The participation and inclusion of the voice of all stakeholders, including students, parents, principals and senior teachers, formed a significant aspect of the design and methodology of the research. Research findings were presented in Chapter 4 and indicated that most special schools offer a Senior Cycle programme for their students, which focuses on Junior Cycle Levels 2 and 3 and QQI Level 3 curricula and accreditation programmes. The majority of students in this research transitioned to a HSE training programme and the subject choice curriculum or accreditation programmes, with which students engaged, rarely impacted on the post career trajectory of students.

A thematic approach was used in Chapter 5 to analyse the findings. This research identified the need for a broadening of the curriculum, to include greater availability of programmes with a variety of accreditation pathways, moving more towards portfolio-based programmes and away from end of year final examinations. The discussion in Chapter 5 identified the need for a balance between exam-focused national post-primary curriculum and a flexibility which focuses on student needs and abilities. The lack of choice and options available post school, the lack of coherent transition pathways, the lack of targeted IEP planning for transition and the lack of Guidance Counsellors in special schools are hurdles which students with ID and their parents must contend with when trying to negotiate the challenging decision of post school transition pathways.

Chapter 6 outlines the findings of this research, and how this new knowledge builds upon previous research, and suggests a possible shift in existing curricular provision, educational support resources and accreditation programmes which could deliver a more improved, inclusive, balanced educational provision for students with ID in special schools in Ireland. This new knowledge may lead to more opportunities and choices for students with ID as they transition post school. Chapter 6 reflects on this new knowledge in terms of policy and practice in relation to curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with ID. In order to deliver a balanced critique of the findings reported in this research, the strengths and limitations of the study will be discussed.

6.3 Research Conclusions

Following reflection and consideration of the research study in its totality, it is now appropriate and beneficial to discuss the findings of this research, its addition to new knowledge in this field and the implications of the findings for existing policy and practice. Findings from this research study aim to illustrate and outline, reflect, and evaluate opportunities to highlight existing policies and develop best practices. The ethical aspects of this research were based on care and establishing a relationship with the stakeholders, which included students, parents, principals, and senior teachers in this specialised sector of special education. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986, 1999, 2005) ecology system provided the theoretical framework which enabled the research to develop themes within the ecological system and the research design. This theoretical framework approach adopted by this research study reflected the different levels of the societal and educational systems that impinge upon student's experience in their educational setting. Bronfenbrenner's ecology framework shows the influences, direct and indirect, on education provision for students with intellectual disabilities.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986, 1999, 2005) highlighted how student experiences are always at the centre of the system (the microsystem) while the Irish Education system and international policies are at the outer edge of the system (the macrosystem). Honest accounts of personal experiences provided a rich, insightful, integral aspect to the research findings. The tangled process of generating new knowledge directed that the researcher was aware of positionality and reflexivity. The origin of this research study was born from a place of personal interest, experience, and care for students with ID, in this specialized sector within the education system in Ireland. Analyzing the findings of this research, teasing them out and reflecting on them in terms of policy and practice has delivered new knowledge and a greater understanding of the research themes of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways.

6.4 A Review of the Provision of Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

The landscape of special education has seen dramatic shifts over the past several decades. A far back as the Special Education Review Committee (1993) shortcomings in curricula were identified in the provision of special education. The Education Act (1998) recognised that young people with disabilities should access educational provision on a basis equal to their non-disabled peers. Inclusive education was the core value of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was signed in 2007 and covers the rights to equal treatment and freedom from discrimination in a range of areas, including education. Eleven years later, in 2018, the Irish government ratified the UNCRPD. Banks and Shevlin (2021) state that many countries have developed education policies which aim to create more inclusive school environments, however, few countries currently comply with the UNCRPD's definition of inclusion as the education of students with special educational needs is conducted in special classes or special schools which is contrary to the principles of the UNCRPD and inclusion. The United Nations has made it clear that parallel systems are not compatible with its view of inclusion, academics and policymakers alike argue that inclusive education in Ireland is at a crossroads (Banks and Shevlin, 2021).

Lindsay (2007) highlighted that a major concern for an inclusive education policy has been that children's rights were compromised by special education, which segregated them from their developing peers and the mainstream curriculum and educational practices. Over recent years, Irish special education and mainstream education, while connected, had developed separately and appeared to run along parallel lines (McCoy et al. 2016). The findings from this research suggest that the policy of equal rights for all students in education may not be seen in practice for students with ID in special schools in Ireland. Feedback from the NCSE (2019) policy advice reported that the placement of a student in a separate specialized educational setting can have lifelong consequences for a student and there is clear

evidence that once students were placed in a special school, students rarely left this setting. Banks and Shevlin (2021) highlight how students with disabilities in mainstream classes are more likely to achieve better academic results and qualifications than those in special class settings and that they are also more likely to develop the social skills which will be valuable to them in later life. Lindsay (2007) states that inclusive education is a major policy initiative, designed to improve the educational opportunities for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

This research would venture to assert that inequality, rather than equality of education provision, may be the experience of students with ID in special schools in relation to the curricular, accreditation programmes and transition pathways available to their peers in mainstream. This research would suggest that the ratification by the Irish Government of the UNCRPD in 2018, which obliges states to ensure access to inclusive education, is not being seen on the ground in special schools, by students with ID. The vision for inclusive education in Ireland is not apparent in practice in special schools in Ireland today. The NCSE (2019) policy advice on special schools suggested that there is no reason why special schools should be located on a site separate from a mainstream school. Shevlin and Banks (2021) reported that inclusive education research to date has highlighted that the continued use, and expansion, of special classes and segregated settings is at odds with the prevailing inclusive policy narrative. The current thinking appears to be to provide the physical space, a unit or special class within mainstream schools, a support teacher and special needs assistants and see what happens instead of providing funding or resources to schools, not only for student supports but for building teacher capacity which encourages inclusive practice. It can be argued that systems of segregation remain (Banks and Shevlin, 2021).

The findings of this research suggest that a shared education campus, for mainstream and special post primary schools, would benefit all students from a diversity and inclusion standpoint and provide for the sharing of resources. A

shared educational campus for mainstream and special schools would enable access for all students to specialised teachers and specialised classrooms and equipment. This would level the playing field somewhat for students with ID, who endeavor to follow accreditation pathways and to have the equal opportunity to engage with a wide variety of academic and vocational practical subjects and to ensure that they have equal opportunities for continued educational progression in their choice of transition pathways post school.

Inclusive education is the core value of the EPSEN (2004) and refers to assisting students with SEN to leave school with the skills to participate in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent lives. Since ratification of the UNCRPD in 2018, Ireland's system of special education is being considered for full reform with the possibility of moving to a system of inclusive education and the removal of special schools and classes (Banks, 2021). Current and prevailing inclusion debates focuses on inclusive education being understood in relation to social justice (NCSE, 2018). The European Agency for Inclusive Education and Special Educational Needs (2015) views inclusive education as provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities for all learners in their local community, alongside their friends and peers. This research would suggest that the education policy of inclusion falls far short of the spirit of the EPSEN (2004) and the UNCRPD. While the Department of Education and Skills continues to promote and develop the policy of inclusion, in practice there exists an inequity and imbalance between the provision of mainstream education and the provision of special education with regard to the curricular and accreditation choices, resources, supports and opportunities available to students in mainstream and students with ID in special schools. This pattern of imbalances and inequality can limit the choices available for students with ID in special schools and thus may have repercussions on their lives after school and the opportunities which may be available to them.

The findings of this research indicate that the policy, promoted by the Department of Education and Skills of providing and developing an inclusive education system for all students and providing equal opportunities for engagement and participation for all students in special schools, can pose a significant challenge in practice for the Irish education system. This research suggests that special schools operate curriculum and accreditation programmes similar to mainstream schools. However, in practice these programmes are diluted and are implemented with degrees of modification including age of students completing programmes, range of curriculum offered, modified choice of subjects, varying degrees of access to specialized teachers, lack of progression curriculum to build on previous accreditation and lack of specialised guidance counsellors' support to assist with clear transition pathways and options post school.

Florian (2014) argues that the intention of the special education policy framework, is to ensure the right to education for those who would otherwise be excluded from schooling, has paradoxically created problems of inequality within education. This research would suggest that there exists inequality of education provision for students with ID in special schools in comparison to mainstream education provision. The consequences of a diluted, limited form of education provision available in special schools for students with ID minimise the opportunities for continuity of education in Senior Cycle, which limits post school options and access to other non-health board training and further education courses. This results in poor employment opportunities for students with ID post school as compared to the employment and training opportunities available to their non-disabled peers in mainstream education. This research indicates that the outcomes of the current inclusive education provision available in special schools are radically different from the education opportunities and provision available in mainstream education. Consequently, inequality exists in education provision, in employment opportunities and employability status in later life between students with ID in special schools and their non-disabled peers in mainstream.

This research indicates that there is little connection between curriculum and accreditation programmes students with ID pursue and the transition pathways options post school. The selection of curricula and accreditation programmes in practice does not influence or increase the post school options available to students with ID. There exists a presumption that students with ID, no matter what curricula or accreditation programmes they have completed, will traditionally transition to a HSE placement. This culture in special schools is dramatically different from the education provision and expectations which are present in mainstream schools where the vast majority of non-disabled students transition to higher and further education programmes.

6.5 Review of Research Questions

The following section will revisit the fundamental themes and research questions of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with ID in special schools in Ireland in light of the new knowledge highlighted by the findings of this research.

6.5.1 Research Question One - What curriculum is available for students with intellectual disability to engage with at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland?

Smyth et al. (2019) highlighted how the Irish education system affords discretion to schools over important aspects of organisation and process albeit within a highly centralised curriculum and assessment system. Smyth et al. (2019) further identifies that in policy and practice at school level the educational experiences for young people may vary significantly regarding the degree of subject choice, academic climate, level of student and parental involvement. These aspects of policy and practice have important consequences for educational participation and attainment of students (Smyth et al. (2019). This research would suggest that the autonomy of individual special schools to deliver curriculum and accreditation programmes results in a varied and individualised approach by each special school

and can result in potential inequalities in the availability of choices and opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities at Senior Cycle compared firstly to other special schools and secondly to their peers in mainstream schools.

Reflecting on the findings of this research, the provision of curriculum in special schools appears to be limited and unequal in comparison to the choices and options available to students in mainstream education. In practice in special schools this research identified that there was a lack of specialised teachers, such as music, home economics, science, woodwork and PE, and the lack of specialised equipment, such as science laboratories, home economics rooms, music rooms and woodwork rooms. This lack of resources and supports for special schools illustrates a gap in subject provision for students with ID in special schools as compared with students in mainstream schools. These inequalities and imbalances limit access to subjects for students with ID and therefore the accreditation programmes they can engage with and achieve within. The consequence of this inequality creates an imbalance in the transition options available to students with ID post school. This research highlighted evidence of a very small number of students with intellectual disabilities transferring to higher and further education post school while the vast majority of students with ID transitioned to a health-based service.

This research suggests that the consequences of a limited curriculum, limited subject options and limited choice of accreditation pathways negatively affects the choice of transition pathways and options available to students with ID post school. This limited choice of transition pathways post school limits their opportunities for employment. Students with ID in special schools endure modified, narrow, limited curriculum and accreditation programmes, resulting in low educational qualifications which affects their employment prospects and consequently their ability for financial independence and living an independent life as an adult.

Inclusion in education is both the means for, and a consequence of, school systems attempting to address issues of inequality by widening access and participation (Florian, 2014). This research would suggest that students with ID do not experience an inclusive education equal to their mainstream peers. In fact, the education provision for students with ID seems to be an afterthought in government policy, even though the Irish Government has committed to the principles of the UNCRPD and their view of quality education for all learners. It can be argued that systems of segregation remain in place due to a lethargic approach by the government to institute real reform and face the challenges of establishing mainstream pathways for every child (Banks and Shevlin, 2021).

6.5.2 Research Question Two - What are the accreditation outcomes for students with intellectual disability at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland?

Evidence from this research concurs with Squires et al. (2016) who reported that some students in special schools felt that they did not have the same examination opportunities as peers in mainstream. Rose et al. (2015) identified barriers to the establishment of inclusive learning environments in their longitudinal study which included knowledge and expertise involved in delivery of special educational provision. This research would concur with O'Mara et al. (2012) who stated that there needs to be a balance between meeting the standard criteria for accreditation and certification and preventing adapted curricula from becoming too narrow. The Education (Admission to Schools) Act, 2018 recommended the introduction of learning programmes at Levels 1 and 2 on the National Framework of Qualifications by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. The provision of accredited education programmes at varying levels within the NFQ allows for an opportunity for students with ID to engage with and participate in appropriate certification.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) are in the process of reviewing the existing Senior Cycle curriculum. Teachers highlighted that some aspects of Senior Cycle did not promote inclusion, as the existing Senior Cycle, which was more oriented towards academic rather than practical subjects, was seen as posing challenges for including young people with lower achievement levels and those with special educational needs (NCCA, 2018). This research suggests that the provision of education for students with ID could benefit from a recognised Senior Cycle accredited programme being implemented at Senior Cycle in special schools. This research highlights that most special schools deliver a school-designed '*Leaver's Programme*' that may not be recognised within the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ).

From a policy perspective, students with ID need to have equality of access to a continuum of accredited progression programmes in post primary schools equal to the curricula and accreditation opportunities of their peers in mainstream education. The review of the new Senior Cycle curriculum would benefit from the progress made in the new Junior Cycle Framework (2015), which focused on the implementation of Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes. This would ensure access to all learners to an appropriate curriculum and a continuity of curriculum for students with special educational needs at Junior and Senior Cycle. Presently, after completing Junior Cycle Level 2 there is no appropriate continuation programme at Senior Cycle. This is a good example of how haphazard the curriculum and accreditation programmes for students with ID can be at post primary level, as compared with the curricular and accreditation pathways available to their mainstream peers. Again, this highlights the inequality and imbalance that exists for students with ID when compared to their counterparts in mainstream education.

The Education Act (1998) obliges schools to ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career options. The Indecon Report (2019) refers to this guidance as leading to effective choices and decisions about their lives and that post primary schools have a structured response to the educational, vocational and personal needs for the students. From a policy perspective the Department of Education and Skills has allocated no guidance counsellors for special schools. The findings of this research concur with Aston et al. (2021) and highlight the existence of an obvious gap and inequality in the policy of inclusive education by the lack of provision of guidance counsellors in special schools. Following interrogation of the findings from this research, no principal, senior teacher, student or parent identified a guidance counsellor as assisting them in the challenging area of transition pathways post school.

This research suggests that providing a guidance counsellor role within special schools in Ireland could be of immense benefit to students and parents as they negotiate their way through the transition pathways available post school. The support of a guidance counsellor may also highlight the options of transition pathways available to students with ID as opposed to the presumption that the majority of students with ID progress to HSE training courses rather than higher or further education or employment as is the norm for students in mainstream education.

6.5.3 Research Question Three - What are the transition pathways available to students with intellectual disability post school?

The NCSE (2019) stated that integral to the education of students with ID in special school is the Pupil Personal Plan (PPP) or formerly an Individual Educational Plan (IEP). Pupil Personal Plan should be a provision for all students with special educational needs (NCSE, 2015). However, the outcomes from these pupil personal plans are not formally collected. While PPP's can facilitate the ongoing reviews of educational progress for students with ID, the educational targets and progress placement decisions are rarely, if ever, reviewed. In practice, post school plans, options and programmes are not a required aspect of a PPP. The NDA/NCSE (2017) report identified gaps in support for preparing young people with disabilities for life after school and transition planning could be incorporated into a collaboratively developed pupil personal plan involving the young person, their family, resource teacher, special needs assistant and Guidance Counsellor.

Aston et al. (2021) reported that students with ID are presently not supported nationally with targeted progressions into further education or training that builds on their own achievements. The future education, training and career options for students with ID are limited based on a lack of suitable progression options outside of the traditional health service based adult day centres or vocational training centres (Aston et al. 2021). A good practice model from the US focused on implementing an Individual Transition Plan in the final three years of post primary education. This research suggests that PPP's would be more beneficial to students and parents if transition plans were a focused target for Senior Cycle students. This research reported that the transition procedures and planning could be improved through earlier intervention and in-depth discussions with parents and students and the personnel involved in transition planning.

In this study there was evidence that no student progressed to higher education. Grigal et al. (2012) highlighted that, if attending a further and higher education programme is 'seldom or never' listed as a goal on a student's Personal Pupil Plan, then it is doubtful that the outcome will ever occur. This research would suggest that students may not have participated in a transition plan which incorporated further and higher education as a realistic option for students with ID post school. Formulating a PPP's should involve negotiating a plan that respects students' personal choices and opens up rather than closes down possibilities for them (EADSNE, 2002). Grigal (2012) and McGuckin et al. (2013) state that if transition planning to higher education is not incorporated in the PPP process, then the target is often not achieved. This research did not have the scope to review PPP's and the transition planning process for graduating students. Further study in this area could delve deeper into the connections, or lack of, between PPP targets and transitions pathway options.

The research findings suggest that being offered a place on a programme post school by the local HSE Officer may not reflect the most appropriate or successful placement available for every student. Issues such as funding, location and resources may dictate a post school placement for a student with ID as opposed to continuing accreditation programmes. The scope of this research did not involve follow-up interviews with students and their parents after they graduated from their post primary special school. The findings suggest that being allocated a placement or having limited options does not equate with a successful transition placement. The scope of this research did not pertain to investigating the process of transition to HSE placements after students leave post primary education. The findings indicate that future study should investigate the placement procedures on a post school programme by referencing the criteria, aims and objectives of such a placement. NDA/NCSE (2017) states that bridging the gap between schools and post school settings is considered to be essential in fostering adequate preparation for movement to any new settings.

Information and guidance could assist in bridging the gap between post primary school and the transition pathways available post school. The research findings would suggest that the NCSE provide specific information on transition pathways available for students with ID leaving special schools in Ireland. This cohort is a unique group of students facing many unique challenges. Support from the NCSE for students, parents and school stakeholders could provide education-based information and transition pathways and supports available for students in addition to the HSE health-based support structures.

This research would suggest that schools make available course literature designed to provide a comprehensive outline of transition pathways that are available to the students and their families. This could take the form of a 'Careers Day' held annually within the school. This would give all stakeholders an opportunity to view and discuss the transition pathways available post school. These suggested improvements, which became evident from the findings of this research, concur with the NCSE (2014) recommendations which highlighted that the transition from schools can be eased through pre-transition visits, ongoing support during and after transition by specialised school staff, and transition booklets adapted for students and their families.

6.6 Strengths and Limitations of Research

As with any study, there is no research that is exempt from some limitations. The research was designed to minimise bias and subjectivity in order to collect data that was objective, honest and relevant to the research questions. The findings and observations of this research are cognisant of the limited sample of special schools, students, parents and case study schools involved in this study. The research findings are not proposed to be generalisable across all special schools in Ireland. The findings are not intended to reflect the general situation in special schools in Ireland but to offer a snapshot of what is occurring in special schools presently and add to the literature of this unique cohort of students participating in this educational environment.

6.6.1 Strengths

This research is the first of its kind in Ireland, investigating and discovering new knowledge on the themes of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with ID in special schools in Ireland. All special schools in Ireland catering for students with ID were invited to participate in this research. This study is timely as it took place when there is much shifting in the landscape of special education and curricular and accreditation developments contained in discussion documents formulated by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE, 2019).

Upon reflection, this research can hold its own on merit and has considerable strengths. It has allowed, for the first time in an Irish context, the opportunity to investigate the academic programmes, accreditation outcomes and transition pathways available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland. The researcher was, at all times, mindful of the vulnerability of this cohort of students. The focus group student interview questionnaires were designed to be clear, concise and easily understood. Key visuals were used to aid comprehension and processing time was allocated to ensure participants had sufficient time to prepare and deliver their responses. These amendments to the questionnaire format were

aimed to encourage student voice and participation. Often the voice of students in special schools is absent and decisions are made by adults. It is good practice to directly involve the students in a meaningful way in the decision-making process of their education. The research design framework focused on capturing all relevant voices, where possible, for this study. Being mindful, respectful and consulting all stakeholders added an authenticity to the research findings. The new knowledge in this research could better inform the inclusive education policy of the Department of Education and Skills. The findings have highlighted gaps, inequalities and imbalances in the current policy. The findings of this research aim to highlight how better connections between special education and mainstream education could balance some of the inequalities which are present.

6.6.2 Limitations

Cosgrove et al. (2018) identified the limitations of using any questionnaire-based survey which involves self-reporting, as this instrument can be prone to subjectivity bias. Questionnaires were used in Phases One and Two of the research. The findings of this research were analysed and reflected upon with knowledge of subjective bias. In addition, Squires et al. (2016) emphasised how researchers need to be cognisant of how students are selected for involvement in case study semi-structured focus groups. Qualitative data provides deeper insights into students' realities. The researcher had very little control over which students were selected to participate in the semi structured interview.

This research was subject to teacher selection of students to participate in the semi- structured focus groups. To somewhat address this issue, the researcher was aware that there was potential bias in the selection of focus groups participants and also there may be an under representation of students with communication and behavioural problems from the selected case study participants. There was difficulty in getting special schools to participate in a case study. Principals rejected

the invitation to participate in the research, based on time, GDPR and relevance of their students to the research. Some schools were reluctant to get involved in a case study due to the profile of their students and the limitations in their students' cognitive and communication abilities. This highlights how the student's voice is often in the hands of other stakeholders, such as parents and teachers and that the views of students with ID can be overlooked.

The classification of students with special educational needs was problematic. The Department of Education Special School List 2017 formed the framework for the entire research. Based on this list, there was no way of differentiating between children with mild, moderate and severe GLD. The National Association of Boards of Management for Special Education (NABMSE) assisted in categorising the 137 special schools listed by the Department of Education and Skills. A total of seventy-seven special schools were identified as catering for student with mild general learning difficulties. This research does not aim to generalise across all special schools; however, a significant response rate of 51% was achieved in the nationwide questionnaire targeting principals in special schools catering for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

6.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research provides a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the research questions curriculum, accreditation, and transition pathways available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland. This research journey has highlighted the imbalance and inequalities which exist in practice in an education policy which has inclusion as its core value. This research is pertinent and relevant to the discussion on special education currently in Ireland. The findings of this research suggest that students with ID in special schools do not have access to the same educational opportunities as their peers in mainstream; nor do they have access to the same supports, resources and choices available to students attending mainstream schools. The limited choice of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways available to students with ID in special education provision may have negative lifelong implications.

As a result of this research, special education provision could benefit from providing a continuum of curriculum and accreditation programmes which students with ID can progress through Senior Cycle in special schools. Instead of special and mainstream education provisions running along two parallel tracks, it may be beneficial for both sectors to share their resources and expertise. This could attempt to right the imbalance and inequalities which exist now. Special education has undergone dramatic changes in the last twenty years and the policy of inclusive education is a positive, rights-based government policy. However, the core of inclusive education is the right to education for all students. Education policy discussions needs to advocate for students with ID in special schools. Special education should not be seen as a lesser form of education due to lack of resources, limited curriculum, limited accreditation, limited transition pathway options and presumptions that the overwhelming majority of students with ID will only transfer to Health Board training courses.

Students with ID are being directed along a pathway which may not be the most successful option for them nor give them the best opportunities for employment and independence in later life. The Irish education system needs to promote aspirations and expectations for all its students, whether in mainstream or special education provisions. The Department of Education and Skills (2014) stated that a key aspiration for pupils with special needs is that they will, on completion of their school-based education, be able to graduate as young independent adults. This aspiration has a long way to go before it becomes a reality for students with ID who attend special schools in Ireland today.

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List of Supporting Documents/Appendices for Research Design

Data Collection Instrument	Participant
Phase One of Research	
Questionnaire 1	Questionnaire to 91 Special Schools
Information letter to principals	
Phase Two of Research	
Questionnaire 2	Student Questionnaire
Student Questionnaire information sheet	For students
Student Questionnaire consent form	For students
Student Questionnaire information form	For parents
Student Questionnaire consent form	For parents
Questionnaire 3	Parent Questionnaire
Parent Questionnaire information form	For parents
Parent Questionnaire consent form	For parents
Phase Three of Research	
Interview information form	For principal
Interview consent form	For principal
Interview information form	For parent
Interview consent form	For parent
Focus group student interview information	For parents
Focus group student interview consent form	For parents
Focus group student interview information	For students
Focus group student interview consent form	For students

Appendices

Appendix 1	Information for Student Questionnaire
Appendix 2	Parent Information for Student Questionnaire
Appendix 3	Participant Information Questionnaire 1
Appendix 4	Student Questionnaire Consent Form
Appendix 5	Parent Consent Form for Student Questionnaire
Appendix 6	Consent Form for Parent Questionnaire
Appendix 7	Parent Questionnaire Information
Appendix 8	Principal Interview Information
Appendix 9	Consent Form for Principal Interview
Appendix 10	Information for Focus Group Student Interviews
Appendix 11	Student Interview Consent Form
Appendix 12	Parent Information Sheet for Student Interview
Appendix 13	Parent Consent Form for Student Interview
Appendix 14	Parent Interview Information
Appendix 15	Consent Form for Parent Interview
Appendix 16	Questionnaire 1 – Principal/Senior Teacher
Appendix 17	Student Questionnaire
Appendix 18	Parent Questionnaire
Appendix 19	Principal Interview Schedule
Appendix 20	Senior Teacher Interview Schedule
Appendix 21	Focus Group Student Interview Schedule



Appendix 1

Information for Student Questionnaire

Dear Student

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. I would like to explain why this research is important and why your opinions and experiences are valuable. It is important to read and understand this information before beginning the questionnaire. If you have any questions about any part of the questionnaire, or need help in understanding the questions, please let your teacher know. Thank you in advance for your time, experiences and opinions. All are greatly appreciated.

The research is being carried out by Joan McGrath and is part of my PhD programme in Trinity College Dublin. The aim and objective of the research is to focus on the following questions:

1. What curriculum is available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland?
2. What are the accreditation outcomes for students with ID in special schools?
3. What transition pathways are available to students with ID in special schools after they leave post primary education?

The Student Questionnaire will take approximately 8-10 minutes to complete. The Student Questionnaire will focus on collecting students' thoughts, experiences and opinions on their time in school. All the questionnaires will be stored securely and in accordance with up-to-date GDPR. No names of any schools, teachers, students or parents will be used in any of the reports.

Up to the point of data entry, students have the right to withdraw from the research without giving a reason. There is no payment for completing the questionnaire and attending focus group.

Further information can be obtained by contacting:

Joan McGrath, PhD Researcher, Trinity College Dublin.

Appendix 2

Parent Information for Student Questionnaire

Your son or daughter is being invited to part take in a research study of the academic outcomes of students with intellectual difficulties in special schools and what academic transition pathways are available to students with intellectual difficulties once they leave post primary education. I am conducting this research as part of my PhD study in Trinity College Dublin.

I would like to explain to you why this research is being undertaken and how your child's participation will help. Please take some time to read the following information. Should you require further clarification on any issue outlined, or would like more information, please contact the researcher. All contact details are outlined at the end of this form. Thank you in advance for your time, experiences and opinions. All are greatly appreciated.

Who will conduct the research?

The research is being carried out by Joan McGrath and forms the data for a PhD in Trinity College Dublin.

What is the aim of the research?

The aim and objective of the research is to focus on the following questions:

1. What curriculum is available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland?
2. What are the accreditation outcomes for students with ID in special schools?
3. What transition pathways are available to students with ID in special schools after they leave post primary education?

Why has your child been asked to participate?

Contributions from students will form an important aspect of gaining insight into the research questions. Students will be asked to complete a questionnaire which will focus on collecting data on policy and practice, their experiences, curriculum, accreditations and transition pathways. Student questionnaires will take approximately 8-10 minutes to complete.

What will happen to the data collected?

Data collected from completed questionnaires will be stored without any identifying material in a password-protected computer folder. No names will be used.

Quotations which give an insight into practice, and personal experiences will be used without the participant being identified.

How is anonymity maintained?

No names of any schools, teachers, students or parents will be used in any of the reports. All participants will be entered as a number for analysis.

What happens if a participant changes their mind?

All parents will be given an information sheet and asked to sign a consent form for their child to participate in the research. However, both parents and students will have the right to withdraw, prior to data entry from the research without explanation. There is no payment or benefit-in-kind associated with participating in this research.

Where will the research take place?

Questionnaires will be administered during school time, at a time which will cause least amount of disruption to their school day. School teachers will assist in distributing the student questionnaires.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?

The research will form the basis of the research gathered for a PhD thesis. The findings will be available to be published in academic papers so that other people and organisations can benefit from the findings and recommendations.

Garda Vetting

The researcher is a registered member of the Teaching Council and has up to date Garda vetting.

Contact for further information

Further information can be obtained by contacting:

Joan McGrath, PhD Researcher, Trinity College Dublin.

Appendix 3

Participant Information Questionnaire 1

PhD Research – School Questionnaire

Dear Principal,

I am a teacher in St. Augustine's Special School, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, with 21 years teaching experience. My teaching career has steered me towards special education, and for the past 8 years I have been working with senior students (aged 16-18) with Intellectual Difficulties (ID). As part of my PhD study at Trinity College Dublin, I am conducting research, under the supervision of Professor Michael Shevlin, which seeks to examine academic achievement, outcomes and transition pathways of students with ID in their final year of post primary education in special schools.

I would greatly appreciate it if the enclosed questionnaire could be completed by a *Senior Cycle teacher* in your school or by the *principal*. The questionnaire should take approximately 25 minutes to complete. All information from participants will be treated anonymously by the researcher and participants' identities will be randomly assigned ID numbers to protect their anonymity. I am aware that this is a very busy time of year for schools; however, your contribution, experiences and opinions would be very welcome.

What is the study about?

The aim and objective of my PhD research is to focus on the following questions:

1. What curriculum is available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland?
2. What are the accreditation outcomes for students with ID in special schools?
3. What transition pathways are available to students with ID in special schools after they leave post primary education?

The research to date has involved an investigation of current Irish and International literature, which has enabled the research design to focus on the acquisition of new knowledge in this field. The target population of the research is students with intellectual difficulties in their last year in post primary education in special schools. The core methodology of this research is questionnaires, interviews and two case studies of special schools catering for students with intellectual difficulties.

What is the rationale for the study?

The National Council for Curriculum Assessment (2007) consultation process identified a gap in the curriculum, assessment and certification provision at Junior Cycle for students within the low mild to moderate range of general learning disabilities. There remains a considerable issue over the assessment of students with ID and how their achievements are recognised when they leave post primary education in special schools.

What are the benefits of this study?

Presently, there is evidence of much variability within and among schools in relation to the quantity and quality of assessment data (Douglas et al., 2014). Douglas et al. (2014) recommended the need for further empirical research on pupil outcomes in the Irish context. Although Cosgrove et al. (2014) identified that much evidence was collated at class and school level, apart from standardised test results, much information gathered is not structured to enable national level analysis. O'Mara et al. (2012) highlights that educational outcomes for students with ID are not systematically reported or tracked in Ireland. The findings of this study will aid identification of accreditation that is being achieved by students with ID and show what transition pathways they are following on completion of post-primary education.

What happens with this information?

This research will fall under the new GDPR regulations. Data will be stored and destroyed in line with the relevant Irish Data Protection legislation

<https://www.dataprotection.ie/docs/GDPR/1623.htm>. The data will be stored on a secure, encrypted computer file. Data will not be stored on cloud services, which

are not GDPR compliant. On completion of this research the findings will be written up for a PhD thesis.

The findings of the research will be widely disseminated among policymakers and practitioners. The findings will provide information within an Irish context on the levels and types of progress made by students with ID as they leave post primary education in special schools. It is likely that policymakers, parents, young people with ID and their teachers will find this information valuable.

What if you have more questions?

If you have any questions about this study, I would be happy to talk about the research in further detail. Please return completed questionnaires as soon as possible, preferably before _____.

Many thanks for this opportunity to gather real, valuable data in this area.

Kind regards,

Joan McGrath,
PhD Researcher,
Trinity College Dublin



Appendix 4

Student Questionnaire Consent Form

If you have read the *Student Information Sheet* and are happy to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

Student Questionnaire Consent Form

I confirm that

1. I have read the attached student information sheet. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, have been given opportunities to ask questions and these questions clarified.
2. I understand that taking part in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw consent, up to point of data entry, without giving a reason.
3. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes

Student name: _____

Signature of student: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 5

Parent Consent Form for Student Questionnaire

If you have read the *Parent Information for Student Questionnaire* and are happy for your son/daughter to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

Parent Consent Form for Student Questionnaire

I confirm that

1. I have read the attached *Parent Information for Student Questionnaire*. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, have been given opportunities to ask questions and these questions clarified.
2. I understand that taking part in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw consent up to the point of data entry without giving a reason.
3. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes
4. I agree to my son or daughter taking part in the above research

Pupil's name: _____

Name of parent: _____

Date: _____

Signature of parent: _____

Appendix 6

Consent Form for Parent Questionnaire

If you have read the *Parent Questionnaire Information Sheet* and are happy to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

Consent Form for Parent Questionnaire

I confirm that

1. I have read the attached parent questionnaire information sheet. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, have been given opportunities to ask questions and these questions clarified.
2. I understand that taking part in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw consent up to the point of data entry without giving a reason.
3. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes

Name of parent: _____

Date: _____

Signature of parent: _____

Appendix 7

Parent Questionnaire Information

You are being invited to take part in a research study which forms part of my PhD research at Trinity College Dublin. Please take some time to read the following information. Should you require further clarification on any issue outlined or would like more information please contact the researcher. Thank you in advance for your time, experiences and opinions. All are greatly appreciated.

Who will conduct the research?

The research is being carried out by Joan McGrath and forms the data for a PhD in Trinity College Dublin.

What is the aim of the research?

The aim and objective of the research is to focus on the following questions:

1. What curriculum is available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland?
2. What are the accreditation outcomes for students with ID in special schools?
3. What transition pathways are available to students with ID in special schools after they leave post primary education?

Why have you been asked to participate?

Contributions from parents will form an important aspect of gaining insight into the research questions. Parents will be asked to complete a parent questionnaire which will focus on collecting data on policy and practice, your experiences, curriculum, accreditations and transition pathways. The parent questionnaire will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

What will happen to the data collected?

Data collected from completed questionnaires will be stored without any identifying material in a password-protected computer folder. No names will be used. Quotations which give an insight into practice and personal experiences will be used without any parent being identified.

How is anonymity maintained?

No names of any schools, teachers, students or parents will be used in any of the reports. All students will be entered as a number for analysis. All data will be securely stored electronically.

What happens if a parent changes their mind?

Parents have the right to withdraw from the research without explanation prior to point of data entry. There is no payment or benefit-in-kind associated with participating in this research.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?

The research will form the basis of the research gathered for a PhD thesis. The findings will be available to be published in academic papers so that other people and organisations can benefit from the findings and recommendations.

Garda Vetting

The researcher is a registered member of the Teaching Council and has up to date Garda vetting.

Further information can be obtained by contacting:

Joan McGrath, PhD Researcher, Trinity College Dublin

Appendix 8

Principal Interview Information

You are being invited to take part in a research study which forms part of my PhD research at Trinity College Dublin. I would like to explain why this research is important and what your participation would involve. Please take some time to read the following information. Should you require further clarification on any issue outlined or would like more information please contact the researcher. All contact details are outlined at the end of this form. Thank you in advance for your time, experiences and opinions. All are greatly appreciated.

Who will conduct the research?

The research is being carried out by Joan McGrath and forms the data for a PhD in Trinity College Dublin.

What is the aim of the research?

The aim and objective of the research is to focus on the following questions:

1. What curriculum is available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland?
2. What are the accreditation outcomes for students with ID in special schools?
3. What transition pathways are available to students with ID in special schools after they leave post primary education?

Why have you been asked to participate?

Contributions from participants will form an important aspect of gaining insight into the research questions. Principals will be asked to participate in an interview which will focus on collecting data on policy and practice, your experiences, curriculum, accreditations and transition pathways. The principal interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete.

What will happen to the data collected?

The principal interview will be digitally recorded and transcribed. Data will be stored without any identifying material in a password protected computer folder. No names will be used. Quotations which give an insight into practice and personal experiences will be used without any parent being identified.

How is anonymity maintained?

No names of any schools, teachers, students or parents will be used in any of the reports. All data will be securely stored electronically.

What happens if a participant changes their mind?

Participants have the right to withdraw from the research without explanation prior to point of data entry. There is no payment or benefit-in-kind associated with participating in this research.

Where will the research take place?

Interviews will take place within the school environment and at a time which will cause least disruption to participant's day.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?

The research will form the basis of the research gathered for a PhD thesis. The findings will be available to be published in academic papers so that other people and organisations can benefit from the findings and recommendations.

Garda Vetting

The researcher is a registered member of the Teaching Council and has up to date Garda vetting.

Contact for further information

Further information can be obtained by contacting:

Joan McGrath, PhD Researcher, Trinity College Dublin.

Appendix 9

Consent Form for Principal Interview

If you have read the *Principal Interview Information* and are happy to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

Consent Form for Principal Interview

I confirm that

1. I have read the attached principal interview information. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, have been given opportunities to ask questions and these questions clarified.
2. I understand that taking part in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw consent up to the point of data entry without giving a reason.
3. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes
4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded and transcribed.

Name of Principal: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Principal: _____



Appendix 10

Information for Focus Group Student Interviews

Dear Student

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. I would like to explain why this research is important and why your opinions and experiences are valuable. It is important to read and understand this information before beginning the questionnaire. If you have any question about any part of the questionnaire or need help in understanding the questions please let your teacher know. Thank you in advance for your time, experiences and opinions. All are greatly appreciated.

The research is being carried out by Joan McGrath and is part of my PhD programme in Trinity College Dublin. The aim and objective of the research is to focus on the following questions:

1. What curriculum is available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland?
2. What are the accreditation outcomes for students with ID in special schools?
3. What transition pathways are available to students with ID in special schools after they leave post primary education?

The Focus Group Student Interviews will take approximately 30-40 minutes to complete and will focus on collecting student's thoughts, experiences and opinions on their time in school. The interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed. All the questionnaires will be stored securely and in accordance with current GDPR regulations.

No names of any schools, teachers, students or parents will be used in any of the reports.

Up to the point of data entry students have **the right to withdraw** from the research without giving a reason. There is no payment for completing the questionnaire and attending focus group. Further information can be obtained by contacting:

Joan McGrath, PhD Researcher, Trinity College Dublin.



Appendix 11

Student Interview Consent Form

If you have read the *Student Interview Information* and are happy to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

Student Interview Consent Form

I confirm that

1. I have read the attached student interview information. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, have been given opportunities to ask questions and these questions clarified.
2. I understand that taking part in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw consent without giving a reason, up to the point of entry.
3. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes
4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded and transcribed.

Student name: _____

Signature of student: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 12

Parent Information for Student Interview

Your son or daughter is being invited to part take in a research study of the academic outcomes of students with intellectual difficulties in special schools and what academic transition pathways are available to students with intellectual difficulties once they leave post primary education. I am conducting this research as part of my PhD study in Trinity College Dublin.

I would like to explain to you why this research is being undertaken and how your child's participation will help. Please take some time to read the following information. Should you require further clarification on any issue outlined or would like more information please contact the researcher. All contact details are outlined at the end of this form. Thank you in advance for your time, experiences and opinions. All are greatly appreciated.

Who will conduct the research?

The research is being carried out by Joan McGrath and forms the data for a PhD in Trinity College Dublin.

What is the aim of the research?

The aim and objective of the research is to focus on the following questions:

1. What curriculum is available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland?
2. What are the accreditation outcomes for students with ID in special schools?
3. What transition pathways are available to students with ID in special schools after they leave post primary education?

Why has your child been asked to participate?

Contributions from students will form an important aspect of gaining insight into the research questions. Students will be asked to participate in a focus group. This focus group will consist of interviews with voluntary students. The focus group interviews will take about 30-40 minutes. The focus of the interviews will concentrate collecting data on individual student's experiences within their school, the curriculum, accreditations they have achieved and transition pathways they wish to follow.

What will happen to the data collected?

Data collected from the focus group interviews will be stored without any identifying material in a password-protected computer folder. The interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed. No names will be used. Quotations which give an insight into practice and personal experiences will be used without the participant being identified.

How is anonymity maintained?

No names of any schools, teachers, students or parents will be used in any of the reports. All participants will be entered as a number for analysis.

What happens if a participant changes their mind?

All parents will be given an information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. However, both parents and students will have the right to withdraw, prior to data entry from the research without explanation. There is no payment or benefit-in-kind associated with participating in this research.

Where will the research take place?

Focus group student interviews will take place within their familiar school environment and at a time which is least disruptive to their school day. The support of their teacher will assist in facilitating the interview process.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?

The research will form the basis of the research gathered for a PhD thesis. The findings will be available to be published in academic papers so that other people and organisations can benefit from the findings and recommendations.

Garda Vetting

The researcher is a registered member of the Teaching Council and has up to date Garda vetting.

Contact for further information

Further information can be obtained by contacting:

Joan McGrath, PhD Researcher, Trinity College Dublin.

Appendix 13

Parent Consent Form for Student Interview

If you have read the *Parent Information for Student Interview* and are happy for your son/daughter to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

Parent Consent Form for Student Interview

I confirm that

1. I have read the attached parent information for student interview. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, have been given opportunities to ask questions and these questions clarified.
2. I understand that taking part in the study is voluntary and that I and/or my son/daughter are free to withdraw consent up to the point of data entry, without giving a reason.
3. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes
4. I agree to my son/daughter's interview being audio recorded and transcribed.
5. I agree to my son or daughter taking part in the above research.

Pupil's name: _____

Name of parent: _____

Date: _____

Signature of parent: _____

Appendix 14

Parent Interview Information

You are being invited to take part in a research study which forms part of my PhD research at Trinity College Dublin. I would like to explain why this research is important and what your participation would involve. Please take some time to read the following information. Should you require further clarification on any issue outlined or would like more information please contact the researcher. All contact details are outlined at the end of this form. Thank you in advance for your time, experiences and opinions. All are greatly appreciated.

Who will conduct the research?

The research is being carried out by Joan McGrath and forms the data for a PhD in Trinity College Dublin.

What is the aim of the research?

The aim and objective of the research is to focus on the following questions:

1. What curriculum is available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland?
2. What are the accreditation outcomes for students with ID in special schools?
3. What transition pathways are available to students with ID in special schools after they leave post primary education?

Why have you been asked to participate?

Contributions from participants will form an important aspect of gaining insight into the research questions. Parents will be asked to participate in an interview which will focus on collecting data on policy and practice, your experiences, curriculum, accreditations and transition pathways. The Parent interview will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

What will happen to the data collected?

The Parent interview will be digitally recorded and transcribed. Data will be stored without any identifying material in a password protected computer folder. No names will be used. Quotations which give an insight into practice and personal experiences will be used without any parent being identified.

How is anonymity maintained?

No names of any schools, teachers, students or parents will be used in any of the reports. All data will be securely stored electronically.

What happens if a participant changes their mind?

Participants have the right to withdraw from the research without explanation, prior to point of data entry. There is no payment or benefit-in-kind associated with participating in this research.

Where will the research take place?

Interviews will take place within the school environment and at a time which will cause least disruption to participant's day.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?

The research will form the basis of the research gathered for a PhD thesis. The findings will be available to be published in academic papers so that other people and organisations can benefit from the findings and recommendations.

Garda Vetting

The researcher is a registered member of the Teaching Council and has up to date Garda vetting.

Contact for further information

Further information can be obtained by contacting:

Joan McGrath, PhD Researcher, Trinity College Dublin.

Appendix 15

Consent Form for Parent Interview

If you have read the *Parent Interview Information* and are happy to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

Consent Form for Parent Interview

I confirm that

1. I have read the attached parent interview information. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, have been given opportunities to ask questions and these questions clarified.
2. I understand that taking part in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw consent up to the point of data entry without giving a reason.
3. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes
4. I agree to my interview being audio recorded and transcribed

Name of parent: _____

Date: _____

Signature of parent: _____

Appendix 16

Questionnaire 1 – Principal/Senior Teacher

Part 1: Demographics

Name of School: _____

Address of School: _____

Roll No: _____

School Tel No.: _____

School E-Mail: _____

Q1. What is your position within the school?

Please tick one box only

Principal	
Deputy Principal	
Teacher	
Other (please specify)	

Q2. How many years are you teaching?

Please tick one box only

0 - 5	
6 - 10	
11 – 15	
16 - 20	
More than 20 years	

Q3. How many years are you teaching in this school?	
Please tick one box only	
0 - 5	
6 - 10	
11 – 15	
16 - 20	
More than 20 years	

Q4. How would you describe your school context?	
Please tick one box only	
Urban/City	
Urban/ Small Town	
Rural	
Other (please specify)	

Q5. For what gender does your school cater?	
Please tick one box only	
Girls Only	
Boys Only	
Co-Educational	
Other (Please specify)	

Q6. School Size	
Please tick one box only	
0 – 49	
50 - 99	
100 - 200	
201 – 300	
300+	

Q7. How would you describe your school?	
Please tick one box only	
Primary only	
Post Primary only	
Primary and Post-Primary	
Other	
Please explain your answer	

Q8. Does your school have a Senior Cycle post primary section?	
Please tick one box only	
Yes	
No	
Other	
Please explain your answer	

*If you have answered **yes to Q8** please continue with the questionnaire.*

Q9. Please provide specific numbers of students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) who are in Senior Cycle in your school?	
Male	
Female	
Total	

Q10. Please provide specific numbers of students with ID who have completed senior cycle in your school in the specified years?				
	2013	2014	2015	2016
Male				
Female				
Total				
Comment				

Q11. What are the primary disabilities of students in senior cycle in your school?	
Pick tick what category applies to your students (more than one category may be ticked)	
Autism/Autistic Spectrum Disorder	
Mild General Learning Disability	
Moderate General Learning Disability	
Specific Speech and Language Disorder	
Hearing Impairment	
Specific Learning Disability	
Multiple Disabilities	
Severe/Profound General Learning Disabilities	
Severe Emotional Disturbance	
Emotional Disturbance	
Other (Please specify and explain your answer)	

Source: NCSE 2015 types of NCSE Special classes in Primary and Post primary schools in Academic year 2014-15.

Part 2: Curriculum and Accreditation Options

Q12. What accreditation pathways can be followed in your school, by students with ID?

Please tick relevant boxes

Leaving Certificate	
Leaving Certificate Applied	
Junior Certificate Level 3	
Junior Certificate Level 2	
QQI/FETAC Awards Level 4	
QQI/FETAC Awards Level 3	
QQI/FETAC Awards Level 2	
In-House School Awards	
Other	

Please explain your answer

Q13 (a). Are students with ID in your school entered for state examinations?

Please tick one box only

Yes	
No	
Don't Know	

Comment

Q13 (b). If so, which examinations are available to students to take?							
Please identify what subjects are taught and at what level.							
Examination Level	Higher Level		Ordinary Level		Common Level	Foundation Level	
Examination	Junior Cert	Leaving Cert	Junior Cert	Leaving Cert	Junior Cert	Junior Cert	Leaving Cert
English							
Irish							
Mathematics							
CSPE							
History							
Geography							
Religion							
Science							
Home Economics							
Art							
Woodwork							
Technical Graphics							
French							
Others (please specify)							
Comment							

Q14 (a). Does your school participate in the JCSP Programme?	
Please tick one box only	
Yes	
No	
Don't Know	

Q14 (b). If you answered yes to Q14 (a) please comment on how effective the JCSP Programme is for students with ID in preparing them to achieve accreditation at Junior Cycle Level.

Comment

Q15. Parents in your school have an input into the education programmes in which their child participates.

Please tick one box only

Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know

Please give details

Q16. Does your school restrict the curriculum which would normally be available in mainstream schools?

Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know

Please explain your answer

Q17 (a). Can students follow two or more accreditation pathways at the same time?	
Please tick one box only	
Yes	
No	
Don't Know	
Comment	
If answered yes to Question 17 (a) please answer Question 17 (b)	

Q17 (b). What combination of accreditation pathways can be followed at the same time in your school?								
For example – Some students can follow a combination of LCA, Junior Cert Level 3 and FETAC Level 3 at the same time.								
	LC	LCA	JC Level 3	JC Level 2	QQI/ FETAC Level 4	QQI/ FETAC Level 3	QQI/ FETAC Level 2	In House
Leaving Certificate Applied			✓			✓		
Please tick relevant boxes								
	LC	LCA	JC Level 3	JC Level 2	QQI/ FETAC Level 4	QQI/ FETAC Level 3	QQI/ FETAC Level 2	In House
Leaving Certificate								
Leaving Certificate Applied								
Junior Certificate Level 3								
Junior Certificate Level 2								
QQI/FETAC Level 4								
QQI/FETAC Level 3								
QQI/FETAC Level 2								
In House Awards								
Other								
Please explain your answer								

Q18. Do all students with ID participate in accredited programmes in Senior Cycle?	
Please tick one box only	
Yes	
No	
Don't Know	

Q19 (a). Do any students with ID not participate, for whatever reason, in accredited programmes in Senior Cycle?	
Please tick one box only	
Yes	
No	
Don't Know	

Q19 (b). If you have answered yes to Q19 (a) what programmes are available to these students?
Comment

Q20. Please outline the accreditations students with ID have achieved in your school.				
Please complete the table				
Year achieving accreditation	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017
Total no. of students in senior cycle				
Total no. of students participating in accreditation programmes				
<i>No. of students participating in accreditation programmes</i>				
Leaving Certificate				
Leaving Certificate Applied				
Junior Certificate Level 3				
Junior Certificate Level 2				
QQI/FETAC Level 4				
QQI/FETAC Level 3				
QQI/FETAC Level 2				

Other (please specify)				
Comment				

Q21. Students with ID have a direct input into education programmes in which they can participate.				
Please tick one box only				
Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know
Please explain your answer				

Q22. Students with ID have a direct input into what subjects they can study?				
Please tick one box only				
Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know
Please explain your answer				

Q23. Procedures for the transition of students with ID from post primary school to further placement (Education/Employment) operate effectively within your school.				
Please tick one box				
Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know
Please explain your answer				

Q24. The availability of subject choice in your school can impact on post school career trajectory of your students with ID.				
Please tick one box				
Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know
Please explain your answer				

Q25. To where have final year students progressed after they have finished their post primary education?				
Please complete the table				
Year leaving post primary school	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017
Total no. of students				
No. of students transferring to each placement				
Further education (e.g. Post Leaving Certificate, Youthreach, Vocational Training Opportunities Schemes VTOS)				
Higher Education (e.g. Universities, Institutes of Technology, colleges of education)				
Vocational Training (e.g. apprenticeship, traineeships, specific skills training)				
HSE Rehabilitative Training and Adult Day Services (e.g. day care programmes, supported employment, sheltered work therapeutic)				
Employment				
No further placement				
Don't Know				
Other (please specify)				
Comment				

Source: Post-School Education and Training, 2014, NCSE

Q26. Who makes the decision regarding transition to further placement, after students with ID finish their post primary education?

Please explain your answer

Q27. Students are involved in the decision-making process regarding transition to further placement after their post primary education?

Please tick one box

Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know

Please explain your answer

Q28. Parents are involved in the decision-making process regarding transition of their son/daughter from post primary education.

Please tick *one* box

Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know

Please explain your answer

Part 3: Your Experience

Q29. The culture within your school encourages the participation levels of students with ID to achieve accreditation.

Please tick one box only

Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know

Please explain your answer

Q30 (a). Are you happy with the level of accreditation available for students in your school?

Please tick one box only

Yes	
No	
Don't Know	

Please explain your answer

Q30 (b). If yes, how is this achieved?

Comment

Q31. All students are encouraged by your school to have high aspirations about their learning in your school.				
Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know
Please explain your answer				

Q32. Do barriers to participation of students achieving accreditation exist in your school?	
Please tick one box only	
Yes	
No	
Don't Know	
Please explain your answer	

Q33. Your school has a good reputation for encouraging academic success.				
Please tick one box only				
Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know
Please explain your answer				

Q34. Would you be willing to participate in an interview to explore the research questions outlined in the covering letter for this research?

Please tick one box only

Yes

No

Q35. Would your school be willing to participate in a focus group to explore the research questions outlined in the covering letter of this research?

Please tick one box only

Yes

No

Q36. Would your school be willing to participate in a case study to explore the research questions in this research?

Please tick one box only

Yes

No

Contact Details

Thank you for your time, opinions and comments.

All opinions and comments are welcome and valued.



Appendix 17

Student Questionnaire

Q1. How long have you been coming to this school?	
Please tick (✓) one box only	
1 -3 years	
4 -6 years	
7- 10 years	

Q2. In what year will you be leaving this school?	
Please tick (✓) one box only	
2020	
2021	
2022	

Q3. How would you rate your school in the following areas					
Please place a tick (✓) in the box you agree with					
	5 Extremely Good	4 Very Good	3 Quite good	2 Somewhat good	1 Not good
Teaching					
Supporting students to learn					
Preparing for the world of work					
Developing social skills					
Preparing for examinations					
Developing Independent living skills					
Subjects available					

Q4. Please tick (✓) what subjects you study in school?	
English	
Irish	
Maths	
CSPE	
History	
Geography	
Religion	
Art	
Home Economics	
Science	
Woodwork	
Technical Graphics	
French	
Wellness	
Please write in any other subjects you do	

Q5. Are there any other programmes/subjects you would like to study in school?

Q6. Are you sitting exams this year?		
Please tick one box only		
 Yes	 No	 Don't Know

Q7. What exams are they?	
Please tick (✓)	
Junior Cycle Level 2	
Junior Cycle Level 3	
JCSP	
QQI/FETAC Level 2	
QQI/FETAC Level 3	
Leaving Certificate	
LCA	
In-House School exams	
Others	

Q8. Please express your opinion on the following statements

Please place a tick (✓) in the box you agree with.

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Slightly Disagree	3 Don't Know	4 Slightly agree	5 Strongly agree
I feel I will be well-prepared for work when I leave this school					
I feel I will be well-prepared for further study when I leave this school					
I feel I will have developed my social skills when I leave this school					
I feel I will have developed my independent living skills when I leave this school					
I feel I will have real choices about what I can do when I leave school					
This school has been a good school for me					
I would recommend students to come to this school					

Q9. Is there anything you would change about your school?

Q10. What would you like to do when you leave school?

Q11 (a). Has anyone talked to you about what you would like to do after you leave this school?

Q 11. (b) If yes who?

Thank you for spending your time answering my questions



Appendix 18

Parent Questionnaire

Q1. How long has your child been coming to this school?

Please tick (✓) **one** box only

1 -3 years

4 -6 years

7- 10 years

Q2. In what class is your child now?

Q3. What year will your child be leaving this school?

Please tick (✓) **one** box only

2020

2021

2022

Q4. How would you rate your child's school in the following areas

Please place a tick (✓) in the box you agree with

	1 Not Good	2 Somewhat Good	3 Quite good	4 Very good	5 Extremely good
Teaching					
Supporting students to learn					
Preparing for the world of work					
Developing social skills					
Preparing for examinations					
Developing Independent living skills					
Subjects available					

Q5. What subjects does your child study?	
Please tick (✓) which subjects your child studies	
English	
Irish	
Maths	
CSPE	
History	
Geography	
Religion	
Science	
Home Economics	
Art	
Woodwork	
Technical Graphics	
French	
Others (please specify)	
Comment	

Q6. Are you satisfied with the subject choice which is available to your child?				
Please tick one box				
Extremely Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Not Satisfied
Comment				

Q7. Is your child participating in accreditation programmes?	
Please tick one box only	
Yes	
No	
Don't Know	
Please explain your answer	

Q8. What accreditation programmes is your child following?	
Please tick relevant boxes	
Leaving Certificate	
Leaving Certificate Applied	
Junior Certificate Level 3	
Junior Certificate Level 2	
QQI/FETAC Awards Level 4	
QQI/FETAC Level 3	
QQI/FETAC Level 2	
In-House School Awards	
Other	
Please explain your answer	

Q9. Are you satisfied with the level of accreditation available for your child in their school?				
Please tick one box				
Extremely Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Not Satisfied
Comment				

Q10. Are the programmes your child follows relevant to their needs?				
Please tick one box				
Extremely Relevant	Very Relevant	Relevant	Somewhat Relevant	Not Relevant
Comment				

Q11. Do you have an input into the education programmes in which your child participates?				
Please tick one box only				
Always	Most of the time	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Please give details				

Q12. Do you feel you have an active role in the decision-making process regarding the transition of your child when they leave their school?				
Please tick one box				
Extremely Active Role	Very Active Role	Active Role	Somewhat Active Role	No Active Role
Comment				

Q13. (a) Has anyone talked to you about what your child would like to do after he/she leaves school? If yes, who?

Q14. Please express your opinion on the following statements

Please place a tick (✓) in the box you agree with.

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Slightly Disagree	3 Don't Know	4 Slightly Agree	5 Strongly Agree
My child will be well-prepared for work when he/she leaves this school					
My child will be well-prepared for further study when he/she leaves this school					
My child will have developed social skills when he/she leaves this school					
My child will have developed independent living skills when he/she leaves this school					
My child will have real choices about what he/she can do when he/she leaves school					
This school has been a good school for my child					
I would recommend students to come to this school					

Thank you for your time, opinions and comments.

All opinions and comments are welcome and valued.

Appendix 19

Principal Interview Schedule

1. What is your position within the school?
2. How many years are you teaching?
3. How many years are you teaching in this school?
4. What gender does your school cater for?
5. School Size?
6. How would you describe your school context? What cohort of students enrol in your school? What are the primary needs of students in this school?
7. What is the schools admissions policy?
8. How many staff does your school have?
9. What range of qualifications does your post primary teachers hold?
10. Does your school have specialised teachers and do they teach accreditation programmes?
11. Does your school have a senior cycle post primary section?
12. What age range are students in senior cycle?
13. What accreditation pathways can be followed in your school by students with ID?
14. Please provide specific numbers of students with ID who have completed senior cycle in your school in the specified years? 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 males and females
15. Do all students with ID participate in accredited programmes in senior cycle?
16. Are students with ID in your school entered for state examinations?
17. Which examinations are available to students to sit?
18. Can students follow two or more accreditation pathways at the same time?
19. What combination of accreditation pathways can be followed at the same time in your school?
20. Please outline the accreditations students with ID have achieved in your school.
21. Are you happy with the level of accreditation available for students in your school?

22. Does your school restrict the curriculum which would normally be available in mainstream schools?
23. Does the curriculum available in your school suit the needs of the students?
24. Do your students have a direct input into what subjects they can study and the education programmes they can follow?
25. All students are encouraged by your school to have high aspirations about their learning in your school? How is this achieved?
26. Do any students with ID for whatever reason not participate in accredited programmes in senior cycle? What programmes are available to these students?
27. Do barriers to participation of students achieving accreditation exist in your school?
28. Do parents in your school have an input into the education programmes their child participates in? How does this occur?
29. How does a student follow a particular programme? What is the process? How is the decision made?
30. Does the school provide academic support tailored to the student's needs? How?
31. How do the teachers in your school create positive academic and social outcomes for students with ID?
32. Does your school has a good reputation for encouraging academic success?
33. Do you have a network of support with other special schools? If not do you think such a network would be beneficial? How?
34. Improving access to professional development for teachers prior to taking up positions in special classes would remove the feeling of being 'thrown in' at the deep end' Would you agree or disagree with this statement Ref: A study of special classes in Irish schools –phase 2 – A qualitative study, Banks et al, 2016.
35. What professional training is available to your staff? Does your school get many opportunities for professional development?
36. What are the procedures for the transition of students with ID from post primary school to further placement (Education/Employment) operate effectively within your school.

37. Do you think the availability of subject choice in your school can impact on post school career trajectory of your students with ID?
38. Where have final year students progressed to after they finish their post primary education?
39. Who makes the decision regarding transition to further placement after students with ID finish their post primary education?
40. Who is involved in the decision making process regarding the transition of students to further placement after their post primary education?

Appendix 20

Senior Teacher Interview Schedule

1. What is your position within the school?
2. How many years are you teaching?
3. How many years are you teaching in this school?
4. What accreditation pathways can be followed in your school by students with ID? And what age do they follow these programmes at?
5. Do all students with ID participate in accredited programmes in senior cycle?
6. Are students with ID in your school entered for state examinations?
7. Which examinations are available to students to sit?
8. Can students follow two or more accreditation pathways at the same time?
9. What combination of accreditation pathways can be followed at the same time in your school?
10. Please outline the accreditations students with ID have achieved in your school.
11. Are you happy with the level of accreditation available for students in your school?
12. Does the curriculum available in your school suit the needs of the students?
13. Do your students have a direct input into what subjects they can study and the education programmes they can follow?
14. All students are encouraged by your school to have high aspirations about their learning in your school? How is this achieved?
15. Do any students with ID for whatever reason not participate in accredited programmes in senior cycle? What programmes are available to these students?
16. Do barriers to participation of students achieving accreditation exist in your school?
17. How does a student follow a particular programme? What is the process? How is the decision made?
18. Does the school provide academic support tailored to the student's needs? How?

19. Does your school has a good reputation for encouraging academic success?
20. What professional training is available to your staff? Does your school get many opportunities for professional development?
21. What are the procedures for the transition of students with ID from post primary school to further placement (Education/Employment) operate effectively within your school.
22. Do you think the availability of subject choice in your school can impact on post school career trajectory of your students with ID?
23. Where have final year students progressed to after they finish their post primary education?
24. Who makes the decision regarding transition to further placement after students with ID finish their post primary education?
25. Who is involved in the decision making process regarding the transition of students to further placement after their post primary education?

Appendix 21

Focus Group Student Interview Schedule

Q1. How long have you been coming to this school?

Q2. What year will you be leaving this school?

Q3. Do you enjoy school?

How would you rate your school in the following areas

	5 Extremely Good	4 Very Good	3 Quite good	2 Somewhat good	1 Not good
Q4. Teaching					
Q5. Preparing for the world of work					
Q6. Developing social skills					
Q7. Preparing for examinations					
Q8. Developing Independent living skills					
Q9. Subjects available					

Q10. Please tick (✓) what subjects you study in school?			
English		Religion	
Irish		Art	
Maths		Home Economics	
CSPE		Science	
History		Woodwork	
Geography		Technical Graphics	
Wellness		French	

Q11. What is your favourite subject?

Q12. What is subject do you not like?

Q13. What do you think about the choice of subjects in this school?

Q14. Are there any other programmes/ subjects you would like to study in school?

Q15. Who decides what course or programme you study?

Q16. Are you sitting exams this year?

Q17. What exams are they?			
Please tick (✓)			
Junior Cycle Level 2		QQI Level 2	
Junior Cycle Level 3		QQI Level 3	
JCSP		LCA	
In-House School exams		Leaving Certificate	

Q18. Will you receive a certificate for these exams?

Q19. Do you think this is important?

Q20. Do you think the programmes you followed were suited to you?

Q21. Which option best describes your course/programme				
5 Very Difficult	4 Difficult	3 OK	2 Easy	1 Very Easy

Q22. Do you feel you have achieved success in school?

Q23. Do you feel prepared to leave school?

Q24. Has anyone talked to you about what you would like to do after you leave this school? If yes who?

Q25. What job would you like to do when you leave school?

Q26. Do you think you have a real choices about what you can do when you leave school?

Q27. Do you think what you learn in school will help you get a job after you leave school?

Q28. Has this school has been a good school for you?

Q29. Is this school is a good place to learn

Q30. I would recommend students to come to this school

Q31. Is there anything would you change about your school?

