

**Educating Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through the ASD Class Model: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Experiences of ASD Class Teachers and Principals in Irish Primary Schools**

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**Thesis Submitted for the Award of the Degree of Doctor of Education.**

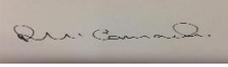
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## Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of the Degree of Doctorate of Education (Ed. D) is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed:  ID No.: 59275723 Date: 13/12/18

**For Méabh**

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While this thesis is for Méabh, I also dedicate it in memory of her grandfather, John McCormack and my dear friend and neighbour Trent Latham.

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## Definition of Terms

<b>ABA</b>	Applied Behaviour Analysis
<b>ACF</b>	Autism Competency Framework
<b>AET</b>	Autism Education Trust
<b>AoN</b>	Assessment of Need
<b>ASD</b>	Autism Spectrum Disorder
<b>ASI</b>	Autism Specific Interventions
<b>BCBA</b>	Board Certified Behaviour Analyst
<b>BoM</b>	Board of Management
<b>CABAS</b>	Comprehensive Application of Behaviour Analysis to Schooling
<b>C-ABA</b>	Contemporary-Applied Behaviour Analysis
<b>CDC</b>	Centres for Disease Control
<b>DCU</b>	Dublin City University
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Skills
<b>DIR/Floortime</b>	Developmental, Individual Differences, Relationship Based/Floortime
<b>DoH</b>	Department of Health
<b>DSM-IV</b>	Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 4th Edition
<b>DSM-IV-TR</b>	Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition - Text Revision
<b>DSM-V</b>	Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th Edition
<b>EBP</b>	Evidence Based Practice
<b>EPSEN</b>	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004)
<b>HSE</b>	Health Service Executive
<b>IAA</b>	Irish Autism Action

<b>International Review</b>	International Review of the Literature of Evidence of Best Practice Provision in the Education of Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders
<b>ICD-10</b>	International Classification of Disease (10 <sup>th</sup> Revision)
<b>ICD -11</b>	International Classification of Disease (11 <sup>th</sup> Revision)
<b>IEP</b>	Individual Education Plan
<b>ITE</b>	Initial Teacher Education
<b>Maine</b>	Intervention for Autism Spectrum Disorders – The State of the Evidence: A Collaboration of the Maine Department of Health and Human Services & the Maine Department of Education
<b>MCA</b>	Middletown Centre for Autism
<b>NAC</b>	National Autism Center
<b>NCSE</b>	National Council for Special Education
<b>NEPS</b>	National Educational Psychological Service
<b>NSP</b>	National Standards Project
<b>NUIG</b>	National University of Ireland, Galway
<b>OFSTED</b>	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
<b>PE</b>	Physical Education
<b>PECS</b>	Picture Exchange Communication System
<b>PD</b>	Professional Development
<b>PLS</b>	Plain Language Statement
<b>PSI</b>	Psychological Society of Ireland
<b>QUB</b>	Queen's University Belfast
<b>QUART</b>	Queen's University Autism Research and Treatment Centre
<b>SACS</b>	St. Angela's College, Sligo
<b>SEN</b>	Special Educational Needs
<b>SENO</b>	Special Education Needs Officer

<b>SESS</b>	Special Education Support Service
<b>SERC report</b>	Special Education Review Committee
<b>SPIDD</b>	Sensory Processing Intellectual Developmental Disability
<b>Task Force report</b>	Educational Provision and Support for Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders: The Report of the Task Force on Autism
<b>Task Group</b>	Report of the Task Group on Autism (Northern Ireland)
<b>TEACCH</b>	Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children
<b>TCD</b>	Trinity College Dublin
<b>UU</b>	University of Ulster

## **Abstract**

**Patrick McCormack**

### **Educating Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through the ASD Class Model: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Experiences of ASD Class Teachers and Principals in Irish Primary Schools**

The study examines the experiences of class teachers and school principals educating students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through the ASD class model in Irish primary schools. Research questions emerged from a comprehensive review of the literature and a critical examination of Ireland's policy on the education of children with ASD and the evidence base underpinning what are termed ASD specific interventions. An interpretative research design was employed utilising qualitative methods of data collection, namely conducting in-depth, individual semi-structured interviews with four ASD class teachers and focus groups with eight school principals. Interviews were also conducted with representatives from the Special Education Department of a teacher education college and organisations involved in the allocation of teaching resources and provision of professional development for teachers and parents.

In 1998 ASD was first recognised as a distinct disorder requiring particular provision for some students with ASD through an ASD class model. There is currently in excess of 600 ASD classes in Ireland's primary schools. This is a relatively new mode of educational delivery. To date there has been little research in the Irish context exploring the experiences of teachers working in these classes or of school principals leading schools with ASD classes.

From the analysis of the findings, a number of key themes emerged. Teachers and principals identified new leadership challenges that the ASD class brings, the changes to their workplace dynamics and the value they place on professional learning communities. Teachers valued the principal's support for their work. Principals outlined a lack of guidance and support from the Department of Education and the National Council for Special Education. Teachers valued access to ASD specific continuous professional development (CPD). Both teachers and principals expressed concerns around difficulties obtaining places on CPD programmes. Teachers also conveyed concern that the content of courses did not evolve in line with their growing knowledge and changing needs. Principals identified an absence of specific CPD for themselves as school leaders.

The study's findings suggest that ASD class teachers and principals are committed to their work but find it challenging and require better supports from state agencies. The study recommends greater clarity on policy for the education of children with ASD and timely provision of appropriate CPD for all staff involved in their education

## **Chapter One – Introduction**

### **Introduction to the Research Topic**

#### **Educational provision for students with ASD – Developments in Ireland.**

Educational provision for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a contested topic which has generated intense debate and controversy in recent years at national and international levels. In Ireland, at the time of writing, it is nineteen years since the Department of Education and Skills (DES) first recognised ASD as a distinct disability requiring special educational provision. The *Education Act* (Government of Ireland, 1998) enshrined in law the right of all children to access and participate in the education system according to their potential and ability. The then Education Minister noted that prior to 1998 the Irish education system lacked the flexibility to meet the individual requirements of children with special educational needs (SEN). However, he envisaged that the DES could now access improved data, enabling it to more appropriately meet these students' needs, including children with ASD (Department of Education, 1998). He saw an integrated education system and outlined the basic template for ASD classes attached to mainstream schools. This is now established as a model of support in the national continuum of educational provision as specified by the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (Government of Ireland, 2004). To date there are over 600 ASD classes, including those for pre-school children, opened in primary schools with an additional figure in the region of 200 opened in secondary schools (National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2015). At primary level, ASD classes have a ratio of one teacher and two special needs assistants (SNAs) to six students. At second level, the allocation is typically 1.5 teachers and two SNAs to six students. For the purposes of this study a special class is

defined as a class for students with ASD which is their main learning environment (McCoy et al., 2014).

***ABA pilot schools.*** Another indication of an attempt to increase options for students with ASD was state funding of an Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) pilot school, (ABA Schools Working Group, 2010). Thirteen schools received funding under this pilot. The majority of tutors were not primary or secondary school teachers, but psychology graduates with postgraduate qualifications in behaviour analysis. Though the DES did not publish a pilot project evaluation, it advised the Minister against adopting the model. Subsequently, the project ended in July 2010, with the schools offered transition to the status of '*Special Schools for Children with Autism and Other Complex Needs*' (Department of Education and Skills, 2010). They now operate under the same DES policy as ASD classes. This includes the option of an extended school year, a scheme commonly known as 'July Provision'. A Home Tuition Allowance (HTA) is also available to pay for educational provision for those children without a school place. Central to the continuum of educational provision for students with ASD is their inclusion in mainstream classes.

***Commitment to inclusive education.*** The need for a more inclusive education is enshrined in the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) which envisages students with SEN being educated alongside peers in mainstream settings. In December 2014, of the 13,873 students with ASD in the school system, 63 per cent were educated in mainstream classes (NCSE, 2015). This study focuses on special classes as part of the continuum of educational provision for students with ASD. More specifically, the study explores, in the Irish context, the experiences of ASD class teachers and principals of primary schools with ASD classes. Studies commissioned by the NCSE examine the role of special schools and/or special classes in the Irish education system. Ware et al. (2009) considered the role of the special

class and special school. They found that special schools and classes form an important part of the continuum of provision for students with SEN, not only for those directly attending the school but also potentially for students with SEN attending mainstream settings. The authors note an expected future role for special schools acting as a repository of specialist knowledge and support for mainstream schools. However, to play this role and to meet the needs of current students, they identify a need to increase skill sets and professional development (PD) opportunities among teaching staff, including the provision of programmes on SEN for school principals.

Stemming from this recommendation McCoy et al. (2014) and Banks et al. (2016) constitute phase I and phase II of an NCSE commissioned study examining the role of special classes in mainstream schools and the degree to which the needs of students with SEN are being met. Among their findings, McCoy et al. (2014) suggest the increasing diversity of students with SEN, including those with ASD, enrolled in special classes in mainstream schools raises “important questions over the extent to which teachers have the appropriate skills and qualifications to meet the needs of these students” (p. 127). They identify a lack of awareness among school principals around the establishment and resourcing of special classes which in turn impacts on decisions around opening classes.

Banks et al. (2016) examine the experiences of special class teachers. They found that while some principals sought to assign more experienced teachers to the role, in other schools this was not the practice. Teachers in the latter schools tended to report finding the job very challenging and feeling under skilled and underqualified. Access to PD courses led to increased feeling of capacity and willingness to work in special class settings. The authors recommend prior training for special class teachers and access to continuing professional development (CPD). Similar to McCoy et al. (2014) they identify the importance of school

leadership in ensuring the success of the special class. Thus, they recommend clear guidelines for principals around setting up and resourcing special classes. The authors conclude that while their remit was to examine whether the special class setting was working for students, the question was too complex to fully answer. They note the diversity of SEN and the variety of special class models in schools. While they suggest that particular models appeared to work better than others they recommend further discussion on best practice to meet the multiplicity of needs.

Following the Education Minister's request for policy advice, the NCSE commissioned Daly et al. (2016), to evaluate existing state-funded provision for students with ASD. Among their findings they noted a shortage of external professionals and services to support schools in creating student IEPs. This was seen as a serious concern across all education settings. Access to professional supports was considered very important in allowing schools to deal with student mental health issues. To promote inclusive education practice, Daly et al. (2016) recommend that schools explore ways to enhance communication and cooperation with parents. They also stressed the importance of CPD for school management "and whole-school information on special education and the educational implications of ASD in particular" (p. 20). Also, regarding CPD they felt "the role SNAs play in classes for children with ASD might require more specific professional development" with the SNA participants seeking specific CPD to enable them to better support the ASD class teacher's work (p. 21).

***Focus of this study.*** While Daly et al. (2016) looked specifically at educational provision for students with ASD, the other studies mentioned examined the broader landscape of special class provision for a variety of SEN at both primary and secondary level.

This study will focus specifically on the perspectives of ASD class teachers at primary level and of principals leading schools with ASD classes. It also considers the perspectives of policymakers and course providers working in this area. At the commencement of this study there was only a small body of literature exploring the perspectives of ASD class teachers and principals in the Irish context. I believe that, considering the important impact that both groups have on outcomes for students in special class settings, this represents a significant gap in the research field. Thus, I hope that this study will add to existing professional knowledge and practice. This chapter will discuss the characteristics of students with ASD, challenges they encounter in accessing the curriculum, educational interventions and the implications for teacher education and schools.

**The complex nature of autism.** The increased incidence of autism, its complex nature, and the myriad ways it can impact the lives of people is suggested in the subtitle of Pangborn and Baker's book (2005) "Individuality in an epidemic". Bluestone (2005), a writer with ASD, describes it as a fabric, as she tries to interlace its threads to gain a deeper understanding. Early studies by Kanner and Asperger point to the spectrum nature of autism (Sicile-Kira, 2003). Wing and Gould's Camberwell study (1979) identified a triad of impairments which has been defined as "a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioural challenges" (Centers for Disease Control, 2012a, p. 1). The complexity of ASD and the educational challenges faced by students with ASD is highlighted in a number of reports and research papers (Department of Education, 1993; Department of Education and Science, 2001; Jordan, 2008; Obrusnikova and Dillon, 2011; NCSE, 2015). Robertson, Chamberlain and Kasari (2003) and Lecavalier, Leone and Wiltz (2006) indicate the impact such challenges can have on teacher-student relationships and learning outcomes for children with ASD.

I conceptualise autism as a lifelong developmental disability that impacts on how a person interprets the world around them and interacts with other people. It is a pervasive, spectrum disorder, with challenges in social interaction and social communication skills impacting across all areas of a person's life. The spectrum nature of the disorder also means that while people with autism might share certain difficulties, the condition will affect individuals in different ways. The fact that autism is often a hidden disability, with the person showing no physical differences to their neurotypical peers, means that teachers working with students with ASD need to be educated about the nature of ASD. In the absence of a real appreciation of this, in the context of the school environment behaviours stemming from an ASD might be misconstrued as the child merely being deliberately disruptive, unruly or uncooperative. Their unwillingness to engage in a task might be misinterpreted as an inability or refusal to learn rather than a need to establish more effective supports and channels for communication. Two people with autism might have a similar written diagnosis but the symptoms they experience could manifest in completely diverse ways. Thus, it is imperative that educators look beyond the diagnosis and remain focused on the fact that they are working with an individual person. While the words 'disability' and 'disorder' may be regularly encountered when reading about autism, it is vital that this does not lead to the person with autism being regarded through a deficit-focused lens. Falling into such a position might lead to the discounting of a person's capacity and potential to learn and might also blind one to the richness of their different talents and abilities. As Breakey (2006) reminds us, autism should be considered from the position of observing difference rather than deficit, a position that will more likely result in the respect for the equality and rights of the individual with ASD.

With regard to engaging the student with ASD I believe that educators need to be able to draw from a palette of pedagogical options. This image is deliberately chosen as I believe that teaching is part art, part science. Teaching is a science in that there are pedagogical strategies and approaches that research has proven to be effective. These might be termed ‘evidence-based practices’ (EBP). Many of these, teachers will have become familiar with through their initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and through their mainstream classroom practice. With regard to other evidence-based pedagogical approaches and strategies, teachers might only be introduced to these when they are working in an ASD class setting, as they might be commonly identified as particularly effective when working with children with ASD. Also, the experiential knowledge drawn from working in the ASD class coupled with the opportunity to attend ASD specific professional development programmes can develop the teacher’s appreciation for the complexity of ASD. The art of teaching is manifested in how the ASD class teacher adapts and blends various pedagogies to most effectively meet the complex needs of their students. To this end, considering the relatively nascent stage that the Irish education system is in with regard to the inclusion of children with ASD, I believe that it is imperative that we hear the voices of school principals and ASD class teachers, as we look to learn from their experiences, to understand the particular challenges they might face and also to grow the body of knowledge and support required to meaningfully include students with ASD and to support the teachers working with them.

**Teacher education programmes in special education.** The importance of teaching in determining quality outcomes for all students is well established (Darling-Hammond, 1996, 2000; Rowe, 2003; NCSE, 2015). In the Irish context, the need for specialist training for teachers of students with ASD has been identified (Department of Education, 1993; Department of Education and Science, 2001). A number of reports indicate the necessity of

such teacher education focusing on evidence-based interventions (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009; National Autism Center, 2009; Travers et al., 2010; Guldborg et al., 2011; NCSE, 2015). The establishment of Special Education Support Service (SESS) and Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA), agencies delivering CPD, to add to SEN and ASD courses offered by colleges such as the School of Inclusive and Special Education, DCU Institute of Education, Dublin City University and St. Angela's College, Sligo (SACS), denotes a recognition in the Irish context of the need for specialist teacher education. Teachers now have the option of accessing courses in ASD specific interventions. Though in its policy advice the NCSE (2015) stops short of recommending mandatory education programmes for teachers of students with ASD, it indicated the need for such programmes. It recommends that the DES:

...request the Teaching Council to develop, as a matter of priority, standards in relation to the knowledge, skills, understandings and competencies that teachers require to enable students with complex special educational need, including ASD, to receive an education appropriate to their needs and abilities (p. 148).

The introduction of ASD classes arguably marks one of the most significant transformations in Irish education since the State's foundation. It places a responsibility on schools and teachers to meet the educational requirements of students with profoundly complex educational and behavioural needs. Until recently SEN modules generally formed a very small part of ITE in Ireland. With research suggesting that quality of teacher training impacts on teacher classroom performance, reduces teacher stress levels and positively impacts on learning outcomes for children with ASD (Probst and Leppert, 2008; Alexander, Ayres and Smith, 2015), this has led to a demand for the up-skilling of and increased supports for teachers (Balfe, 2001; Department of Education and Science, 2006; Parsons et al., 2009; Ruble, Usher and McGrew, 2011)

The number of teachers in Ireland holding postgraduate qualifications in SEN generally and ASD specific interventions specifically remains low (Ware et al., 2009). Similar to the UK education system, the Irish system has no mandatory requirement for teachers of children with ASD to possess postgraduate qualifications in ASD. In contrast, each US state requires that special education teachers are licensed (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 2004). In Ireland, in-service training and teacher CPD is provided through the SESS and MCA. This generally consists of short courses. Ring (2010) reports on CPD's positive impact on teachers' understanding of ASD and confidence levels while the NCSE (2015) speaks of the "significant progress [made] in the past decade in providing good quality training to teachers and many teachers are now well trained in ASD" (p. 8). Ring (2010) also finds that an "inclusive whole school approach was evident in schools where teachers had completed this [accredited CPD on ASD] programme" (p. 12). Recent evaluation reports of CPD offered by the SESS (Department of Education and Skills, 2012) and MCA (Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate; Education and Training Inspectorate – Northern Ireland, 2012) also report positively on CPD quality. However, it is worth noting that participation on these courses does not lead to certification in the particular disciplines. Also, other international reviews suggest that some of the ASD interventions offered through CPD in Ireland have no robust research evidence to suggest effectiveness (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009, National Autism Center, 2009).

While the SESS and MCA offer short courses, more in-depth postgraduate programmes are available in third level institutions such as the School of Inclusive and Special Education, DCU Institute of Education, Dublin, St. Angela's College, Sligo (SACS) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD). Ware et al. (2009) estimate at 25-33%, the number of

teachers in Ireland holding postgraduate qualifications in SEN. The figure for those with qualifications in an ASD specific intervention appears to be lower. A breakdown of figures contained in the study indicates that 5.78% of teachers working in Ireland's special schools held postgraduate qualifications in ASD. In those special schools specifically for children with ASD that percentage rises to 20% (Appendix I). These figures suggest that many teachers commence work in special schools and ASD classes with no specific ASD academic qualifications. With a marked increase in ASD classes over the past five years this suggests many ASD class teachers begin with little or no practical experience of working with students with ASD. McCoy et al. (NCSE, 2014) identify a broad diversity in the make-up of special classes in Ireland and the wide range of SEN evident. This, they contend, invites "important questions over the extent to which teachers have the appropriate skills and qualifications to meet the needs of these students" (p. 127). Rose et al. (2015) express concerns about the low number of teachers with SEN qualifications and the limited extent of SEN content on ITE programmes. Working in an ASD class environment, often with limited knowledge of evidence based ASD interventions, I believe, presents a potentially onerous and challenging task for teachers. This study aims to explore the perspectives of teachers in ASD classes on these particular issues.

**Leadership and special classes for students with ASD.** There is a consensus that school leadership plays a critical role in supporting the education of students with SEN. For example, Travers et al. (2010) refer to the principal's key role in supporting inclusive practices in school. Teacher respondents in their study spoke of the principal's leadership as central in helping the school to realise a vision of inclusive educational practice. School leadership plays a vital role in creating a school culture which empowers teachers to pursue PD and to work confidently and collaboratively with colleagues (King, 2011). King describes

an enabling form of distributed leadership allowing the teacher to trust in themselves and take initiative. The NCSE (2015) similarly regard the principal as pivotal to the successful inclusion of children with ASD. However, they found that principals often felt unsupported when opening an ASD class and required more information related to the logistics and to effective ASD educational interventions. They recommend the provision of ASD related PD programmes for principals and deputy principals to ensure their familiarity with developments in ASD and education. Through focus group interviews with primary school principals, this study will explore their experiences of opening and managing ASD classes and the access that they have to ASD related PD programmes.

**Increased prevalence of ASD.** Over the past decade, the recorded incidence of ASD among children has increased dramatically. The CDC (2012) estimates the US rate at 1:88 people with ASD. Ireland's SERC report (Department of Education, 1993) suggested a prevalence of "between 2.5 and 4 per 10,000" (p. 141). Stemming from this it estimated that, at primary school level, there were between 112 and 176 children with ASD. However, the 2006 population census, coupled with data from a 2006 National Disability Survey estimated the incidence of ASD among 0-17-year olds at approximately 1.1% (Health Service Executive, 2012). Staines & Sweeney (2013) estimate the prevalence of ASD at 1% of the population, while the NCSE recommends that "educational planning should be based on an ASD prevalence rate of 1.55 per cent" (NCSE, 2015, p. 3). This rapid increase in the incidence of ASD has placed increased demands on Ireland's health and education services. With approximately 14,000 students with ASD currently in the Irish school system, 23 percent of whom attend ASD classes (NCSE, 2015, p. 4), teachers are challenged to meet the needs of a student population with an increasingly diverse range of needs.

## **Historical Background of Special Education Provision in Ireland**

Coolahan (1981) records the beginning of the Irish state's involvement "in the education of the mentally handicapped" with the growth in state recognised special schools from one in 1950 to thirty-three in 1960 (p.185). He contends that the following two decades saw special education take an important place "in line with developments in other countries" (p. 187). In 1990, Ireland held the European Community (EC) presidency and presented a proposal for the integration of children with SEN into mainstream education (Flatman-Watson, 2009b, p. 107). This was unanimously adopted by the EC Council of Ministers of Education. Ireland's ratification of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1992 and its declaration that all children have a right to equal education sparked a period of consultation and review in this country (Department of Education, 1993; Government of Ireland, 1994; Government of Ireland, 1995). Promoting integration where possible, the SERC report advocated "a continuum of services...ranging from full time education in ordinary classes...to full time education in special schools" (Department of Education, 1993, p. 19-20). It also identified specialist SEN teacher shortages and made recommendations to address this including obligatory SEN components in ITE including teaching placements with students with SEN. The SERC report recognised childhood autism as "one of the most severe developmental disorders affecting children" and prioritised early identification and intervention in the pre-school years (Department of Education, 1993, p. 140-1).

In making educational provision for children with ASD, the SERC report (Department of Education, 1993) recommended that, where considered most appropriate they should continue to be placed in schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural disorders. If they were to be enrolled in other forms of special schools, there should be a 6:1 pupil teacher ratio with one SNA. Since the publication of the SERC report (Department of Education, 1993)

there have been significant developments related to ASD educational provision. These include the introduction of the ASD class model, as initially envisaged in the SERC report (Department of Education, 1993), the opening of specific schools for children with ASD and, the provision of a suite of teacher PD programmes. However, to date there is limited evidence of the effectiveness of these models of provision. Similarly, there is little research exploring the experiences of teachers working in these settings or of school principals endeavouring to lead the teaching and learning.

### **Legislation Relevant to SEN in Ireland**

In the international arena, the recognition of the educational requirements of people with SEN and call for a policy of inclusion was evident in the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 1994). Ireland's Education Act envisaged an inclusive system of education where "[a] recognised school shall...ensure that the educational needs of all students, including those with a disability or other special educational needs are identified and provided for" (Government of Ireland, 1998). It defines "special educational needs" as "the educational needs of students who have a disability and the educational needs of exceptionally able students" (p. 8). The rights of those with SEN were further acknowledged in the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004). This recognised that children with SEN have a right to an appropriate education and acknowledged the importance of enabling parents of children with SEN to play a greater participatory role in their education. However, to date, many sections of the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) have not been enacted. For example, an independent Special Education Appeals Board which parents could petition if concerned about the educational placement prescribed for their child has not been established.

The *Disability Act* (Government of Ireland, 2005) also looked to uphold children with SEN's right of to an appropriate education. Under this Act a child can have an assessment of need (AoN) carried out to provide "a statement of the health and education needs (if any) occasioned to the person by the disability" (p. 11). However, there is no obligation on the DES to meet the educational recommendations that might be contained within an AoN. This potentially presents a challenge to ASD class teachers and principals as they work with students who may not have the full range of professionally recommended educational supports. This study aims to hear their perspective in this regard. It is also important to hear the voice of policymakers and teacher education providers as they work in this milieu.

Other significant pieces of Irish legislation have directly or indirectly supported the right of people with SEN to appropriate education provision. These include the *National Disabilities Authority Act* (Government of Ireland, 1999), *Equal Status Act* (Government of Ireland, 2000), *Education Welfare Act* (Government of Ireland, 2000) and the *Children's Act* (Government of Ireland, 2001). Section 8.2(b) of the *National Disabilities Authority Act* (Government of Ireland, 1999) instructed that Authority "to undertake, commission or collaborate in research projects and activities on issues relating to disability and to assist [in] the planning, delivery and monitoring of programmes and services for persons with disabilities". Section 10.1(j) of the *Education Welfare Act* (Government of Ireland, 2000) states that the NEWB will "advise the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment with regard to those aspects of the school curriculum that...are likely to have an effect on attendance levels at, or the extent of student participation in, school". The Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) and *International Review of the Literature of Evidence of Best Practice Provision in the Education of Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders* (NCSE, 2009) also support the educational rights of children with ASD. A

common conclusion reached by these reports is reflected in Parsons et al. (2009) which contends that “there is currently no evidence that a single intervention or solution will meet the needs of all learners with ASD, so a range of options (types of educational setting and interventions) should be available and chosen to fit the profile of the child or young person” (p. 6). This statement recognises that children with ASD are a heterogeneous group with wide and varied needs. Again, I believe it also indicates the importance of garnering the views of teachers and principals working directly with students with ASD as well as those of policy makers and course providers.

**A Framework to examine education policy related to ASD.** Riddell (2003) offers a useful framework for examining Ireland’s education policy related to ASD. In exploring administrative justice in the area of SEN and differences in the application of national policy in local authorities in England and Scotland, Riddell (2003) utilises a six-part analytical model incorporating different theoretical frameworks. This allows the policy to be scrutinised through a variety of framework lens, enabling the researcher to compare local practice variances, to divine the dominant policy frameworks in play, and to consider the strengths and challenges of divergent constructs. A bureaucratic framework operates on the principle of the impartial application of rules, overseen by organisation officials. Managerialism sees a closer scrutiny on the performance of service allocators and providers, with clients having the right to appeal if performance indicators are not being met. Under a professional policy framework, power tends to rest with professional groups providing services to clients. Riddell (2003) uses the example of educational psychologists and the power they have in recommending service provision for clients. A legal framework recognises the rights of individuals, entitling them to a level of provision and providing the option of appeal to an independent body should they feel these rights are not being met. A markets framework concerns parent/guardian scope to choose the educational placement they want for their child,

and the right of those with SEN not to meet avoidable barriers to school inclusion. Finally, a consumerist framework considers the strength of the parent/guardian and student voice in informing policy and determining the type of service provision. This framework will be used to consider the influences on Ireland's education policy and practice.

**Supporting teachers and principals in an inclusive education system.** There is a body of research examining the impact that working with children with SEN and/or ASD has on teachers (Balfe, 2001; Talmor, Reiter and Feigin, 2005; Leaman, 2008; Kokkinos and Davazoglou, 2009) with some of this identifying teacher needs for appropriate supports (Alexander, Ayres and Smith, 2015). The Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) acknowledges this:

It was evident from this study that a high percentage of the teachers being employed had little or no knowledge of ASDs, therefore it would seem to be advisable that teachers appointed to classes for children with ASDs be given access to a certain body of knowledge prior to beginning to teach or as soon as possible afterwards (p. 266)

In its recently published policy advice the NCSE concurs with the need for such training:

It is a matter of concern to the NCSE that the DES permits newly qualified teachers to teach in special classes when the general consensus is that teachers require further experience and ongoing CPD before taking up such positions. (2015, p. 56)

It advises that the Teaching Council work on establishing standards of teaching and knowledge of ASD required to work in an ASD class setting, and on ensuring that such standards are upheld. This study will examine the ASD related experience held by teachers and principals prior to the opening of their ASD classes as well as their assessments of education and supports provided to them. It will also seek the views of education providers in this area.

## **Evidence base for ASD Specific Educational Interventions**

Currently, there is no DES document available describing in detail its policy on the education of children with ASD. However, in a response to a request for the components that form the current policy of ‘eclectic’ provision for children with ASD, the Minister noted:

The Department, through the Teacher Education Section, provides for a co-ordinated and comprehensive Autism-CPD programme ... Continuing professional development is provided in a range of areas that includes applied behaviour analysis (ABA), the Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH), the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), LÁMH manual signing/communication system, mediation of the curriculum, HANEN, Floortime, Social Stories, assessment, accommodating sensory differences, intensive interaction and play (Minister for Education and Skills, 2012).

There is significant discussion in research circles about the levels of effectiveness of various ASD specific interventions (Van Bourgondien, Reichie & Schopler, 2003; Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009; National Autism Center, 2009; Klett and Turan, 2012) and also whether various interventions can be employed together as part of an ‘eclectic’ model of provision (McConkey et al., 2007; Healy, Leader and Reed, 2009; Dillenburger, 2011). McConkey et al. (2007) define an eclectic approach as one that doesn’t fixedly adhere to a single approach, but “draws on a wide range of theories, ideas, techniques and methods and can encourage cross-fertilisation and, possibly, the development of new approaches” (p. 20). Dillenburger (2011) argues a person cannot gain proficiency in all of the interventions that might constitute an ‘eclectic’ package. However, in their examination of comprehensive treatment models (CTMs) Odom et al (2010) refer to a technical eclectic model, which would filter the interventions that could be included under such a model. This term stems from the work of Lazarus and Beutler (1993) who, with regard to therapeutic interventions, counsel against the unsystematic blending of different theories or approaches. Odom et al (2010) develop their definition of eclecticism to include only those interventions and approaches that

can be considered EBPs, with a similar definition also adopted by Wong et al (2014). Thus, while it might draw on a range of interventions to support the student's education, it cannot be described as an ad hoc approach. I will also consider the development of DES policy on the education of children with ASD, exploring and evaluating the research evidence base that underpins the strands comprising its 'eclectic' or 'child-centred' policy. Based on the Minister for Education's statement (2012) it does not appear to fit the definition of a technical eclecticism.

Operating from a standpoint similar to the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) and the NCSE (2015), that teachers of children with ASD require particular professional skills apart from those acquired through ITE, I will explore CPD available to teachers in Ireland. This will examine course content and CPD delivery. I will examine the research literature which considers methods of CPD delivery for teachers of children with SEN and ASD.

## **Research Questions**

As stated, present education policy in Ireland promotes the inclusion of children with ASD in a mainstream school environment whether in a mainstream or ASD class. This commitment is evident in the rapid growth in ASD classes. In 2003 students with ASD constituted 9 per cent of all students attending special classes. By 2009 this increased to 27 percent (McCoy et al., 2014). NCSE (2015) figures indicate that of the 13,873 students with ASD in Ireland's school system in December 2014, 23 percent attended special classes in mainstream schools. A further 14 percent attended special schools. The establishment of and investment in the SESS, MCA and the NCSE reflects the acknowledgement that children

with ASD are a group with a distinct disability with many requiring specialist, ASD-specific educational provision. While, in the Irish context training for teachers in ASD interventions is not mandatory (NCSE, 2015), there is an implicit recognition by the DES that professional instruction beyond that offered in ITE is required.

As will be examined in the Literature Review chapter there are numerous reports and research papers identifying challenges faced by teachers of students with ASD and recommending training in various ASD interventions. Similarly, within the research literature there is evidence highlighting challenges experienced by school principals in providing leadership in this area and recommending professional supports. To date, within the Irish context there is a small amount of research examining ASD class teacher experiences, with an even smaller body exploring the experiences of school principals. Thus, endeavouring to add to the current body of literature, this study aims to address the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of class teachers educating students with ASD through the ASD class model in Irish primary schools?
2. Regarding the ASD class, what are the leadership experiences of school principals of Irish primary schools?
3. What is the research evidence underpinning the effectiveness of various ASD interventions informing Ireland's policy on the education of children with ASD?

In the following chapter, each of these questions will be discussed in the light of current research. The subsequent section will examine the research methods being employed in this study.

## **Research Methods**

The study involves desk bound research and analysis of key international research pertaining to the education of children with ASD including the experiences of teachers and

school principals. It includes an examination of research exploring the effectiveness of various ASD interventions included in the DES's model of provision for children with ASD. The literature review incorporates consideration and analysis of research, reports and legislation that have informed Ireland's ASD education policy as well as literature critical of 'eclectic' models of ASD intervention. Using international databases such as Academic Search Complete, ERIC and Google Scholar I searched for research literature related to special schools and special classes for children with ASD. I also searched for material concerned with the experiences of teachers working with children with ASD. I sought material concerned with the structure of CPD offered to teachers of children with ASD and the various ASD specific interventions that form part of the DES policy. I also searched journals such as the *British Journal of Special Education*; *European Journal of Special Needs Education*; *International Journal of Inclusive Education*; *Autism*; *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*; *Journal of Special Education* focusing particularly on research conducted since 2000. In terms of Irish journals, I sought articles in *REACH*, *LEARN* and *Irish Educational Studies*. I also obtained information from websites such as; [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie); [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie); [www.sess.ie](http://www.sess.ie); [www.education.gov.uk](http://www.education.gov.uk); [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk); [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov); [www.kennedykrieger.org](http://www.kennedykrieger.org). and used the resources available to me through the Cregan Library in the DCU Institute of Education, Dublin City University and the O'Reilly Library in Dublin City University (DCU).

An interpretative research design was employed utilising qualitative methods of data collection, namely conducting in-depth, individual semi-structured interviews with four ASD class teachers and focus groups with eight school principals. Interviews were also conducted with representatives from the special education department of a teacher education college and organisations involved in the allocation of teaching resources, provision of policy advice and the provision of PD courses for teachers. The participants were chosen through purposive,

‘stake holder’ sampling identifying teachers who had undergone some CPD in the area of ASD specific interventions and were teaching in an ASD class. Two of the participants were in their first-year teaching in an ASD class while the other two participants had more than three years’ relevant experience. This would enable me to obtain the perspective of teachers new to the ASD class role along with the views of more experienced teachers and address questions such as the impact that this has had on sense of confidence and effectiveness in the classroom. Similarly using purposive, stake holder sampling, eight principals of primary schools with ASD classes were selected to participate in focus group sessions.

### **My perspective as the Parent of a Child with Autism, a Teacher and Principal**

The impetus for me to conduct this study is informed by my experience as the parent of a child with autism as well as my professional experience as a mainstream secondary school teacher and school principal. Prior to my child being diagnosed with autism I had little understanding of autism and the complex nature of the disorder, the debilitating effect that it can have on the child with the diagnosis and the overwhelming and, at times, devastating impact that it can have on families. As I sought to understand the condition and support my child it was disheartening to see that, in the area of health service supports, there was little provision or expert help available. As a parent, it was also apparent that with regard to early intervention settings or special classes for children with ASD, there was a shortage of places and that, if a place was available, it was often outside of the child’s local community. For example, at the time of my child’s diagnosis, there was no special ASD class provision in any of my local primary or secondary schools. The initial option available to us was to use the Home Tuition Allowance, a monetary allowance from the Dept. of Education for those children without a school placement, to try and recruit a teacher to work in our home. To find a teacher with experience of SEN and/or ASD proved very difficult. We soon discovered lots

of families in similar situations. We decided to pool our money with others and enrolled our daughter in a small school funded through these payments and families own contributions. The dearth of available places for these children within the centrally funded school system led me to consider why this was the case.

As a teacher, I was aware that, in the education sector, autism was now recognised as a distinct condition and that special provision was being made. I knew of schools with what were termed ‘ASD units’ and I was also aware of an ABA school in my local area. In an effort to increase my own knowledge base I visited a number of ASD units and two ABA schools. Of the teachers I met in the ASD units none held postgraduate qualifications in ASD. Although I am a qualified teacher I knew how underequipped and unskilled I felt home-schooling my daughter. As a teacher, my experience was that ITE only touched on a range of SENs and did not consider the different pedagogical knowledge that one might require to work with students with complex conditions. I suspect that to meaningfully work in an ASD class setting teachers need access to a body of knowledge that will educate them about the complexity of ASD, will introduce them to new evidence-based pedagogies and will assist them in effectively adapting their current teaching skills. I wondered how the ASD class teachers I visited were coping in their role and how well the needs of the children in their class were being met.

Following these visits, my wife and I made a decision to enrol our child in a small ABA school for children with ASD. At the time this decision was significantly informed by a lack of alternative options. We had been impressed by the knowledge of the staff in the school when we visited and were delighted to witness the progress that our daughter was making. When the decision was made to end the ABA school pilot project I lobbied for their

retention. I believed that the closure of those schools would lead to a loss of valuable staff and expertise from the education system. I also wanted the DES to conduct an evaluation of the pilot project to determine the successes and deficits and to see what lessons might be garnered to improve provision for students with ASD. My experiences from this time have led me to the supposition that the debate surrounding provision for children with ASD in Ireland has been quite conflicted and fractious, something that is alluded to in studies such as the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001, p. 45) and Ware et al. (2009, p. 1). I ask whether this has adversely impacted on the quality of the debate and subsequent outcomes for some children with ASD and teachers. My own experience with ITE suggests to me that the competencies attained here are not sufficient to enable teachers to meet the educational needs of a significant number of children with ASD. This view has been re-enforced through my experiences of home schooling my child and the additional knowledge, skill sets and supports required to improve my effectiveness in this educator role.

As a school principal, and from having opportunities to speak with and learn from the experiences of fellow principals, I have some insight into the extra administrative workload that having students with SEN and/or ASD can bring. I know the amount of time and resources that can go in to setting up a class and the challenges that school management can face when trying to secure ongoing supports for students through various private and publicly funded agencies. I also have some knowledge of the concerns that principals hold concerning their own knowledge of ASD and the impact that this can have on their support for teachers and students' families. I hope that through this research paper I can make a modest contribution to the body of research related to ASD and educational provision in Ireland. I will endeavour to shed some little light on to the experiences of a small group of teachers working in ASD classes as well as principals of primary schools with ASD classes and allow their voices to be heard. I will also try to include the voices of teacher education providers

and policy makers working in this area. To date, in the Irish context, there has been little research examining these areas.

## **Framework of Thesis**

Chapter one offers an introduction to the research topic, providing a brief historical background to educational provision for children with ASD in Ireland. It outlines the research problem and provides an organising framework for the thesis. Chapter two will provide a literature review detailing and critiquing research papers and studies relevant to the study. Chapter three will provide detail of the methodology I used to conduct my research. It will explain the research design used; the process employed for the selection of participants; the quality assurance measures taken; how ethical guidelines were established and followed and how the data collected was handled. Chapter four will detail the research findings made. These findings will be discussed in relation to each of my research questions and also in the light of their link to the literature. Chapter five will summarise the findings and final conclusions will be drawn. The limitations of the study will be highlighted as will its implications. This chapter will also make suggestions for further studies which might stem from this initial research.

## Chapter Two – Literature Review

### Introduction

This study's prime purpose is to explore, in the Irish context, the experiences of ASD class teachers and the principals of primary schools with ASD classes. The literature review will begin with a consideration of what autism is, including its potential impact on students with ASD and their engagement with education. This will be followed by a section examining ASD educational interventions, including comprehensive treatment models (CTM). I will critique research on ASD interventions constituting an 'eclectic' approach, sometimes referred to as a 'blended' or 'child centred' approach, as outlined by the DES. I will also consider research studies on best practice approaches to teaching students with ASD and the impact of CPD in ASD interventions on the work of teachers. Literature related to CPD for teachers of children with SEN and ASD, including models of delivery and course content is also considered.

A review of literature examining whether teachers of children with ASD require specialist knowledge to fulfil their role is included. The next section considers the role of professional learning communities (PLCs), particularly for teachers of students with SEN and/or ASD. Following this, there is an examination of literature concerned with attrition rates and levels of stress and burnout among teachers of students with ASD and/or SEN. The final section of the chapter will review literature on school leadership and its impact on building a culture of inclusive education and meeting the needs of children with SEN and ASD.

To reiterate, prior to 1998 autism was not recognised as a distinct disability with associated SEN particular to those on the ASD spectrum. Ireland's Education Act

(Government of Ireland, 1998) recognised the rights of all children to access and participate in the education system in accordance with their capacity to do so. This prompted a change to the schooling landscape for students with ASD and with it, the landscape for teachers and school principals. It also sparked a period of debate centred on best practice models for educating students with ASD. The introduction of special classes for students with ASD in mainstream schools meant that schools with such classes were now expected to educate students with ASD whose needs could not be wholly met in a mainstream class placement. Although, in the Irish education system, engagement with further training in ASD specific interventions is not compulsory, for ASD class teachers this might mean familiarising themselves with new pedagogies and ASD specific interventions, as well as working with other personnel in the classroom. For principals, as well as that professional requirement to become familiar with ASD and possible attendant SEN, the advent of ASD classes also introduced a new piece of management work.

### **What is Autism?**

Key reports produced in Ireland over the past sixteen years indicate the need for teachers to obtain a deeper understanding of ASD; to receive training and support in ASD specific educational interventions, and guidance in adapting existing pedagogical skills (Department of Education and Science, 2001; Department of Education (Northern Ireland), 2001; NCSE, 2009; Ring et al., 2016). The Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) and Ring et al. (2016) also consider the training needs of principals and the impact of specialist ASD classes on school management. In this study, I will examine the perspectives of ASD class teachers and principals on the skills they feel are necessary to work effectively with children with ASD. I will also seek the perspectives of policy makers and teacher education providers. The recorded levels of people with ASD in Ireland and

internationally, whether through improved diagnostic procedures, a broadening of admissible criteria or increased occurrence, is rising rapidly. This leads to an ever-increasing responsibility upon the education system to refine its response. As indicated in McCoy et al. (NCSE, 2014) special classes in Ireland are working to meet the needs of students with a wide range of SEN and diversity of need. A significant majority of special classes opened at primary level, sixty per cent, are specifically for students with ASD. Thus, there is a requirement that a greater understanding of ASD and the challenges it presents for students and for professionals is acquired.

**The challenge of defining autism.** The word ‘autism’ has its origins in the Greek language from the word ‘autos’ meaning ‘self’ (Bluestone, 2005). The terms ‘autism’ and ‘autistic’ were first coined in 1911 by Swiss psychiatrist, Eugen Bleuler. He used the terms to describe a form of schizophrenia, wherein the person appeared to withdraw completely from the outside world and into himself (Sicile-Kira, 2003). In 1943, Austrian born doctor Leo Kanner used the term ‘autistic’ in his papers describing the behaviours of children, behaviours that would now be recognised as manifestations of autism. The following year, independently of Kanner, Austrian physician Hans Asperger used the term in a study of four boys who had what now might be termed higher functioning autism or Asperger’s Syndrome. A consideration of these researchers’ early work indicates the spectrum nature of the disorder. While Kanner’s study was of children severely affected by the disorder with him viewing it as a debilitating condition, Asperger’s study was of “more able children” and he felt that aspects of their condition “could lead to great achievements as an adult” (Sicile-Kira, 2003, p. 6).

The United States’ *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* (CDC) defines ASD as “a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication

and behavioural challenges” (Centers for Disease Control, 2012a, p. 1). These are frequently referred to as the triad of impairments (Cashin, Gallagher, Newman, & Hughes, 2012; Pickles, St Clair, & Conti-Ramsden, 2013; Department of Education and Science, 2001) with the term originating from Wing and Gould’s Camberwell study (1979). This study also identified that autism formed a spectrum of disorders rather than clearly separated subsets and examined the link between ASD and general learning difficulties. That autism is classified as a “spectrum disorder” denotes a wide range of symptoms, with children experiencing diverse levels of impairment (National Institute of Mental Health, 2015). Social challenges might mean that the child with ASD does not readily make eye contact or appear to engage with other people. Communication difficulties might include absence of speech or difficulties understanding spoken and/or body language. Behavioural challenges might include fixated engagement in repetitive actions, difficulty controlling emotions or engaging in stereotypy. These difficulties can present significant obstacles to the student with ASD’s engagement with the education system. It presents profound challenges to teachers and to principals as they look to meaningfully include all students with ASD. Equally, it presents a challenge to the wider education system, including policy makers and teacher education providers, to build a sensitive and suitable curriculum delivered by appropriately qualified teachers working in adequately resourced schools.

**Theories on Autism Spectrum Disorders.** The Theory of Mind (Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985) examines and endeavours to explain the persistent challenges that people with ASD can experience with social communication and interaction. Essentially, the ability to imagine what others may be thinking and to empathise with them is generally established by the time a typically developing child reaches five years old. This enables them to interpret and respond to social cues, thus aiding their ongoing social development. For

people with ASD this is impaired to one extent or another. As it is not developing innately, it must be deliberately worked on to strengthen the person with ASD's capacity in this area. Meanwhile, the Theory of Executive Dysfunction (Pennington & Ozonoff, 1996; Russell, 1997) looks to explain the restricted interests and stereotypy of people with ASD. Executive functions describe cognitive skills that allow us to organise our lives, to set targets and plan for future objectives. A person with developed executive functions exhibits flexibility when necessary, can amend plans when needed, and can regulate impulsive behaviours. Again, these skills innately develop in most people, but for people with ASD these cognitive functions are impaired.

The Theory of Weak Central Coherence (Frith, 1989) looks to explain the fragmented processing that people with ASD can exhibit. This is the behaviour of focusing in on small details to the exclusion of information that others might deem important for contextualising the data. Rather than seeing it as a deficit, Frith (1989) regarded it as a bias, a capacity to see the tree in great detail without necessarily showing awareness of the forest. Again, it can shed some light on the expressive and receptive communication skills of people with ASD. The Theory of Empathising-Systemising (Lawson, Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004) posits that all people are on a scale from the excessively empathic to the excessively systematic. While most people can strike some balance, this considers the difficulties that people with ASD can have in communicating with others and developing social relationships. While people with ASD may develop a learned empathy, knowing for example that a certain type of response is likely to equate to a particular emotion, it is not an intuitive empathy. It requires practice and reinforcement to grow the capacity to respond in a 'socially appropriate' way. People with ASD tend to be more systematic, looking for the details and rules that might govern a certain process. They tend to prefer processes and situations that are predictable and

can also have difficulties in generalising learning from one system to another. Baron-Cohen (2009) considers the implications of this theory for education, suggesting that the systematic structures preferred by people with ASD can actually be used to grow their empathy skills.

**Diagnostic instruments.** The traits identified in these theories of ASD are reflected in the diagnostic criteria used to determine whether a person is classified as having an ASD. At the commencement of this research study the most commonly used instrument for the diagnosis of ASD was the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition - Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR). This identified five disorders as falling within the autism spectrum:

- Autistic disorder (classic autism)
- Asperger's disorder (Asperger syndrome)
- Pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS)
- Rett's disorder (Rett syndrome)
- Childhood disintegrative disorder (CDD). (DSM-IV-TR., p. 1)

This instrument was replaced by the DSM-V which was published in 2013 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). DSM-V proposed that “autism, Asperger’s disorder, pervasive developmental disorder (not otherwise specified) and childhood disintegrative disorder be consolidated within the overarching category of ASD” and that while “DSM-IV requires functioning delays to be present prior to age 3; DSM-5 criteria would extend this until —social demands exceed limited capacities, as long as symptoms were present in early childhood” (American Psychiatric Association, 2012, p.1). This presents some possible implications for the Irish education system as some students may possibly lose their diagnosis while others may now be identified as having an ASD and possibly in need of specialist educational provision. The International Classification of Diseases-10 (ICD-10) is another commonly used diagnostic tool, approved for use in World Health Organisation (WHO)

member states (World Health Organisation, 1992). The 11th revision is currently under construction with the publication due in 2018 (World Health Organisation, 2016).

**The prevalence of ASD.** An increased incidence of ASD means there is an increased demand on the education system to provide for students with ASD. This has implications for resource and personnel planning. Thus, it is important that accurate data on the prevalence of ASD is maintained. At present, there are no agreed prevalence rates for ASD in Ireland. In April 2009, the charity group Irish Autism Action (IAA) stated that it was funding a prevalence study, to be carried out by Dublin City University's School of Nursing and Human Science (DCU) (Irish Autism Action, 2009). This study found a prevalence rate of 1% of Ireland's population (Staines & Sweeney, 2013). This marked a significant increase on the figure of approximately 0.56% which the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) took as a guiding figure and which, in the absence of more accurate data, the NCSE adopted as its prevalence rate for the purposes of planning (Parsons et al., 2009, p. 9).

From a review of large scale epidemiological studies, Rutter (2005) estimates that the prevalence of autism internationally stands at a ratio of between 30-60 per 10,000, a marked increase on the figure of 4 per 10,000 which was the estimate reached in the 1960s. He attributes much of this increase to "a combination of better ascertainment and a broadening of the diagnostic concept" (p. 13). However, he does not discount a possible contributory aspect from as yet unknown environmental factors. Rutter's (2005) figure is comparable to that cited by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Following a 2009 *Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers*, it estimated that approximately 1:340 children had an ASD. This represented a marked increase in prevalence from a 2003 study which recorded the ratio at 1:680 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009).

The Centers for Disease Control (2012b) estimates that the prevalence of autism in US sites reviewed is, on average, 1:88. The report was authored by the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network, an active surveillance system estimating the prevalence of ASDs and describes other characteristics among children aged 8 years whose parents or guardians reside within 14 ADDM sites in the United States. The authors warn against generalising the results of their findings to the entire US population. They also state that they cannot confidently say whether this apparent increase in incidence is attributable to “better case ascertainment as a result of increases in awareness and access to services or true increases in prevalence of ASD symptoms”. However, they do regard their findings as “underscoring the need for continued resources to identify potential risk factors and to provide essential supports for persons with ASDs and their families” (p. 2).

*Prevalence of ASD in Ireland.* Ireland’s HSE acknowledged that it “does not currently collect information specifically on adults and children identified with Autism on a national basis” (Health Service Executive, 2013). However, a 2012 HSE review of Assessments of Need conducted under the terms of the Disability Act (2005) showed that 20% (545) of the children were identified as having an ASD. Further to this, the HSE *National Review of Autism Services*, estimates that among 16,000 persons with disabilities reviewed “the prevalence of ASD within this cohort could be estimated to be in the order of 1.1%” (p.17). In recent policy advice issued to the DES, the NCSE suggested that a prevalence rate of 1.55% should be used for the purposes of planning provision for students with ASD (NCSE, 2015). This suggests the Irish education system is faced with having to meet the needs of an increasing number of children with ASD. Thus, it is likely that a growing number of schools and teachers will be presented with questions related to pedagogical approaches and models

of provision for students with ASD. From this it is reasonable to expect that there will be an increased demand for teacher education and guidance in this area.

## **Impact of Autism on Educational Engagement**

Jordan (2005) highlights the challenges that the triad of impairments can present to a student with ASD and, by extension, to teachers. This can include the need to teach a child with ASD the purpose of communication, including the complexities of non-verbal communication techniques. Skills that might be organically and quickly acquired by neuro-typical children need to be taught in a particularly methodical and accessible way. Mesibov and Howley (2003) consider the importance of creating a structured environment, of the need to consider environmental factors, such as light and sound levels, which could provoke anxiety in the student with ASD. To promote positive engagement and reduce student stress, the TEACCH system they promote advocates clear signage in the classroom indicating dedicated areas of activity as well as the use of visual schedules. However, areas of learning activity might extend beyond the classroom, presenting challenges for the teacher in preparing students for such occasions. Fleury et al. (2014) note the importance of teaching students with ASD how to generalise skills beyond classroom settings. Thus, teachers may have to acquire new teaching methodologies and teach in different settings to facilitate the transferability of student learning. However, they also highlight that while students with ASD might share some diagnostic traits it is not safe to make assumptions about academic ability or learning styles. This presents another challenge to educators.

A 2012 guide for parents, produced by the Department of Education, Training and Employment in Queensland, Australia, notes the potential impact of the triad of impairments on a child's engagement with education. It observes that ASD can manifest itself through

restricted interests and challenging behaviours, and details possible barriers that may prevent the child's learning. For example, in terms of social interaction challenges it notes the potential difficulty a child with ASD may have engaging in and maintaining normal social contact and a lack of empathy which may appear as insensitivity to others' feelings. Communication difficulties might include delayed language acquisition, relatively low levels of receptive language comprehension including understanding of abstract language or symbols. Sensory processing challenges may lead to difficulties for the child with ASD as they struggle to cope with ambient sounds in the classroom or particular, acute sensitivity to lighting or pronounced awareness of odours (Department of Education and Skills, Training and Employment, 2012).

Similarly, the report of the Northern Ireland Task Group on Autism (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2001) notes the impact that the triad of impairments associated with ASD has on a child's engagement with education. This Task Group consisted of "educational practitioners with an interest and expertise in autism and included representatives of voluntary organisations" (p. i). It consulted with stakeholders including Education Boards, Health Boards, parent organisations and voluntary bodies, and identified "many implications of ASD for educational provision" (p. iv). It recognised that ASD can often occur with co-morbid conditions such as general learning difficulties and the importance of identifying these. It stressed the importance of understanding the triad of impairments' impact on the individual as this "provides an effective basis on which practical approaches can be constructed" (p. 19). The report also recognised potential obstacles that other areas such as behavioural, sensory or attention deficit challenges can present to a child with ASD's successful engagement with learning and advises of the need for a very structured environment. In determining the best approach to educating children with ASD it finds that a single approach might not address the impairments experienced by each child and

contends that intervention programmes should be “child-centred rather than method-centred” addressing “the observed and unique needs of the child” (p. vii).

The Republic of Ireland’s Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) makes a similar determination, recommending “a child-centred approach to planning, vs. a methodological approach” (p. 3). It was tasked by the DES with reviewing and assessing educational provision for children with ASD and to make recommendations for future needs. Similar to the Northern Ireland Task Group (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2001) the Task Force (Department of Education and Science, 2001) consulted with Irish and international experts and conducted visits to schools and service providers in Ireland, Northern Ireland and England. The goal was to inform an effective ASD education policy. The changing attitudes in Ireland towards the provision of educational intervention for people with special educational needs (SEN) was described by Professor Desmond Swan as the movement from an era of neglect or denial to “the era of integration or inclusion” (Inclusion Ireland, 2005).

The Task Force (Department of Education and Science, 2001) noted that the “degree of severity of the ASD has an impact on the way in which children are taught, the curriculum content, and the context for the teaching” (p. 6). It examined the particular barriers to learning that ASD places on a student and identified the importance of differentiated planning for each student, taking into account their unique needs. Comparable to the Northern Ireland Task Force Report finding (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2001), the DES (2001) concluded that “there is no definitive evidence that supports one approach as being better than others for all children with ASDs” (Para. 6.7.1) and notes:

“the Department of Education should tender additional, Irish based research in the areas of eclectic and single, mainstream and specialist approach programmes in order to inform the educational system, particularly parents, of the most appropriate method of teaching children with ASDs.” (Para. 6.8)

Published in collaboration between the University of Ulster (UU), Queen’s University, Belfast (QUB) and Parent Educator’s as Autism Therapists (PEAT) and funded through the Royal Irish Academy (RIA), Keenan et al. (2007) produced a report which included an examination of the impact of the triad of impairments on access to learning for children with ASD. Similar to the findings from the two task force reports cited above, they draw on the work of Wing and Gould (1979) to offer a definition of this triad. The report comments that, in relation to defining autism, the “essential point of the concept of a spectrum rather than a distinct disorder was that each aspect of the ‘triad of impairments’ (Wing, 1979/1996) could occur in widely varying degrees of severity and in many different manifestations” (p. 16). Akin to findings made in the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) Keenan et al. (2007) note the stress that parents of children with ASD can face when dealing with the education system, and the need for expert training and supports for teachers working with children with ASD. However, in terms of recommendations regarding the educational interventions to employ, they reach a different conclusion. For example, they recommend that all children diagnosed with ASD are provided with early intensive behavioural intervention (EIBI), that state funded ABA schools and classrooms are established and maintained and that teachers and teaching assistants “are appropriately trained in ASD and ABA” (p. 11). Three of the authors of the report are academics who hold BCBA qualification, while another is the chairperson of PEAT, a Northern Ireland based charity which “promotes the science of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) for helping children with Autism” (Parents' Education as Autism Therapists, 2012).

In an article discussing a model of educational inclusion for children with ASD, Jordan (2008) has noted that even among the community of children with severe learning difficulties (SLD) “it was apparent that children with ASD presented particular educational challenges” (p. 11). Some of these challenges are highlighted by Obrusnikova and Dillon (2011) in their study of challenging teaching situations faced by Physical Education (PE) teachers of children with ASD in US schools. Questionnaires were issued to forty-three PE teachers seeking information on their experiences of teaching children with ASD. Inattentive and hyperactive behaviour as barriers to learning was highlighted by 39% of the respondents. Other barriers to learning identified were the child’s social impairment (36%); “emotional regulation difficulties (22%), difficulties understanding and performing tasks (21%), narrow focus (18%), and inflexible adherence to routines and structure (16%)” (p. 120). Again, writing in the US context, Fleury et al. (2014) explored the challenges experienced by students with ASD as they begin secondary school education. They note that students with ASD are more likely to be unemployed and less likely to advance to third level education than students in most other disability categories. In considering the myriad challenges linked to the triad of impairments faced by students with ASD in mainstream and special class settings the authors contend that “dismally poor postsecondary outcomes for individuals with ASD highlight the urgent need to re-evaluate the quality and quantity of academic preparation individuals with ASD receive in schools” (p. 74). They found that for many students with ASD, there will be a need to adapt mainstream curriculum content. However, this must be married to a realisation that educators must adapt their methods of instruction to effectively engage with these students, including familiarising themselves with ASD specific interventions.

In her consideration of ASD and inclusive practices in schools, Ravet (2011) studies the positions adopted by those advocating a 'rights-based model' versus a 'needs based model' of inclusion for students with ASD. She acknowledges that, on the surface, these binary positions appear wholly incompatible. However, it is her thesis that a basis for a functional blending of the concepts can be found to form an integrated approach. The former model positions all learners as being essentially the same, with no need for specialist pedagogies or teachers with 'special' knowledge of ASD. It considers these as elements of exclusionary practice. The view is that all the needs of these students can be met in mainstream settings and the labelling of students reinforces difference and creates barriers. Meanwhile, the latter model believes that the differences do exist between students, and that naming these differences is actually an act of inclusion and compels teachers and schools to meet the diverse needs that present. It supports the use of specialist pedagogies and believes that some students with ASD need to and can benefit from working with specialist teachers. Though the two positions might initially present as mutually exclusive, Ravet (2011) contends that an effective middle ground can be found. This integrative perspective proposes that labelling of ASD does not have to be a negative construct. Rather, it suggests a move from regarding ASD as a disease to considering it as indicative of the neurodiversity that exists, something which must be acknowledged and valued. Ravet's (2011) integrative model also considers ASD pedagogies as being distinct but not only beneficial for students with ASD. She believes that the use of a distinct ASD pedagogy, rather than being exclusionary, actually increases the likelihood of successful inclusion in mainstream settings. Her model also calls for whole school staff ASD awareness with training in ASD provided to key staff. It also challenges schools to be "autism friendly" and to consider how its provision meets the needs of all students (p. 673).

Jordan (2005) defines ASDs as transactional disorders, with the manifestations presenting in interactions with others. She counsels against assuming ASDs are automatically accompanied by an SEN, and against supposing that the needs of all those with an ASD and SEN are uniform in nature and can be addressed through a common pedagogical or therapeutic approach. Rather, the person with ASD as an individual with a particular personality, strengths and challenges must be recognised and respected. Any associated SEN must be considered in the context of time and learning environment. For Jordan, the transactional nature of ASD means that any keys to improved educational engagement and attainment cannot be found solely in curriculum adaptations. Change must also occur in those responsible for designing and delivering the curriculum. For those designing the curriculum, there is an obligation to recognise the group pedagogic needs related to ASDs, that their will need to be a spectrum of pedagogic programmes to meet the diverse needs of those with a spectrum disorder. Teachers must approach their work with an attitude of openness, a willingness to learn about ASD and to adapt their own assumptions and behaviours. A deeper knowledge of ASD can move them beyond considering ASDs solely on an observable, behavioural level, to a point where they understand the roles they and the physical environment can play in constructing meaningful and flexible programmes for individuals with ASD.

This section highlights the depth of the challenge facing educators, at policy and practice level, in seeking to create an education system truly inclusive of students with ASD. The need for the educators to have a deeper knowledge of ASD is apparent. Assumptions cannot be made about the particular needs of individuals with ASD based solely on the experiences of working with others with ASD. Teachers need to examine their professional knowledge and work practices, and the physical teaching environment to consider any

adaptations that may be required. Teachers and policy makers need to educate themselves in relation to the different pedagogic approaches that have been identified for ASD. They need to consider their usefulness, whether they can be incorporated into an overarching policy, and how they might be adapted for use in a student's individualised programme.

## **Educational Interventions for Children with ASD**

Regarding examining interventions for students with ASD, I adopt a similar approach to Wong et al. (2014). Namely, that the intervention is “behavioural, developmental, or educational in nature and could be implemented in typical educational intervention settings” (Wong et al., 2014, p. 9). For example, while Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu (2009) also reviewed the evidence supporting pharmacological and biomedical interventions for ASD these are not considered in the context of this study. When examining ASD interventions, I include interventions expressly included in the Minister for Education's statement on his department's policy (2012). For example, within this statement there is reference to ABA generally, while in the various systematic reviews of ASD interventions this is broken into various approaches that would fall within the board science of ABA (e.g. discrete trial training; functional communication training; pivotal response training) (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009; National Autism Centre, 2009; Wong et al., 2014). TEACCH is described by Myers et (2007) as a structured teaching approach with an emphasis on creating an organised physical environment and planning predictable and structured learning opportunities for the student, with the use of visual schedules for the student to support this work. PECS, as the name suggests, is a communication system designed to assist the student with developing their expressive and receptive communication skills. Similarly, Social Stories, is an approach to support social communication development. It can take the form of short written and/or visual narratives describing social situations or the responses of people that the person with

ASD might encounter (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009). DIR/Floortime model is described as “a developmentally-based framework” which allows the teacher to build a programme around the student with ASD’s strengths and interests. (Special Education Support Service, 2015). However, while there may be different approaches to working with students with ASD, I do not believe that these are necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, a TEACCH programme may incorporate a PECS or other social communication intervention and/or may be informed by principles of behavioural science. Also, it is important to consider that approaches considered as specialist ASD educational interventions can also be successfully incorporated with pedagogical principles that a teacher may have first encountered during ITE and grew and developed through the experiential learnings of classroom practice. What is important is to determine whether an intervention or teaching programme is evidence based, and whether the teacher sees it helping them to work successfully with the children in their ASD class.

Recent systematic reviews of the literature on educational interventions for students with ASD have identified a range of approaches considered to be effective (Parsons et al., 2009; Odom et al., 2010; Wong et al., 2014) NCSE, 2015). However, prior to this, in the absence of education legislation and definitive research on the most appropriate educational interventions for ASD, parents of children with ASD in Ireland sought recourse to the courts in order to secure the rights of their children to an appropriate education (Glendenning, 2012; Department of Education and Science, 2001; NCSE, 2009). In *O’Cuanacháin v. The Minister for Education and Science* (2007), the parents contended that their child benefitted from ABA provision, that it was a proven, evidence-based intervention. They argued that the ‘eclectic’ model was not appropriate for their child, that it was not evidence based and they feared that their child would regress under that model. They reasoned that the State should continue to

fund ABA provision for their child. In his judgement, Justice Peart found that the Minister for Education had the right to determine education policy. He explained, the “fact that there may be little such comparative research which shows an eclectic model providing better outcomes than the exclusive ABA model does not preclude the Minister deciding that an eclectic approach is an appropriate provision”. He added, the Minister “is entitled to accept the advice received that Model A, and the other eclectic models described, are appropriate in a general way for children with autism, and to provide for that” (SOC v Minister for Education and Science and Ors., 2007, p. 130). While the ‘eclectic’ model of educational provision for children with ASD continues to influence policy and practice in Ireland it has not developed in line with the vision offered in Model A (Department of Education and Science, 2007; Appendix II).

Model A (Department of Education and Science, 2007) envisaged each student having an Individual Education Plan (IEP), with speech and language therapy, as necessary, as part of an integrated education and language programme. It overtly referenced ABA, TEACCH and PECS as key components of the eclectic provision and stated that prior training in ABA would be provided to both teachers and SNAs with supervision provided by an ABA specialist. While the Minister later advised that the DES had moved from the ‘Model A’ concept, he added that “this did not materially alter the provision being made for children with autism” (Dáil Debate, May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014).

**Special Needs Assistant education programmes.** One alteration made from ‘Model A’ (Department of Education, 2007) was the continuing absence of DES funded ASD related PD programmes for SNAs. It remains the case that SNAs do not have official access to DES provided CPD programmes, with the exception of access to some DES approved Institute of Child Education and Psychology (ICEP) courses

([http://icepe.eu/cpd/Understanding\\_Autism](http://icepe.eu/cpd/Understanding_Autism)). The *Value for Money and Policy Review of the SNA Scheme* (DES, 2011) found that:

[T]he application and use of SNAs in schools has changed, leading to a disconnect between the official role of the SNA and the actual practice in schools. This has contributed to inconsistencies in practice and a lack of clarity in schools concerning SNA duties. (p. 12)

Logan (2006) also identified the changing nature of the role and confusion around the role of the SNA. This small-scale study examined the role of SNAs in Ireland's schools. The researcher felt there was a dearth of research in this area and was concerned about "the *ad hoc* way in which this provision has developed" (p, 93). It involved a survey of parents, students, teachers, SNAs and principals. From a total of 381 surveys sent to school staff there was a 62% return rate. This included a return rate of 66% from 127 surveys issued to SNAs. Logan (2006) found that SNAs were largely very positive about their work and felt appreciated by their principals and classroom teachers, and that teachers and principals were generally very welcoming of the work of SNAs. However, there was some confusion about the role with SNAs seeking more work-related support and advice and identifying their need for accredited training. Daly et al. (2016) also reported that in all the school sites they surveyed there was a demand among SNAs for access to training programmes. Currently, a number of further education colleges offer SNA training programmes attracting Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 5 or 6 awards. However, these courses do not address an issue that emerges in Logan (2006). Namely, this is the role that SNAs often fulfil, contrary to DES directives, in providing educational assistance and guidance to the students under their care.

**Teacher benefits from engagement with CPD.** For teachers who engage with CPD programmes related to ASD interventions, there is a suite of courses available through providers such as SESS and MCA as well as postgraduate programmes through colleges such

as DCU, SACS and TCD. Studies suggest that teachers in Ireland are engaging with and benefitting from these programmes (NCSE, 2015; Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate & Education and Training Inspectorate – Northern Ireland, 2012). For example, in its policy advice to the DES, on the education of children with ASD, the NCSE (2015) indicates that from 2011-14, almost 22,000 teachers took SESS courses in ASD-related areas. They describe the CPD provided through SESS and universities/colleges as being of a ‘high quality’ and suggest that, “teacher knowledge and understanding of ASD have improved and continue to develop” (p. 3). The DES commissioned an *Evaluation of the Special Education Support Service* which found that in 2010, the SESS provided 20,348 training places (PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC), 2012). A postal survey was conducted with principals and teachers in a thousand primary, post-primary and special schools. Of the teacher respondents it found that 57% of mainstream class teachers had attended at least one SESS provided CPD event in the previous two years. For special class teachers, this rose to 80% for those who had attended one or more such events. Almost 90% of respondents described the content of courses offered as being “relevant” or “very relevant” to their work in the classroom (p. 79) A joint inspection of Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) (Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate & Education and Training Inspectorate – Northern Ireland, 2012) also found high levels of satisfaction with the content of courses. MCA provides programmes to parents and professionals and, in the five-year period leading up to the publication of the report, “4,719 parents from both jurisdictions and 6,527 professionals [accessed] training with over 95% indicating that the training was both informative and of practical use” (p. 4). With such levels of engagement by teachers and generally high satisfaction ratings with CPD course content, it is worth considering the evidence base underlying the effectiveness of the various interventions.

**Systematic reviews of ASD educational interventions.** In October 2009

*Interventions for Autism Spectrum Disorders – State of the Evidence* ( Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009) was published. Between 2000 and 2008, Maine saw an increase of 276% in diagnosed cases of autism. Recognising the attendant strain upon state resources it sought to establish the most effective ASD interventions, “that produce positive outcomes as proven by research...thus saving precious time and resources” (p. 7). Similar to the approach adopted by Northern Ireland’s Task Group on Autism (2001) and the Republic of Ireland’s Task Force on Autism (Department of Education and Science, 2001), Maine (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009) sought input from “a variety of viewpoints, including people with autism, parents, educators, providers, researchers, and policymakers” (p. 5). It reviewed and analysed research into educational, biomedical, psychotherapeutic and pharmacological interventions for children with autism and looked to determine the empirical evidence for various ASD interventions. Interventions were scored along the scale: “Established Evidence...Promising Evidence...Preliminary Evidence...Studied and No Evidence of Effect...Insufficient Evidence...Evidence of Harm” (p. 8-9).

In relation to ABA it found established evidence for its use for challenging behaviours, communication and Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention (EIBI). It found promising evidence for its use in adaptive living skills, preliminary evidence for its use in teaching vocational skills, for academics including “numeral recognition [and] reading instruction” and insufficient evidence supporting its use for “Academics – Cooperative learning groups” (p10-11). PECS was shown to have established evidence which the authors defined as “proven effective in multiple strong or adequately rated group experimental design studies, single-subject studies, or a combination” (p. 8). These studies included examining the impact of PECS on a primary school student’s communications skill (Kravits et al., 2002), a comparison of PECS with sign language training for students with ASD (Tincani, 2004), and

an assessment of the impact of PECS on areas such as social communication and the alleviation of challenging behaviours for children with ASD (Charlop-Christy et al., 2002).

With regard to other elements forming part of the DES ‘eclectic’ or ‘child centred’ model, Maine (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009) found “insufficient evidence” to support the efficacy of TEACCH as an educational intervention (p. 43). Another intervention for which SESS provides training for teachers is the DIR/Floortime model which it describes as “a developmentally-based framework that helps educators, clinicians, and parents develop an intervention tailored to the unique challenges and strengths of the child with autism” (Special Education Support Service, 2015). Maine (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009) described this as having “insufficient evidence” with “no published controlled trials [having] met the Committee’s criteria for review” (p. 34). Similarly, the report found insufficient evidence to support the effectiveness of Social Stories with the research consisting of “descriptive studies and case reports” with one “methodologically weak single-subject design study” (p. 39-40).

Contemporaneous to the Maine study (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009), the *National Standards Project* (2009) was conducted by the US based National Autism Center (NAC). Identifying itself as an advocate for evidence-based treatment approaches, its remit includes:

[identifying] effective programming and [sharing] practical information with families about how to respond to the challenges they face. The Centre also conducts applied research as well as develops training and service models for practitioners (p. 3).

The NAC conducted the National Standards Project (NSP) (2009) citing serious limitations with existing clinical guidelines for the treatment of ASD. It felt that existing reviews excluded a number of educational and behavioural treatments studies for a variety of ASD diagnoses. It contended there was a lack of transparency in studies informing previous

guidelines and wished to address this as “evidence-based practice guidelines now tend to show each aspect of decision making” (p. 5). In conducting its research, the NAC insists that it is “policy to request the disclosure of potential conflicts of interest so that action may be taken to ensure that such conflict does not influence objective decision making” (National Autism Center, 2016, p. 1 retrieved from <http://www.nationalautismcenter.org/conflict-of-interest-policies/> ).

The NAC completed a review of the educational and behavioural treatment literature, published between 1957 and late 2007 which targeted the core characteristics and associated symptoms of ASD. Presentations derived from the ongoing study were presented at national and international conferences with regular feedback sought from parents and professionals. Ongoing input was also sought from a cross-disciplinary group of experts. The three primary goals identified for the NSP were the identification of:

...the level of research support currently available for educational and behavioural interventions used with individuals (below 22 years of age) ...to help parents, caregivers, educators, and service providers understand how to integrate critical information in making treatment decisions... [and] to identify limitations of the existing treatment research involving individuals with ASD (p. 7).

After reviewing the research literature, interventions were ranked under four general heading headings: “Established Treatments...Emerging Treatments...Unestablished Treatments...Ineffective/Harmful” (p. 32)

The NSP (2010) identified eleven treatments with established evidence as interventions for children with ASD and that “the overwhelming majority of these interventions were developed in the behavioural literature (e.g. applied behaviour analysis, behavioural psychology, and positive behaviour support)” (p. 93). This was similar to the findings made in Maine (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009). However, in contrast, the NSP

(2010) found established evidence to support the use of naturalistic teaching strategies (p. 48) and story-based packages such as Social Stories (p. 50). It also identified twenty-two “emerging treatments”, including TEACCH, PECS, and DIR/Floortime with some emerging evidence but “not enough to be confident that they are truly effective”. Five treatments were classified as “unestablished” with no “sound evidence” of effectiveness with the possibility that “these treatments are ineffective or harmful” including Auditory Integration Therapy (AIT) and Facilitated Communication (p. 70).

**Comprehensive treatment models.** More recently, Odom et al. (2010) stressed the importance of programmes being built around the needs of the person with ASD. Their examination of comprehensive treatment models (CTMs) for children with ASD found evidence to support the use of technical eclectic models, based on behavioural and other evidence-based interventions. As well as the importance of framing any EBP around the person’s individual needs, the authors counselled that such programmes be conceptually grounded and “well implemented”. They point to the importance of effective teacher education in EBPs, if it is to “have a positive impact on the development, learning, and life outcomes of children and youth with autism” (p. 291). With the range of interventions that could form part of any student’s tailored education programme this presents challenges around teacher education provision, a point made by Dillenburger (2011) who questioned whether teachers could gain proficiency in multiple interventions. Through speaking with teachers as part of my study I want to get their views on SEN course provision during their ITE, on the subsequent PD courses available to them and the challenges, if any, faced around their competency-building in ASD interventions.

Wong et al. (2014) emphasise the increased demand for effective ASD educational and therapeutic interventions. They found sufficient scientific evidence to support certain

focused interventions being classified as EBP. These included PECS; discrete trial training; pivotal response training and video modelling. They suggested that the identification of these EBPs offered an opportunity for the design of “technical eclectic/evidence-supported programs” for children with ASD while cautioning that “the most important evidence supporting an EBP at the individual student level is the progress the student makes when the EBP is implemented” (p. 33).

In the Irish setting, the DES references Parsons et al. (2009) as supporting its model of educational provision for children with ASD. This refers to the rapidly changing landscape in ASD research and states that the “focus of the present review on literature dated 2002-08 ensures that only the most up-to-date evidence informs our recommendations, along with expert views drawn from recent best practice guidelines and policy documents.” (p. 2). When considering papers to include in the review the authors decided to include only a select number of review articles and to exclude single case studies. This was designed to “keep the size of the review manageable within the funded time and personnel resources” (p. 41).

The authors included three non-peer-reviewed reports with the explanation that they focused on adults with ASD, an area with a dearth of research literature. They also noted that many recommendations in the literature reviewed were based on “what appears to make good sense, by those experienced in the field, rather than on empirical evidence” (p. 31). They described the review’s procedure to be “as systematic as possible...within the project’s necessary time and resource constraints” (p. 35). This perhaps points to the rapidly increasing prevalence of ASD and the resultant demands placed upon researchers and the educational system to make sense of and speedily respond to the shifting landscape. In its recommendations, Parsons et al. (2009) found no evidence that any single intervention could meet the needs of each person with ASD. They recommended the availability of a range of

educational interventions and settings to meet the particular needs of a child. They also identified the need for more evidence to determine the “impact of specific educational settings and interventions across a range of ages and sub-groups within the autism spectrum” (p. 125).

In relation to the ‘eclectic’ model of provision adopted by the DES, Healy, Leader and Reed (2009), write:

As no study has demonstrated, scientifically, that the ‘eclectic’ approach is effective, it is surprising that a number of prominent individuals and organizations in the Republic of Ireland, in the field of psychology and education, continue to endorse and support the eclectic approach as a valid intervention to ameliorate the core symptoms of ASD” (2010, p. 15).

Dillenburger (2011), offers a schematic depiction of an eclectic model which expects the practitioner to draw on interventions including ABA; Hanen; Floortime; TEACCH; PECS; and Sensory Integration. This model is not dissimilar to that envisaged by the DES but Dillenburger (2011) posits that it is “humanly impossible to be appropriately qualified in all of the interventions that could be part of an eclectic provision package” (p. 1122). She argues that it is difficult to know what is actually meant by the term ‘eclectic’ in this context, as there is no international agreement as to the meaning of the term.

In offering the view that the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) makes “many excellent recommendations for service provision with respect to autistic spectrum disorders” among them “the policy priority of resourcing and implementing educational services for children with ASD”, Grey et al. (2005) stress that teachers require access to education interventions for such children, based on validated and successful methods (p. 209). They contend that ABA has an established history with key among its features being an “emphasis on positive reinforcement procedures...the use of scientific

methods to evaluate effects of interventions” and an established record as “the only method of instruction which has shown consistent empirically supported improvements in the core deficits of the disorder” (p. 210). In their NCSE commissioned literature review, a central question considered by Bond et al. (2016) was “[w]hat does the international research evidence tell us about what works best in the provision of education for persons with ASD?” (p. 1). While Bond et al. (2016) found some common ground with the findings of Grey et al. (2005), namely that teachers require access to PD in EBP for children with ASD, they did not find the weight of evidence rested exclusively with behavioural interventions. They did find that for pre-school children with ASD there was “most evidence for comprehensive pre-school ASD-specific intervention informed by behavioural principles” and stressed that any programme should be child-centred and constructed in consultation with parents and carers (p. 141). For primary school aged children with ASD, Bond et al. (2016) found most evidence of effectiveness for peer mediated interventions, multi-component social skills interventions and behavioural interventions. Interventions such as PECS and Social Stories were found to have “a moderate amount of evidence in the current review” (p. 142). They called for more research to determine the most effective ASD interventions for use in secondary, post-secondary and specialist placement settings.

**The role of qualitative research approaches.** The aforementioned studies highlight the diversity of learning needs for students with ASD. A range of interventions has developed, some with apparently strong evidence bases to support their use. However, the studies also highlight the challenges for researchers in determining the effectiveness of various approaches. For example, limitations identified in the various reviews include studies with small sample sizes, impacting on their generalisability, and the diversity of children in the studies, related to their age, the nature of their ASD and the impact of possible co-

occurring morbidities such as dyspraxia, emotional-behavioural disorders or sensory processing disorders. As evidenced in the focus taken by Maine (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009) and the NSP (National Autism Center, 2010) the term ‘autism’ describes a category of neurodevelopmental disorders with potentially, life-long impacts on numerous areas of development. When addressing a student with ASD’s educational needs one may have to consider interventions that would generally be considered ‘therapeutic’ or ‘medical’ in nature. The diversity of needs arising from ASD is also evident in Parsons et al. (2009), which highlights the dearth of research that exists in certain areas, for example, educational interventions for adults with ASD. It provides an example of the resultant dependency that researchers and policymakers might have on papers that have not been robustly peer-reviewed. Another question arising is the framework used for conducting reviews on ASD interventions, whether they borrow too much from medical and psychology models. There is a particular weight given to studies based on, for example, random controlled trials. Whatever about the financial cost of conducting such trials, one might also consider their applicability to the ‘real-life’ world of the classroom. There is less apparent consideration given to qualitative research examining the application and effectiveness of interventions in classroom or home settings.

While there are interventions for ASD that can be classed as evidence based (Department of Health and Human Services, 2009; Odom et al., 2010; Wong et al., 2014), Dillenburger (2011) questions how the various interventions, whether individually or blended, might be effectively employed by a classroom teacher. Considering ASD’s complexity and the debate surrounding best educational practices, perhaps more clarity can be attained through taking an iterative approach. Conducting qualitative interviews with ASD class teachers can provide valuable data about the effectiveness of interventions in practice and the attitudes and experiences of teachers. Equally, focus group interviews with principals

can also offer insight into the experiences of school leadership as well as policy in practice. Bölte (2014) sees a need for more qualitative research in the field of ASD and education. He feels that qualitative studies have been considered less worthy than quantitative work but that this viewpoint must be challenged. He offers an example of the unexpected impact that unstructured, post-training interviews with parents and children had on clinical trials that he was conducting. The information garnered complemented the quantitative work and changed the direction of the research. Bölte (2014) contends that rigorous, qualitative research provides deeper insights into participant lives and experiences and new perspectives for researchers and service providers.

Like Dillenburger (2011), Kasari and Smith (2013) also point to difficulties with the classroom implementation of ASD teaching strategies. While there may be EBPs it is difficult to know how these are being practically employed. To address this, Kasari and Smith (2013) advocate more classroom-based research to provide faster feedback on practical intervention use. It also means that researchers are working directly with teachers and the students for whom the intervention is intended, in the environment where it is primarily applied. The use of qualitative research allows for a window into real-life classroom experiences of teachers, a chance to gain a deeper insight into the complexities of their work.

### **Teacher Need for Specialist Knowledge and Support**

The importance of quality teaching for all children with SEN is highlighted in a 2006 Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) report examining the topic of educational inclusion. It found that students with profound SEN in mainstream settings could perform as well as those enrolled in special schools, "when they had access to teaching from experienced and qualified specialists" (OFSTED, 2006, p. 3). Thus, it called for increased access to specialist teachers for students with SEN, and focused

PD which examined teacher education needs and sought to spread knowledge across staff. In the Irish context, the NCSE commissioned Rose et al. (2015) to study the implementation of Ireland's inclusive education policy and schools' SEN provision. This took place over a three-year period and included a review of Irish and international literature related to SEN provision. Following a survey of schools, case studies were conducted in ten primary, ten secondary and four special schools. Stratified sampling was used to ensure a range of school types and geographical locations. The case studies involved interviews with students, teachers, parents and service providers. Focus groups were also carried out with interest groups such as school principals, service providers such as National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and teacher education providers. Among their findings, Rose et al. (2015) found many teachers were "uncertain of the skills, knowledge and understanding required to provide effective curricular access for [their students with SEN]" (p. 4). With the range of ASD educational interventions and teaching approaches teachers are challenged with how best to implement them, either individually or blended.

Also, in the Irish context, Grey et al. (2005) evaluated the effectiveness of a teacher-education programme in ABA. The study involved 11 SEN teachers with experience of working with students with ASD in a classroom setting, but no prior ABA training. It concluded that teachers "can successfully develop and implement behavioural interventions". All teachers underwent 90 hours of classroom instruction and supervision over a seven-week period. Teachers had to design and implement behavioural support plans containing multi-element interventions for students with ASD. Of the eleven children, eight had support plans to reduce the frequency of problematic behaviours, while three were designed to increase the incidence of positive student behaviours. These plans led to an average reduction of 66% in problem behaviours and increases between 126% and 196% in the incidence of desired behaviours for the students. While acknowledging the study's small scale, the authors noted

the positive feedback from teachers and parents as well as the improvements experienced by students. They concluded that the study provides some evidence that with appropriate training and supervision teachers can implement behaviour management plans in the classroom. They also suggested that factors such as specialist supervision, intensity of treatment and acceptance as an educational intervention have mitigated against the implementation of ABA in school settings but that numerous studies have “shown that teachers and others can successfully acquire and implement with high integrity behaviour-analytic methods” (p. 211).

The concerns expressed by Grey et al. (2005) concerning appropriate standards of teacher education and supervision in interventions are also evident in Guldberg et al. (2011). They cite a number of studies suggesting that “outcomes for children may be jeopardised because of a lack of training and supervision in using the intervention” (Guldberg et al., 2011, p. 68). They stress the need for teachers, parents and carers of children with ASD to possess specialist knowledge, the necessity for further research to determine teacher and parent education requirements and the need to explore the impact of training on their practice and behaviour. Similarly, writing in the US context, McCulloch and Martin (2011) pose the question, “Where are the Teaching Competencies?” Citing a US CDC estimation that ASD affects 1:110 US children (more recent estimations put the figure at 1:68 (Centres for Disease Control, 2014) they found that, despite these figures, only a small number of states provided teacher training in ASD competencies. Advocating for standardised competencies in ASD interventions, McCulloch and Martin (2011) consider how states might implement these. They suggest that interventions must be “evidence based” and propose the NSP (National Autism Center, 2009) as a starting point for the identification of such interventions. Denne et al (2011) also stress the need for suitable framework for measuring and growing competencies for those working with people with ASD. They note that there is no agreed

definition of what the term ‘competency’ refers to, but that generally it denotes the development of knowledge, skills and attributes.

Almost two decades earlier in Ireland, the SERC report (Department of Education, 1993) outlined the need for specialist training of teachers of children with ASD. In correspondence issued by the Education Minister he could not specify the number of teachers in the Irish education system holding postgraduate qualifications in ASD (Minister for Education and Skills, 2011). While there are postgraduate courses in Learning Support (LS) and SEN available in Ireland, access is limited. Places are generally restricted to teachers with three years teaching experience or more, with at least one of these spent teaching students with SEN (Flatman-Watson, 2009b). Flatman Watson writes that by limiting access to these courses, government is ignoring the recommendations of its commissioned reports, teachers are being deprived of necessary PD, and students with SEN are not being afforded their right to educational inclusion. With less than 12% of teachers and 2% of principals holding postgraduate qualifications in SEN or LS, Flatman-Watson (2009a) sees a danger that there is insufficient understanding of the needs of students with SEN. McGough (2007) also addresses the importance of employing appropriately qualified professionals and the need to guard against an assumption of high levels of qualifications.

**Competency Frameworks to Support Teacher Professional Development.** In the Irish context, the NCSE (2015) provides advice on supporting the education of children with autism in pre-school and school settings. It outlines a list of interventions which are ‘shown across a number of reviews to be effective for some children and young people with ASD.’ (NCSE, 2015, p, 142). It outlines the need for a wide-ranging curriculum to meet the needs of students with ASD and highlights the importance of multidisciplinary supports for these students. It recognises the important role parents/guardians play in their child with autism’s

education and the need for them to be consulted with and supported in this role. The NCSE (2015) also recommends that the DES request the Teaching Council to develop standards with regard to the knowledge and competencies required to work with students with complex needs, including ASD. While the Teaching Council continues to develop *Cosán - Framework for Teachers' Learning* (2016), it does not overtly recommend any specific standards or competencies in SEN. Also, while it offers a broad outline on how teachers' professional development will be considered and measured within a framework, as yet there is no detail on how this will look in practice. To guide them in this work they might consider work carried out by the Autism Education Trust (AET) in England.

The AET offers an Autism Competency Framework (ACF), initially devised by Wittemeyer et al (2012/2015). This was updated in 2016 to take account of a new code of practice (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015) speaking of the rights of students with SEN to high quality teaching and the need for teachers to be appropriately skilled to meet student needs. The ACF supports and guides teachers as they engage in professional development programmes. This can take the shape of teacher self-assessment, or alternatively a department head, principal or inspector using the framework to assess teacher competencies across four main areas: Individual Pupil Needs; Building Relationships (with other key people in the student's life, e.g. parents, carers and peers); Curriculum and Learning (modifying curriculum content and teaching approaches as necessary); and Enabling Environments (E.g. aware of students' sensory needs; need for an organised work environment; need for clear communication style, etc). To assist teachers in developing their skills each of the four main areas contains links to resources to aid skills development.

Under each competency heading there is a range of statements which allow a teacher to determine where their current skills rest along a RAG (Red, Amber, Green) rating system,

‘Not Yet Developed; Developing and Established’ (p. 6). The evidence to support their development can be recorded through documentation (policy documents; pupil and parent feedback sheets, etc); observation (by colleagues, inspectors, etc); and voice (or verbal feedback from colleagues, parents, students, etc). As well as measuring the competencies of individual teachers across three tiers of professional development, this framework allows organisations to measure whole staff development and can assist school leaders in identifying and prioritising areas for whole school development.

**Examining ASD Interventions** While, in the Irish context, the numbers of teachers with qualifications in ASD interventions might be low, there is a range of short teacher education courses, offered through SESS and MCA. SESS offers courses in TEACCH, DIR™-Floortime and Social Stories, all of which have studies attesting to their effectiveness as ASD interventions. TEACCH was established by Dr Eric Schopler in 1972 and is based in the University of North Carolina. TEACCH refers to a “culture of autism”, described as “a way of thinking about the characteristic patterns of thinking and behaviour seen in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder” (<http://teacch.com/about-us-1/what-is-teacch>). Jordan et al. (1998) describe the TEACCH structure as "a concession to the autistic way of thinking; what is created is an autistic environment where the individual with autism can function" (p. 30). There are studies which support the effectiveness of TEACCH as an intervention for children with ASD (Ozonoff & Cathcart, 1998; Panerai et al., 2009) and adults with ASD (Van Bourgondien, Reichie & Schopler, 2003).

Ozonoff & Cathcart (1998) examine TEACCH as a home-based programme for pre-school children with ASD. From a total of eleven subjects two groups were formed. For four months one group received a TEACCH home programme with the other receiving no treatment. The treatment group recorded marked improvements in imitation, fine motor, gross

motor, and nonverbal conceptual skills compared to the other group. They concluded that TEACCH “is beneficial in improving the cognitive and developmental skills of young children with autism” (p. 30) In identifying the study’s limitations the authors noted the small sample size, that it was not compared to other treatment models and that parents in the treatment group, who were the initial responders, might have been more motivated to seek and apply treatments for their children. Panerai et al. (2009) sought to examine whether TEACCH could be effectively employed in an inclusive education environment as well as special education settings. They studied TEACCH in a residential centre for people with ASD and/or an ID; its use in a home and mainstream school-based programme for which parents also received training in TEACCH; and the use of non-specific approaches for students with ASD in an inclusive mainstream setting. They concluded that TEACCH led to better outcomes and ASD specific programmes were required to optimise outcomes for students. TEACCH proved effective in organising the child’s physical environment, while also stressing the importance of visual cues and prompts to assist the student’s communication. They also found it effective in its focus on individualised programmes for students and no incompatibility between TEACCH and its use in an inclusive setting. The researchers suggest that schools’ possible reservations around specialised intervention use in mainstream class settings, must prompt the school to change its attitude towards meeting a student with ASD’s needs.

Social Stories (SS), originally developed for use with children with ASD, are designed to describe a situation, skill, or concept in terms of relevant social cues, perspectives, and common responses in a specifically defined style and format with the intention that it is reassuring and informative for the user. Scattone et al. (2002) examine SS effectiveness in decreasing disruptive behaviours in three children with ASD in a special classroom setting.

Each participant was verbal with good literacy skills. Child specific written scripts were prepared outlining the target behaviour and detailing responses expected of the student. When the script was read daily with the child, they discussed it with their teacher to ensure they comprehended what was expected of them. The researchers found that SS reduced unwanted student behaviours. A further study conducted by Scattone, Tingstrom and Wilczynski (2006) examined the effectiveness of SS for increasing appropriate social interactions with peers. Again, the study examined this in relation to three boys with ASD, ranging from 8 to 13 years old and each with a history of not initiating social contact. All were verbal and capable of speaking in full sentences, with one attending a special class and two in a mainstream setting. Personalised stories based around social situations at break times were prepared for each student. A teacher, who had been trained to deliver the story read it daily with the student and confirmed comprehension through a set of predetermined questions. The intervention increased appropriate social interactions for two participants with the authors concluding that this supported the effectiveness of SS as a stand-alone intervention. They suggest further research to examine its effectiveness when used with other interventions.

Similarly, Klett and Turan (2012) conducted a study in which mothers were trained to use SS with their daughters to teach them about self-care in relation to menstruation. The girls ranged in age from 9 to 12 years, were toilet trained and could read. An initial, general SS related to puberty and the menstrual cycle was prepared by the researchers and tailored to suit the participants' individual. The SS included written steps to follow as well as illustrations. While acknowledging the study's small scale and the nascent state of research in their specific area of examination, the findings were similar to Scattone et al. (2002) and Scattone, Tingstrom and Wilczynski (2006). The parents reported high levels of satisfaction with the intervention and an intention to continue its use as necessary while the girls

exhibited improved self-care skills. Also, a similar observation in all studies was the ease with which SS could be used in a relatively non-invasive way for students.

Alexander, Ayres and Smith (2015) reviewed 23 studies examining teacher education in EBP for individuals with ASD. Articles were included if peer-reviewed and contained data on teachers of students with ASD with some form of ASD training. They found that out of sixteen identified ASD related EBPs, only five were evaluated in teacher training. Their study stemmed from a significant increase in students with ASD enrolled in US schools and the “ethical and legal requirements of teachers using EBPs, and barriers to the adoption of EBPs” (p. 15). The authors found that the optimum way for schools to provide effective ASD educational settings is to ensure teachers are trained and receive ongoing support in employing EBPs. PD which included teachers working directly with students with ASD while receiving coaching and immediate feedback was more likely to lead to greater mastery and maintenance of EBPs. Teachers also need to be skilled in generalising use of EBPs to other students and environments.

The teachers included in the studies reviewed by Alexander, Ayres and Smith (2015) were most often identified as SEN teachers with most holding a master’s degrees in SEN. However, this did not automatically equate to expertise in ASD. In fact, they found an absence of skills in ASD and argue that teachers working with students with ASD require specialist training. They note a lack of availability on teacher education programmes of EBP in ASD. Another key point made by the authors is the dearth of ongoing support and supervision for teachers using EBP. With such support, they find that teachers are more likely to apply their skills effectively and maintain their use. Without this support, it is likely that students will not experience favourable outcomes and that teachers will question the intervention’s effectiveness. Whether in receipt or not of specialised training, or ongoing

expert support, one potentially important source of teacher support is the formation of professional learning communities (PLC) (King, 2016; Desimone, 2011). These PLCs can exist within or across schools and their impact is considered within the subsequent section.

### **Potential Burnout among Teachers of Children with ASD**

The low levels of specific qualifications in SEN and/or ASD (McGough, 2007; Flatman-Watson, 2009a; 2009b; McCoy et al., 2014) coupled with the fact that 254 schools have a single ASD class (NCSE, 2016) suggests some ASD class teachers work in a school environment lacking in-school expertise or capacity to effectively support their work and, without a teaching colleague who can directly identify with their role. The NCSE (2015) calls for the Teaching Council to establish a framework for the development of teacher SEN knowledge. In the Irish context, it is the principal's role to lead teaching and learning in the school. However, challenges in providing such leadership around SEN and ASD, both with the extra administrative duties required (Department of Education, 1993; DES, 2001) and knowledge shortages in this area (Zaretsky, Moreau and Faircloth, 2008; Flatman-Watson, 2009a; 2009b) suggests ASD class teachers may not receive similar support levels as mainstream class teachers.

In the Irish context, Balfe (2001), an experienced mainstream teacher, recalls being assigned to an ASD class. Her new professional needs were “unlike mainstream teaching [requiring] very different skills and a different knowledge base”. These fostered feelings including “isolation, anxiety, ignorance and frustration” (p. 82). Lortie (1975) and Tickle (1991) also recorded feelings of isolation and disillusionment experienced by beginning teachers, as they struggled to extend their knowledge to meet the myriad needs and learning styles of their students. Balfe contends that, just like beginning teachers, those teachers taking a special needs class teacher role require a proper period of induction and preparation. Balfe

(2001) surveyed seventy teachers in newly established ASD classes. Findings revealed that “many felt ill-prepared for teaching children with an ASD and some did not have ready access to support and guidance” (p. 75) with 69% stating that they “had little or no knowledge of autism on appointment” (p. 82). Balfe regards the competence and confidence of staff as two key features of educational provision for children with ASD. She suggests the need for an ASD class teacher induction programme, to include a mentoring system, provision of ASD information and its implications for learning, and information on interventions.

Talmor, Reiter and Feigin (2005) found, perhaps counter intuitively, that the more positive the teacher’s attitude towards inclusive education the greater the extent of burnout experienced. From primary schools experienced in SEN inclusive practice, 700 mainstream teachers were invited to complete a three-part questionnaire. The first part sought personal background data while the second featured a questionnaire to ascertain levels of burnout. The third part probed environmental features typically faced by schoolteachers working in an inclusive classroom, in four areas: psychological, organisational, structural and social. The study’s principal aim was “to describe the environmental factors that relate to the work of the teacher in inclusive classrooms and to find the correlation between these elements and teacher burnout” (p. 226).

The questionnaire was completed by 330 teachers, a response rate of 47%. The general level of burnout among respondents was low though the authors suggest that many teachers suffering from burnout may not have had the time or motivation to complete and return the questionnaire. Their general conclusion was that a teacher was more likely to experience burnout “when a gap exists between what is demanded of the teacher and the

means for successful inclusion” (p. 227). They suggest that without professional supports, teachers will experience a sense of helplessness in their work. The assistance teachers most commonly sought included help from the SEN teacher, support from the school and an adaptable curriculum for students with SEN. The authors deduce that “for inclusion to succeed there should be a comprehensive effort by the school as a system and coordination between the different agencies involved” (p. 227).

Ruble, Usher, and McGrew (2011) examine teacher challenges when educating children with ASD. Each of the 35 participants was the main educator for at least one child with ASD and 94% had some formal training in ASD. The study was designed to investigate “concurrent correlations between self-efficacy and the following three sources of self-efficacy for teachers of students with autism: (1) mastery experience, (2) social persuasions, and (3) physiological and affective states” (p. 71). By identifying factors negatively impinging on levels of teacher self-efficacy, the authors hoped to address these in ways that could increase levels of teacher confidence and support, decrease teacher burnout, and improve teacher retention rates. In relation to mastery experience the authors found that years of teacher service and experience of working with children with ASD does not automatically lead to increased levels of self-efficacy. They propose that while some children with ASD may have similar diagnoses, symptoms can be markedly different, making it difficult to generalise lessons learned from working with one student to another. Support from school administrators is identified as important in supporting teacher self-efficacy, while the key stressors teachers face include classroom-based challenges and their belief in their capacity to manage these. In addressing the limitations of their study, the authors note the small sample size, that “self-efficacy is a task-specific judgment” and that the tasks they sought to measure

may be too general and not effectively characterise those most important for a teacher of a student with ASD.

Kokkinos and Davazoglou's (2009) also examine work-related sources of stress for SEN teachers working in the Greek education system. They found that, most commonly, the greatest stressors emanated from concerns regarding the student's academic and social progress. Representing approximately one third of Greek schools with SEN units, 484 schools were randomly selected from Greece's official directory of schools. The sample group consisted of 373 SEN teachers (a 31% response rate). The instrument used to measure stress levels was a 72-item scale called the *Special Educators' Sources of Stress Inventory (SESSI)*. This was a purpose-constructed scale drawing on issues identified in previous international research on SEN teachers and stress. The five main stressors for teachers identified in the study were lack of progress by the children; responsibility for children during outdoor activities; the demands of continuous supervision; uncertainty about not meeting children's SEN; and children's social development (p. 412).

One question asked participants to indicate, out of ten SEN categorical groupings, the most stressful group to teach. Teaching children with ASD topped the list with 56.8% of respondents stating that this "poses major stress" (p. 416). The next group on the list was students with behavioural difficulties with 44.2% of respondents identifying this as a source of stress. The results of their study also showed teachers "with only undergraduate training, and SE teaching experience of up to five years" at most risk of becoming "overwhelmed by their expectations related to the mission of their job" (p. 417-419). The authors call for teacher access to PD, as "with a broad repertoire of skills and behaviours, they will be more likely to perform the tasks required of them confidently and have less stressful experiences as

SE teachers and more feelings of professional achievement” (p. 422). The authors also suggest that the employment of teaching assistants, to engage in either teaching or non-teaching duties, will support the learning process and reduce pressure on the teacher.

These studies highlight a lack of preparedness many teachers feel as they commence work with children with ASD, the work pressures experienced and the need for professional supports and access to suitable PD opportunities. Balfe (2001) identified the ill-preparedness many felt and the lack of access to professional support and guidance. Talmor, Reiter and Feigin (2005) also found that, in the absence of effective supports teachers of children with SEN can experience a helplessness which contributes to burnout. Meanwhile, Ruble, Usher and McGrew (2011) found that years of working with children with ASD does not automatically equate to an increased sense of self-confidence or professional effectiveness. While support from school administrators is important much of the work stress that teachers of children with ASD feel derives from teachers’ sense of inadequacy when dealing with classroom situations.

The need for suitable supports and PD opportunities for teachers is a recurring theme in reports produced in Ireland (Government of Ireland, 1993; Parsons et al., 2009; Department of Education and Skills, 2012). Many submissions to the SERC report (Department of Education, 1993) raised the need for specialist training for teachers of children with SEN. It finds while the quality of teacher training in SEN was high, there was insufficient availability to meet demand. Thus, it calls for increased capacity at pre-service and CPD stages and recommends access for all teachers. Parsons et al. (2009) note the recommendation contained within *An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders* (Department of Education and Science, 2006) which

recommends that “all teachers who work full-time with pupils with ASDs should attend an autism-specific course of not less than 450 hours” (p. 90). Parsons et al. (2009) strongly recommend “a need to continue to develop training pathways from basic awareness raising to accredited training and continuous professional development” and that “studies should examine the influence of training on practice and evaluate outcomes for individuals with ASD” (p. 128). A key aim of the *Evaluation of the Special Education Support Service*, (PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC), 2012) was to investigate the impact of CPD being provided through the SESS with the authors examining accessibility for teachers to CPD courses, “the appropriateness of the content and process of CPD programmes for teachers; and the development of teachers’ knowledge, understanding and skills” (p. 1).

### **CPD for teachers of students with SEN and ASD: Models of Delivery and Course Content**

Quality of teaching is a key requisite for improving learning outcomes for students with ASD (NCSE, 2015). As indicated in this paper’s opening chapter, the central role that quality teaching plays in determining quality outcomes for students is well established (Darling-Hammond, 1996, 2000; Rowe, 2003). In policy advice submitted to the DES, the NCSE (2015) counselled that learning outcomes for students with ASD improved when teachers received appropriate training and as their experiential knowledge grew. A key recommendation it made was the development of teacher knowledge and competence, with advice that “Teaching Council should publish detailed information on what constitutes the mandatory ITE module on inclusive education” and subsequently should work with the NCSE to establish consistent standards across third level institutions (p. 148). It recognises the need for training and mentoring for school leaders in the education of students with ASD as well as ongoing teacher education opportunities. *Cosán* (Teaching Council, 2016)

recognises this and insists that effective CPD must be led by teacher need and allow for collaboration between those working in the classroom. However, *Cosán* does not recommend mandatory CPD, qualifications or standards in this area.

Kennedy (2014) suggests two perspectives on teacher professionalism to provide lenses through which CPD models could be viewed. The managerial aspect sees the teacher as a compliant, competent professional, who will at times require training in new policy developments. The teacher is not really the architect of these changes, more an agent to be taught new ways. On the other hand, Kennedy’s depiction of democratic professionalism sees the teacher as an active contributor, an agent for change. Here, teachers are constructing change, and leading developments in their own learning as well as that of their students.

<b>CPD policy aspect</b> <i>Features of policy that can be analysed against perspectives on professionalism</i>	<b>Managerial perspective on professionalism</b> <i>Teacher as compliant, efficient worker</i>	<b>Democratic perspective on professionalism</b> <i>Teacher as change agent and proactive advocate of social justice</i>
<b>Overall purpose</b>	Deficit (to remedy weaknesses)	Developmental (enhancing specific strengths and interests)
<b>Unit of focus</b>	Individual	Collective
<b>Teacher engagement with policy</b>	Compliance with policy directives	Contribution to policy development and considered enactment of policy directives
<b>Dominant underpinning perspective on teacher learning</b>	Behaviourist (instrumental learning)	Social constructivist
<b>Focus of learning</b>	Development of technical, role-focused knowledge and skills	Acknowledgment and articulation of values and beliefs that inform, support or inhibit acquisition and application of knowledge and skills
<b>Motivation</b>	Externally imposed	Internally driven
<b>Accountability</b>	Measured against externally prescribed standards	Measured against context-specific and negotiated desirable outcomes

**Figure 4: Kennedy’s Analysis of aspects of CPD policies against perspectives on professionalism**

Guskey (2002) suggests that, if CPD is to be effective, it must have a transformative impact on three areas. It must lead to change in teacher classroom practices. This, in turn, induces positive changes in student outcomes which influences teachers' attitudes and beliefs about their professional capacity and the possibilities for their students. King (2014) also identifies a deficit in the analysis of the effectiveness of PD programmes. She builds on models such as those offered by Guskey (2002) and suggests that the effectiveness of CPD models must also be evaluated under other categories. These include "Systemic Factors, Diffusion and Staff Outcome including Personal, Professional and Cultural impact" (p. 107).

The first category suggests the individual characters of teachers, their role in the classroom and the work cultural setting must be considered when assessing a programme. The term 'diffusion' refers to the manner in which new knowledge can be spread to other staff, something that a school should consider when deciding on a PD approach. Within the 'staff outcome' category there are three sub-sections. The first, 'personal' takes into account the personal beliefs and attitudes of staff. The second, 'professional' considers the quality and depth of the new learnings for teachers, how much is it understood and valued. Finally, 'cultural impact' considers the scope PD offers for collaborative practice and discussion among teachers, which King suggests are essential if school improvement is to be realised. The following studies, examining CPD for teachers, will be considered in the light of these models.

Marder and deBettencourt (2012) examine a 'hybrid model' graduate study programme for teachers of children with ASD consisting of five courses with face-to-face lectures, asynchronous and synchronous online modules. It was designed to meet the further training needs of teachers working in sparsely populated rural areas, without ready access to a college campus. The authors noted that the small body of literature examining teacher CPD in

ASD suggested that it leads to better outcomes for students. They believed that the dramatic increase in ASD diagnoses and an attendant need for more teachers qualified in ASD interventions, would create a growing demand for such courses. The five courses which comprised this 'hybrid' programme consisted of a survey of ASD; classroom planning for students with ASD; the use of assistive technologies for students with ASD; applied behavioural programming; teaching communication and social skills (p. 15). The programme had fifteen hours of face to face instruction, five hours of synchronous online instruction and five hours of asynchronous instruction. To determine the programme's success in meeting its objectives the authors surveyed the five course instructors and twelve students who completed the programme.

An apparent benefit of the hybrid model was the ability to deliver specialised online instruction to teachers who might not be able to access a college campus. They recognise that a solely online course might present challenges, not adequately allowing for content such as assessment of student behaviours or the collection and assessment of student data. Thus, they propose that face to face time with instructors is an important component of the programme. They suggest that future research into teacher training models should include pre- and post-assessment data on teachers' knowledge and classroom implementation of this knowledge. The lens of this study was focused on teacher knowledge rather than the classroom practices of the teachers.

Barnhill, Polloway and Sumutka (2011) also identify the rapid increase in ASD diagnoses and the impact on the US education system. They examine the prevalence of training programmes for teachers of children with ASD, the nature of the coursework offered, and scope of topics covered. Surveys were issued to 184 educational institutions in 43

different states, with responses received from 87 of these from 34 states. They contend that the immediacy of need is likely to prompt rapid development of training programmes. The study revealed that the rationale for a programme's development was most shaped by the institutions rather than state agencies. The authors question whether a lack of state-level central planning leads to programme content being determined by particular faculty interests rather than research on EBP. They note however that 73% of programmes include a field experience component, which they suggest underscores the importance of direct work with students. The authors observe that the most effective programmes tend to employ a range of objectively validated strategies and are constructed to meet the needs of the person with ASD, the professionals and the families. Following on from the results of the NSP (2009) they advise that future ASD programmes should emphasis training in behaviour intervention plans grounded in behaviour analysis. They also report that while research findings play an essential part in shaping teacher training courses, other equally important considerations should be the preferences of families and the capacity to apply strategies. The importance of programmes preparing teachers to work collaboratively with parents of children with ASD, and the significance of parents in the education of children with ASD is stressed by the authors. This echoes with the approach adopted in studies such as Ozonoff and Cathcart (1998) and Klett and Turan (2012). Rather than the teacher being a relatively passive recipient of new information, they should lie at the heart of the change process, creating new content based on their new learnings and experiential knowledge, actively collaborating with colleagues, and collectively contributing to policy development. (Guskey, 2002; King, 2014; Kennedy, 2014). As Ring (2016) reminds, this is all done for the purpose of improving student outcomes and with the student voice also central to the process.

Guskey (2002) argues that teacher perception of a CPD programme's usefulness rests on learning outcomes for students. If these improve, then the programme is valued and credited with effecting developments. Teacher commitment to new teaching strategies only comes when they are seen to work. Thus, to assess the success of particular programmes Guskey (2002) proposes a new model of CPD evaluation. This must recognise that change in practice tends to be a slow, evolutionary process. Assessors must be mindful of teachers' fear and concerns when faced with practice change. Thus, teachers must be supported in this change process, with regular support and feedback on their work and student outcomes. Evidence of student improvement builds teacher commitment to change. Ongoing professional support, beyond initial training, is vital to master new skills or embed change. He advises that teachers might need, "the encouragement, motivation, and occasional nudging [required] to persist in the challenging tasks that are intrinsic to all change efforts" (Guskey, 2002, p. 388).

Scheuermann et al. (2003), from a US perspective, see the absence of accepted professional standards in the education of students with ASD as a significant problem when planning teacher education. It is their view that "students with ASD, especially those who are low functioning, exhibit unique characteristics that pose challenges for teachers [thus] teacher must use specialised instructional techniques or students will not learn (and may even regress)" (p. 198). They add, such students require a "unique curriculum" and "coordinated services beyond what the teacher alone can provide" (p. 198). They see barriers to teacher education as a lack of cohesive and specialised CPD opportunities along with professional disagreements and controversies about ASD interventions. To address such challenges, they recommend that teachers access ASD education programmes prior to commencing in an ASD classroom role. Seeking to do so when already in situ places added pressure on the teacher

and diminishes student contact time. They contend that much ASD in-service training is too limited in scope and lacking in effective teaching practices. They highlight the common circumstance of hiring a well-known speaker to deliver on a given topic, an approach they consider ineffective, with no relationship to the practical mastery of teaching skills. Rather, their view resonates with Kennedy's (2014) vision of democratic professionalism with the teacher as an active agent of change. Similar to Guskey (2002), they contend that tuition must include comprehensive and ongoing training with supervised experiences with students with ASD and immediate feedback. Comparable to the Task Force (Department of Education and Science, 2001) and Parsons et al. (2009), Scheuermann et al. (2003) also insist that teacher education must not be restricted to "single theory approaches" which provide a "false message that only one approach will work" and curbs teacher effectiveness (p. 200). Thus, teachers must be open minded and base their teaching on the student's best interests rather than on any particular course content. Similar to Grey et al. (2005) they also emphasise the need for ongoing supervision and mentoring for teachers.

Probst and Leppert (2008) evaluated a German teacher training programme in ASD. Like Scheuermann et al. (2003), their view is that many children with ASD require specialised support in schools. They acknowledge the development of ASD-related teacher training programmes but argue there is scant research literature detailing programme outcomes. This observation correlates with Guskey (2002) who offers clear criteria for measuring the worth of CPD. For example, it should be a transformative experience leading to a change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs, effecting discernible change in classroom practice. This should, in turn, lead to measurable improvements in student outcomes. Similarly, King (2014) also alludes to the transformative nature of effective CPD, for the teachers specifically engaged with a programme, and for the wider school staff through the

“diffusion [of] organic unplanned ‘rippling’ of practices” (p. 106). Acknowledging that schools may not possess the expertise or resources to evaluate CPD effectiveness, King (2014) offers an evidence-based framework building on Guskey (2002) and Bubb and Earley (2010). This recognises teachers as “change-agents or gatekeepers of change in the PD process” (King, 2014, p.103). If teachers understood and could employ an intervention to meet their classroom needs, they were more likely to sustain the approach and make any necessary adaptations. This would lead to benefits for students. This resonates with Kennedy’s (2014) vision of the teacher as a purposeful agent for change.

Probst and Leppert (2008) looked at the effectiveness of a “structured teaching” programme, based on TEACCH, and its impact on teacher efficacy and student outcomes. They undertook pre- and post-evaluation questionnaires with ten teachers related to a Classroom Child Behavioural Symptoms Scale and a Classroom Teachers’ Stress Reaction Scale. The students involved in the study also numbered ten. The training programme’s primary goals were to provide teachers with a “theoretically valid disability model of ASD” alongside “evidence based practical methods and skills for the daily teaching and management of children with ASD in the classroom”. Probst and Leppert (2008) found the programme led to decreased teacher stress levels and improved student behaviours, leading to improved student learning outcomes. They contend that these findings validate TEACCH’s effectiveness as an educational intervention and counsel that scientifically validated interventions should form the core of teacher education programmes. To improve the external and internal validity of their results the authors identify the need for further research to replicate their results in other samples.

Howlin et al. (2007) also considered the effectiveness of an ASD intervention, the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). They examine a training programme for teachers of children with ASD and its impact on students' communication skills through a group randomised controlled trial (RCT) with 84 children divided into three groups: those receiving immediate treatment; those receiving delayed treatment; those receiving no treatment. The authors highlight that in ASD education studies, few RCTs had been conducted, but that despite this lack of an evidence base, certain therapies such as PECS enjoyed extensive use. Study participants received a two-day course in PECS, amounting to thirteen hours of instruction along with six half day school-based sessions with expert consultants over a five-month period. The results indicated "modest effectiveness" of the PECS training with student rates of initiation and use of symbols increasing. However, there was no evidence of improvement in other areas of communication (p. 473). Also, the authors noted that once the active intervention ceased, treatment effects were not maintained. Noted limitations of the study included a lack of financial resources which limited training time, and the availability of consultancy supports for teachers, meaning assessors were not blinded to group allocation or treatment phase. However, they assert that their findings corroborate Bondy and Frost (1994) and Ganz and Simpson (2004) indicating that expert training and support in the teaching of PECS can be effective in increasing symbol communication usage among language impaired children with ASD. However, unlike other studies, the authors found no evidence that PECS leads to increased verbal communication among children with ASD.

Syriopoulou-Delli et al. (2011) also examined CPD impact on the attitudes and practice of teachers of students with ASD. Their study does not directly consider student outcomes, but rather examines teacher perceptions of teaching children with ASD. Again, the authors comment on the number of children diagnosed with ASD, that it has "increased

dramatically” (p. 755). A new, inclusive model of education for children in Greece entitled “one school for all” was adopted in the last decade. Akin to the post-1998 development in Ireland, this endeavoured to provide an alternative for children with ASD to the existing option of special schools for children with other disabilities. Within the new model, children with ASD could attend a mainstream or special education class within a mainstream school. Although the authors welcome this new inclusive model and note the requirement that Greek SEN teachers hold a high level of academic qualification, they identify that the Greek teacher population has little experience of educating children with ASD. They point to the work of McConkey and Blerrie (2003) which highlights the limited time given to ASD and associated interventions on undergraduate programmes internationally and research undertaken by Probst and Leppert (2008) which suggests that interventional methods for ASD should feature strongly on such programmes.

The study involved a two-part questionnaire with 228 teachers. The first part focused on ASD teaching experience. Eighty-three teachers had received some training or had attended postgraduate seminars on ASD. Sixty-four had two years or more experience with students with ASD and were classified as “significantly experienced” (p. 758). The second part examined teacher perceptions about ASD; assessment of children with ASD; management of children with ASD; and, the teacher’s role in the education of children with ASD. Findings revealed that approximately 55% of teachers regarded ASD as “the most serious mental health disorder among children” with 75% believing children with ASD should attend a special school. Of the respondents, 55% believed that educational provision for children with ASD should prioritise social over academic skills. To properly meet student needs, 94% of respondents felt that teachers must work with other specialists, while 79% felt that, with appropriate training, a teacher could effectively work with students with ASD

(approximately 53% felt that even with appropriate training, teachers would not be able to properly identify all the challenges faced by a child with ASD). The authors posit that “an interdisciplinary educational background” coupled with “solid training in ASD teaching approaches” would support teachers and allow them to take a leading role, as part of a multi-faceted team. They stress that “it is crucial for teaching personnel to have been appropriately trained” (p. 765).

### **Professional Learning Communities**

While there is no universally accepted definition of the term, professional learning community (PLC), common characteristics attributed to effective PLCs define it as a mutually supportive group of teachers with a common drive to improve practice, a shared desire to learn and innovate, and a collective desire to improve student outcomes (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006; Hord, 2009). Wenger’s communities of practice (1998) refer to groups who have a shared concern about something that they do and have a common desire to address this concern and learn how to do things better. It is a social learning system. To qualify as a community of practice Wenger argues that it must have three defining characteristics. Firstly, it is a domain, with members sharing a commitment to a common interest. Secondly, it is a community, in that members work together, engaging in partnerships and building relationships. They share knowledge and develop their skill sets, applying these for the purpose of achieving improved outcomes. Thirdly, it is a sustained practice. The members of the group are active practitioners, building a resource bank and skills repertoire, applying their knowledge and reflecting on their practice. Wenger speaks of an alignment, “making sure that activities are coordinated, that laws are followed, or that intentions are communicated.” (2010, p. 5). This is a two-way process of communication, negotiation and collaboration. Community members are sharing experiences and knowledge, synthesizing these to create new and improve on existing practices, agreeing on shared codes

of practice and goals. It is this vision of a supportive, driven group of professionals, desirous of new pedagogical knowledge, possessed of a desire to share and create improved practices and eager to improve students' educational experiences that I envisage when using the term PLC.

Writing in the Irish context King (2016) cites the effectiveness of PLCs in a collaborative literacy intervention across five schools, stating PLCs provided teachers with the support required to engage with new practices. Likewise, Desimone (2011) posits that PLCs contribute to teacher growth and development. DuFour (2004) holds a similar view, calling for a focus on collaboration and learning rather than teaching. Similar to King (2016), Pijl (2010) focuses on students' learning claiming that by working collaboratively with colleagues, teachers discuss and reflect on their experiences and learn from each other, thus improving their capacity to meet the needs of students with SEN. Kennedy (2014) also supports this democratic model of professional collaboration and skills development. Ideally, the teacher is invested in the change process as a motivated, proactive participant, eager to develop personal and school knowledge.

Gebbie et al. (2012) conducted a small-scale study on the effect of an online PLC on the classroom effectiveness of three teachers working with children with challenging behaviours. Participants received some training and mentoring in behaviour management strategies and access to an online teacher group. The study found that online interactions with peers were a "highly effective" way to improve teacher effectiveness and the authors recommended that pre-school training programmes for SEN teachers explore ways for teachers to interact with and support each other (p. 35). Similarly, Jones (2009) considered the possible impact of the USA's *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA 2004). It decreed that students with SEN should be taught in the least restrictive environment. Jones

(2009) explored the impact of this on the teachers' professional lives, those working in mainstream and special school settings. Jones' (2009) position was that many ITE programmes did not equip teachers with the specialist pedagogy required to teach students with sensory processing disorders and an intellectual development disability (SPIDD). However, there is an expectation that "they make professional decisions about the efficacy of evidence-based strategies in their classroom; they are expected to be reflective researchers" (p. 693). The study examined the impact of an online course, designed to encourage conversations about and reflections on professional practice among teachers of students with SPIDD. Of twelve who initially enrolled, ten teachers completed an open-ended survey offering their views on different aspects of the course design. The responses were generally positive with a number of reasons identified. An introductory video presentation by the course professor was considered very helpful in providing teachers with key concepts, providing clarity on what was expected of them in the classroom and making a connection between policy concepts and classroom practice from the outset of the course. Peer sharing activities with participants providing feedback on colleagues' work was positively received. Feedback from the course professor was also valued by participants as "highly personal" and providing "meaningful directions for their development" (p. 691). Jones found that though the course was principally delivered online, it facilitated opportunities for teacher reflection and enabled participants to connect and share with colleagues from other schools as well as course tutors.

Nelson et al. (2013) also examine the concept of teacher connectedness. For them, a successful school recognises that collective responsibility for student learning occurs when there are strong, collegial teacher relationships. They state, however, that few initiatives are designed to purposely build such relationships even though research examining school improvement and PD points to teachers' desire to work in collaborative, professional

communities. Such a dynamic, they suggest, leads to greater teacher commitment to enquiry and innovation and guards against burnout. They examine the “effects of peer praise notes on teachers’ perceptions of school community and collegiality” (p. 66). From two junior high schools, seventy teachers participated in writing praise notes to and receiving them from colleagues over an eight-week period. They also received a graph numbering the praise notes written by the group each week in addition to a weekly email from the researchers offering thanks for their participation and encouraging them to continue with the notes. The researchers found that post intervention, teachers saw their relationships with each other and their sense of school community as being more positive and recommended the use of similar interventions in other schools. In presenting their findings, the researchers highlighted their study’s limitations. For example, it was only implemented in two schools, the participants were pre-dominantly white females and the effect on student outcomes was not measured.

The studies considered in this section point towards the valuable role that PLCs can play in providing teachers with an effective forum for sharing professional knowledge, developing new practices and providing personal and professional moral support for other. Wenger (1998, 2010) provides a useful framework which allows us to determine whether a particular PLC qualifies as a community of practice. If it does not, it offers clear criteria which a group can use to improve the quality, development and application of its shared knowledge and resources. Even if it not possible for groups to physically meet, Jones (2009) and Gebbie et al. (2012) indicate the potential benefits of online PLCs. With advances in digital technology allowing teachers to connect across schools, countries and continents, this offers the possibility of accelerated pedagogical developments. An examination of NCSE data on the distribution of ASD classes across schools, highlights that most schools have one such class, with 146 new classes opening in the 2016/17 school year (NCSE, 2016). Coupled with the concerns expressed about SEN qualification levels of teachers (McCoy et al., 2014;

Banks et al., 2016) and the need that special class teachers have for support in their role (Banks et al., 2016), the development of inter-school PLCs and the use of online fora presents a potentially significant support for ASD class teachers in Ireland.

### **School Leadership, Inclusive Education and Special Educational Needs**

Fullan (2005) identifies leadership as a key driver of reform in schools. If teachers are to invest themselves in PD and practice change, they must also trust and feel invested and empowered by their school leadership. To make a significant difference to students' lives, this leadership must work on developing "team based leadership in others" (Fullan, 2004, p. 17). Similarly, King (2011) points to the promotion of teachers' PD and reflection as indicative of effective leadership while Ainscow and Sandhill (2010) consider the role of leadership as a factor in promoting inclusive cultures in schools and identify a feature of effective leadership as the empowerment of staff to be critical practitioners. Riehl (2000) suggested how school leaders could lead a break from existing, exclusive practices and effect transformative, systemic changes. To overcome discrimination and move towards an inclusive model of practice she spoke of the need for inclusive values "to be addressed in administrator preparation programs" (p. 70) and saw a commitment to social justice and inclusion as core traits required in an effective school leader. To lead change in how schools can meet the evolving needs of staff and often complex needs of students with ASD, principals must be adequately supported and prepared for the role.

The SERC report (Department of Education, 1993) suggests that principals working in special schools require extra assistance with the added duties. It recommends that "administrative Principals should be recognised in all special schools at the point at which the sixth teacher...is about to be appointed" (p. 235). It also argues that principal teachers with

full-time teaching duties should be released on a part time basis to carry out attendant duties. The SERC report (Department of Education, 1993) does not overtly state the need for specialist training and support for administrative school principals. However, it does hold that view that there was “insufficient specialist training for teachers and other personnel” in the Irish education system (p. 216). It recommends that ITE contain compulsory SEN components, and the countrywide availability of in-service and induction programmes for all teachers. It also asks that inspectors working in the DES inspectorate hold formal qualifications in SEN with access to ongoing PD in this area.

The Task Force Report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) overtly addresses the professional duties and needs of principals working in schools with students with ASD. It sees student IEPs as a whole-school responsibility “involving the principal, class teachers and any learning support and guidance members of staff” (Para. 5.5). From principals’ submissions, it finds most felt unsupported in their work with children with ASD, that a considerable amount of time was expended in establishing and facilitating ASD classes with “either minimal or no support from the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate” (Para. 8.3.4). It suggests that the position of principals is changed significantly by the inclusion of students with ASD. There is an increased demand on their expertise as administrators and educators. It recommends that the DES accounts for this when considering the overall role of the principal and when allocating school staffing quotas. It also advises that the DES Inspectorate and “appropriate advisory services” should provide principals with direct support (Para. 8.6.1). Many submissions to the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) called for training and awareness-raising for school principals, boards of management and mainstream classroom teachers (Para. 12.4.1).

Similarly, *The Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders* (Department of Education, 2006) received questionnaire responses from two principals working in Special Schools for children with ASD. Both respondents suggested the need for added accommodation and amenities in the school but reported being “very satisfied that the curriculum and educational provision in the schools met the assessed needs of children with ASDs and expressed satisfaction that the staff members were adequately equipped, in training and teaching experience, to meet the specific needs of children with ASDs” (p. 47). However, the observations of principals working in mainstream primary schools with students with ASD differed from those views. Seven out of eight principals responded to the questionnaire. In these schools the students with ASD attended mainstream classes. The report records “varying levels of knowledge among principals and class teachers [regarding the] triad of impairments and their implications for learning and teaching” (p. 69). While most principals reported satisfaction that “the curriculum and educational provision in the school met the assessed needs of the children with ASDs” the majority “were not satisfied that staff members were adequately equipped, in training and teaching experience, to meet the specific needs of children with ASDs” and highlighted the need for providing SNAs for students as well as “in-service training and an advice and support service for all teachers” (p. 76).

Focusing on school principals in Ontario, Canada, Zaretsky, Moreau and Faircloth (2008) explore school leadership in special education. They identify four key areas. The first considers the principal’s role in administering and supervising SEN programmes and services; the second examines the “extent to which the construct of the principal as the instructional leader accurately depicts the role of the principal in schools with high concentrations of students with special needs” (p. 161). The third area considers the

knowledge and skills required to lead a special school while the fourth deliberates on the type of leadership preparatory programmes needed to “bridge the gap between current knowledge and leadership/classroom practice” (p. 161). The authors’ position is that school principals require particular training to create effective and inclusive educational settings. Comparable to Ireland, Ontario does not require principals working in schools with students with SEN to hold any SEN certification.

The study explored the principal’s function in overseeing SEN programmes and influence on CPD planning. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six primary and two secondary school principals. Each had at least two years’ experience and were chosen as their school provided for “a high proportion of students with special needs in a variety of regular and special education programmes and placements” (p. 164). The participants had also identified SEN as a main leadership responsibility. Analysis of the interview data identified common participant experiences, along with those unique to individual contributors. Addressing the study’s limitations, the authors counsel that findings cannot be presumed applicable to areas beyond the included school. They note the small sample size with all participants coming from one school board in one Canadian province.

Principals regarded themselves as leading the development of a school culture with expectations for all students. Key responsibilities included providing teacher access to SEN CPD and facilitating the creation of collaborative staff relationships. This was manifested through the timetabling of team meetings and the arrangement of PD opportunities. There were clear examples of distributed leadership with principals entrusting experienced staff to lead elements of CPD programmes, providing support and instruction to colleagues. Participants also identified key knowledge domains, they considered critical to develop to experience success as leaders of SEN. These included “the development of sound

instructional and assessment practices linked to measurable goals [and] nurturing relationships and networks within and beyond their schools” (p. 168). Four of the eight principals were concerned about their staff’s competence in SEN, and the shortage of qualified SEN teachers. Though all principals professed commitment to inclusive educational practice, their views diverged on what this resembled in practice. One believed “that specialized programmes work” and a preferable model for a child with “high needs” rather than a regular class placement (p. 169). Two others held an opposing view, regarding the placement of children with SEN in mainstream classes as indicative of an inclusive educational setting. One saw minimal benefit to the placement of students with SEN in smaller class settings. They argued that inclusion in mainstream settings led to “more solid teachers” with a better understanding of “what it means to have a problem” (p. 170). Another expressed a similar view, though from the perspective that students did not want to be considered different. That principal felt the exclusion of students with SEN from mainstream classes could increase their vulnerability, particularly in their teenage years.

The principals’ attitudes towards inclusion varied depending on the nature of the SEN. For instance, the principals noted an increasing number of students with ASD in the public-school system and that they presented particular challenges associated with their disorder. One called for CPD for principals focusing on different disabilities and offering guidance on best educational practice. They recommended the creation of links with schools experienced in SEN inclusion, so they “don’t have to reinvent the wheel”. They identified ASD as “one exceptionality that we’re all struggling with” and “the biggest challenge” they had faced (p. 169). Principals were most likely to recommend a special classroom setting for students with ASD. In their conclusions, the authors note that principals are often responsible for overseeing a broad range of SEN programmes “in which they have had minimal training and/or experience” (p. 173). They recommend that CPD programmes for principals

incorporate the professional experiences of serving principals. They also suggest that principals should be reflective practitioners, open to new ways of being a SEN administrator and focused on the development of instructional and distributed leadership skills, allowing them “to provide appropriate support and to realise improvement in learning and achievement for all students” (p. 174).

Horrocks, White and Roberts (2008) also examined principals’ attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN and the relationship between these attitudes and placement recommendations for students with ASD. From a stratified random sample drawn from approximately 3,000 principals in Pennsylvania public schools, the researchers received 571 responses from 1,500 surveys issued. The respondents consisted of elementary school principals (56%), middle school principals (23%) and high school principals (21%). The researchers noted the survey responses showed no significant divergence in attitudes among the different groups. The research instrument used was a four-part Principal’s Perspective Questionnaire. Part one assessed participants’ personal and professional characteristics, part two recorded their placement decisions related to the inclusion of children with ASD, part three measured specific attitude towards inclusion while part four measured general attitudes towards inclusion and special education.

The authors believed through the principal’s viewpoint, they could identify ways to develop training programmes aimed at promoting inclusion practices. In Pennsylvania, principals were not required to possess any special knowledge or specific qualifications in SEN (p. 1462). The authors identify the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) (1997), as US legislation entitling children with specified disabilities, including ASD, to “receive free, appropriate, public education.” They note that although IDEA had led to the Pennsylvania public school system enrolling more students with ASD, there “are few models

and procedures to facilitate the successful inclusion of these students” and teachers must work “in the absence of clear guidelines and procedural protocols” (p. 1763). They stress the importance of school principals providing appropriate instructional leadership and promoting inclusive practice, which they contend leads to a more positive staff attitude towards ASD and educational inclusion.

The study found a positive correlation between a principal’s attitude towards inclusion and the placement of children with ASD in mainstream classroom settings. The findings revealed that principals with direct experience of working with students with ASD were more likely to have a positive attitude towards inclusive SEN placements. This echoed the findings of Praisner (2003) who found that principals’ placement decisions were often based on their personal beliefs and experiences, which often led to students with SEN not being included in mainstream setting. This was due to the principal’s trepidation, with its roots in lack of professional knowledge around SEN.

Horrocks, White and Roberts (2008) recommend the establishment of effective models for the dissemination of knowledge about ASD to all public-school principals, as a clear understanding of the “unique social skill deficits of this population is particularly necessary for principals to effectively support both regular and special education teachers in the inclusion process” (p. 1472). They stress that principals must be aware of evidence based ASD interventions. They note that staff development focus is usually on the classroom teacher. However, they offer the view as the principal “sets the tone for the entire school community”, the principal must be knowledgeable and that it is “hard to overstate the need for informing principals” about students with ASD. Furthermore, they find that without

additional training, specifically around social development challenges in ASD, principals are ill-prepared and less likely to support greater inclusion for children with ASD.

## **Summary – Key Findings**

In the context of the Irish education system recognising the rights of all children to an appropriate education (Government of Ireland, 1998), ASD was first recognised as a distinct disability. A series of DES and NCSE commissioned studies recommend a continuum of provision for students with ASD, including the ASD class model, with it drawing from a range of interventions (Department of Education and Science, 2001; NCSE, 2009). There is debate centred on whether teachers of students with ASD require specialist pedagogies and/or the adaptation of their existing practices (Jordan, 2008; Florian and Linklater, 2010; Ravet, 2011), and whether teachers can feasibly gain proficiency in a range of interventions (Dillenburger, 2011; Healy, Leader and Reed, 2009; Kasari and Smith, 2013). The number of teachers in Ireland with postgraduate SEN or ASD qualifications is low (McGough, 2007; McCoy et al., 2014; Rose et al., 2015), and the small body of research examining the Irish context suggests the need for new practices (Flatman-Watson, 2009a; Guldberg et al., 2011; Rose et al., 2015). While the provision of CPD in ASD indicates DES support for specialist practices in addition to ITE, it is noteworthy that engagement with this is not mandatory (Teaching Council, 2016). Regarding specialist ASD interventions, research stresses the importance of identifying evidence-based practices (Travers et al., 2010; McCulloch and Martin, 2011; Guldberg et al., 2011; NCSE, 2015), with many appearing to stem from behavioural science (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009; National Autism Center, 2009; Odom et al., 2010). The need for established training standards and ongoing support for teachers is also highlighted (NCSE, 2015). Research examining the experiences of teachers of

students with ASD shows a commitment to inclusive practice but also highlights work-related stress, and the need for pre-appointment and ongoing CPD and support. Mainstream class experience does not necessarily equate to teacher effectiveness in the ASD class and there is need for support in their work. (Balfe, 2001; Talmor, Reiter and Feigin, 2005; Ruble, Usher, and McGrew, 2011). The professional benefits accruing from CPD engagement and membership of PLCs is also evident (Jones, 2009; Gebbie et al., 2012; King, 2016). Opportunities to share with professional colleagues should allow teachers to actively consider their own needs and importantly, to shape CPD content (Kennedy, 2014; Teaching Council, 2016). In the Irish context the need for a coherent support structure to support teacher professional development is indicated (Teaching Council 2015, 2016). With particular reference to the development and measurement of ASD and education related teacher knowledge across key competencies, the Autism Competency Framework (Wittemeyer et al., 2012/2015) offers a very useful template. This template can also be employed to measure and support knowledge development and implementation on a whole school level, including among school management.

The importance of school leadership for successful SEN inclusion is also established (Fullan, 2004, 2005; Ainscow and Sandhill, 2010). As the Irish education system changes to include students with ASD, the central and important role of school principals in leading change, as well as their need for support and guidance in this work has been identified (Department of Education, 1993; Department of Education and Science, 2001; King, 2011). While there has been some consultation with principals related to their experiences of leadership and SEN (Department of Education, 2006; Horrocks, White and Roberts, 2008), there has been a dearth of research exploring the experiences of principals of schools with ASD classes. As this model of provision is a significant development in the Irish education

system and considering the central role that principals can play in ensuring the success of a change process, it is important that their voices are heard, along with those of ASD class teachers. With the rapid increase in the incidence of ASD and the attendant requirement of an inclusive education system to meet all students' needs, I am also interested in the views of professionals involved in the provision of CPD and/or ASD education policy development to garner their perspectives on current practice and provision and their opinions on how policy and practice should develop.

## Chapter Three – Methodology

### Introduction

There are three main aims to this study. The first is to explore the experiences of primary school teachers working in an ASD class. Secondly, I want to examine primary school principals' experiences of leading a school with ASD classes. Thirdly, the study will examine the research evidence underpinning the effectiveness of various ASD interventions constituting elements of Ireland's policy on the education of children with ASD. To date, in the Irish and international context, there has been relatively little research exploring ASD class teachers' work experiences or primary school principals in their leadership of ASD classes. Thus, this study asks the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of class teachers educating students with ASD through the ASD class model in Irish primary schools?
2. Regarding the ASD class, what are the leadership experiences of Irish primary school principals?
3. What does the research evidence say regarding the effectiveness of various ASD interventions informing Ireland's policy on the education of children with ASD?

**Outline of Chapter Content.** The chapter will continue with a consideration of my theoretical perspective for this study. This will be followed by an outline of my research design including the rationale for chosen research methodologies. I will then discuss the steps in selecting research participants and the data collection methods used. There will be a summary of my pilot study followed by details of the steps taken to conduct the main study, including the quality assurance measures followed. Finally, I will detail the ethical guidelines observed.

## Selecting Research Participants

**Sampling.** There was an element of convenience sampling in selecting research participants for this study as I sought principal and teacher participants in my home and neighbouring counties as this would provide me with greater ease of access. There was also an element of purposive, snowball sampling. I initially sought participation from the ASD class teacher and principal in two schools that I was familiar with. When I had agreement from those schools I then asked the principal participants if they knew of other principals of schools with ASD classes who might be interested in taking part in the focus groups. I explained that I was looking to include primary schools under different patronages. This provided me with access to six other school principals who agreed to take part. From two of these schools, situated in close geographical proximity to my work travel route, I requested permission to contact their ASD class teacher to seek their participation. They agreed to participate.

However, the primary element for selecting teacher and principal participants was purposive, 'stake holder' sampling. I identified teachers who had undergone some CPD in the area of ASD specific interventions and were teaching in an ASD class. Two were in their first-year teaching in an ASD class while the other two participants had more than three years' relevant experience. This would enable me to obtain the perspective of teachers new to the ASD class role along with the views of more experienced teachers and address questions such as the impact that this has had on sense of confidence and effectiveness in the classroom. Similarly using purposive, stake holder sampling, eight principals of primary schools with ASD classes were selected to participate in focus group sessions. Again, within

this group there were principals with years of experience of managing schools with ASD classes and others who were new to undertaking this role.

With regard to choosing participants from teacher education colleges again, this was a purposive, stakeholder sampling. The participants were experienced in undertaking research in SEN and ASD and involved in the planning and delivery of teacher SEN education programmes at ITE and postgraduate levels. From the agencies involved, I contacted them and requested the participation of spokespersons with experience of examining policy and/or designing and delivering teacher education programmes.

**Seeking the ASD class teacher perspective.** A primary research focus was the experiences of ASD class teachers in the Irish primary school context. Individual, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with four teachers, two with over three years' ASD class experience, two in their first year. These candidates were purposefully chosen to examine whether the perspectives of less experienced teachers differed significantly from those with years of experience. It would also allow me to examine whether practical experience impacted on a teacher's sense of confidence and effectiveness in the classroom. The interviews were conducted in the teachers' schools. Three of the schools were under the patronage of Catholic bodies while one was under the patronage of Educate Together.

**Sample size.** My sample size was small as I was interested in learning about the personal experiences and insights of the participants, to discover their 'real world' experience of ASD class work. It allowed me to focus on the detail of their stories. Also, the sample size was manageable in the time frame available. In planning the selection of research participants, it was important to identify those most likely to provide relevant study data.

They were chosen through purposive, stake holder sampling. Teachers were qualified primary school teachers working in an ASD class and involved in designing and delivering programmes for children with ASD. They had taken some CPD in ASD specific interventions. Attendance at short courses offered by SESS or MCA or taking an online course through ICEP would suffice in this regard.

*Interview schedule for teacher interviews.* The initial four questions of the interview schedule (Appendix III) were designed to garner background information on the participants such as length of service as primary school teachers, reasons for choosing to work with children with ASD and knowledge of ASD prior to working in an ASD class. Questions four through eleven were intended to explore the participants' ASD qualifications. Also, these questions explored the participants' engagement with CPD, the benefits, if any, that they had gained from this and the impact, if any, on their sense of effectiveness and confidence in the classroom. Questions twelve and thirteen sought to examine the participants' feelings regarding the levels of support they had from agencies, teaching colleagues and school management. Question fourteen explored whether working in the ASD class had impacted on how they felt as a staff member. Questions fifteen and sixteen asked participants to consider the most challenging and rewarding aspects of ASD class work, while the final question sought recommendations participants might have concerning professional supports required by teachers working with children with ASD.

## **A brief description of the teacher participants.** The teacher participants in the study

were as follows:

### **Lyle**

Lyle has ten years' experience as a primary school teacher. The first seven were spent in mainstream classes. This was followed by a year in Learning Support (LS) and *English as an Additional Language* (EAL) teacher working with 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class. At this time, he did not envisage working as a SEN teacher. During his seven years as a mainstream classroom teacher he had worked with three children with autism. *"One of them was classic or Kanner's ASD, the other two had Asperger's."* As a resource teacher, he worked with a 6<sup>th</sup> class child with ASD and found it, *"a really fascinating way of seeing the world ... seeing life and experiencing life."* Thus, when the school opened an ASD class, Lyle applied for the class teacher position. He did not hold specific SEN or ASD qualifications though he had taken a twenty-hour online *Institute of Child Education and Psychology* (ICEP) course called 'Understanding Autism.' At the time of interview Lyle had just completed his first year as an ASD class teacher.

### **Suzanne**

At the time of interview Suzanne had graduated as a primary school teacher six year prior. She had worked as a substitute teacher in an ASD class in a special school for one year *"on and off"* and had three years' experience as an ASD class teacher. While acting as a cover teacher in the ASD class for a colleague, Suzanne decided she would like it as a full-time role. As she recalls, *"I went in blind and I just realised that I liked it."* Prior to starting in that class, she had no postgraduate qualification in SEN or ASD interventions. Suzanne had recently completed a postgraduate diploma in ASD.

### **Bernadette**

Bernadette has been working as a primary school teacher for six years. She was in her first year as an ASD class teacher. During her ITE she took a three-week special education placement and following this thought that at some future point she would like to work in the general area of SEN. She recalled that one of the children in that class had ASD. As a mainstream teacher she had some experience of children with ASD visiting her class as a part of their integration programme. She had also substituted in the ASD class. When the ASD class teacher went on career break Bernadette was offered the position. At this time, she did not hold any postgraduate SEN or ASD qualifications. Her knowledge of ASD at this point would *"have been given at staff meetings or more kind of specific to individual children... It would have come mainly from the class teacher that was here."*

### **Joan**

Joan was in her fourteenth year working as a primary school teacher. All of her teaching experience was in the area of working with children with ASD, with four years teaching an ASD class in a mainstream school, seven years in a special school for children with ASD and periods providing substitute and part time teaching in ASD class environments. Joan's ITE was in Montessori teaching and following qualification she *"stumbled upon a job advertisement for a teacher in an ASD unit and it just struck a chord with me."* At that point she did not have any ASD specific training.

### **Figure 1: Teacher Participants**

**Seeking the perspective of school principals.** Similarly using purposive, stake holder sampling, eight principals were selected to participate in focus group sessions. Four of these participants were principals of the schools where the four teacher participants worked. Each of the principals' schools had at least one ASD class. Three schools were under Educate

Together patronage while five were under the patronage of Catholic bodies. Seven participants took part in focus groups. Focus Group A consisted of four participants. Focus Group B consisted of three. It was planned for four participants in each focus group, but one had to withdraw on the morning of the arranged meeting. This principal expressed their desire to participate in the study, so it was agreed that an individual interview would be conducted following the focus group interview schedule. The questions used to guide the focus group are contained in Appendix IV.

**Focus group schedule.** The first five questions explored the initial stages of opening an ASD class, the supports provided by the DES and NCSE, and the principals' assessment of supports provided. Questions six to nine were broadly concerned with the principals' perspectives on their ASD knowledge, the extent to which they felt they could support and lead their ASD class teacher and the availability and quality of CPD available to them. Question ten queried the ASD class' impact on their workload while questions eleven and twelve considered the benefits and challenges presented by having an ASD class. Finally, questions thirteen and fourteen asked whether they had any recommendations concerning supports or education programmes teachers and principals might require for ASD class related work.

**A brief description of the principal participants.** The participants were as follows:

***Hattie***

Hattie was principal of her school since September 2008. The school had two ASD classes. The initial planning for the classes took place prior to Hattie's appointment but they opened during her first year as principal.

***Charlotte***

Charlotte's school opened two ASD classes in August 2012. The school had moved to a new building and the classes were included in the plan for this.

***Bob***

Bob had been principal in his current school for three years. The first ASD class opened in 1998. It now has five primary school and one early intervention class for children with ASD.

***Neil***

Neil had been principal in Bob's school when its first ASD class opened in 1998. He is principal of another primary school which opened its first ASD class in 2011 and a second in 2012. Plans are underway to now open an early intervention class for children with ASD.

***Dino***

Dino was principal in his school for ten years. It opened its first ASD class in September 2013.

***Katie***

Katie started as principal in 2009. Katie's school opened two ASD classes in 2010.

***Natalie***

Natalie was principal in her school for seven years. The school opened its first ASD class in 2009. It currently has two ASD classes.

***Yvonne***

Yvonne became principal of her school in 2004. At that point, the school had two ASD classes. These opened in 2000 and a pre-school class for children with ASD was opened in 2003.

**Figure 2: Focus Group Participants**

**Seeking the perspective of agencies and teacher education colleges.** I also conducted structured interviews with two officials from agencies involved in providing for the education of children with ASD and/or teacher education, and a teacher education college. I conducted individual interviews with the officials from the agencies. For the interview with the teacher education college, there were two members of the special education department present. One staff member was involved in the management of the department, the other had particular experience in ASD related work and research. I also sought the participation of the SESS, an agency of the DES. The DES declined citing an

untenable time commitment that participation in research studies would place on officials.

While I did have the participation of one teacher education college, I also sought the participation of another. I did not receive a response to my requests.

## **Theoretical Perspective**

**Ontological perspective.** Paradigms can be considered as basic belief systems which shape the holder's worldview (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The ontological question arising asks what form reality takes and what might be known about it. My ontological perspective is that the social world is constantly being constructed and reconstructed through social interactions, through our practices and rituals. This research attempts to examine and unearth the different interpretations of reality within a particular social/cultural context, the ASD class environment. I believe that policy on the education of children with ASD is in a state of constant flux as new research emerges. However, unlike research pertaining to the needs of the neurotypical students, research into the education of children with ASD is in a relatively nascent state. With the rapid increase in ASD diagnoses in Ireland and internationally, there is a pressing requirement for an acceleration to the pace of research, a requirement for input from education professionals, parents/guardians and persons with ASD. I hold a positive view of teachers as being generally, reflective practitioners. As Ireland has developed its ASD education policy, I ask whether teachers, typically educated for mainstream classroom work, have been placed in an acutely challenging position in the ASD class. I also question whether the advent of ASD classes has increased leadership demands on school principals. While there has been research into the effectiveness of various ASD educational interventions there is little examining the teachers' experiences of the real-world ASD classroom environment, operating a policy of eclectic provision, as they try to apply these interventions.

**Epistemological perspective.** Epistemology is concerned with the relationship that exists between the ontology, or ‘reality’ and the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Sobh & Perry, 2006). My epistemological perspective is that ASD class teachers are in the position of ‘knower’, that they can provide valuable insights into how policy is working in practice and the impact on them, both professionally and personally. They can also provide their interpretation of the impact of policy on children with ASD. Similarly, I feel that principals can provide valuable insights into how ASD classes have impacted on the fabric of their school, their ability to lead the school and their confidence in their management and leadership abilities. I also wanted to interview personnel from the DES, SESS, NCSE, MCA and teacher education colleges to gain their perspectives on policy and practice in relation to education and ASD.

**Factors informing my theoretical perspective.** My theoretical perspective is informed by my professional experience as a mainstream secondary school teacher, my experience as the parent of a child with ASD and my experiences of assisting in the operation of a school for children with ASD, with that school’s educational and behavioural interventions informed by ABA principles. My supposition is that Ireland’s debate on ASD education policy has been conflicted and fractious. This may have adversely impacted on the debate’s quality and subsequent outcomes for children with ASD, teachers and principals. My own experience with ITE leads me to query whether the competencies attained here sufficiently enable teachers to meet the educational needs of a significant number of children with ASD. This question also stems from my experiences of home schooling my child and the additional knowledge I required for this educator role. I consider that in Ireland, we are in the early stages of building our research knowledge base into ASD educational provision and while this presents many challenges for students with ASD, their families and education professionals, it also presents opportunities. There is the opportunity to learn from

developments in other jurisdictions as well as mining the experiences of principals, teachers and students with ASD in Ireland's schools to learn of policy in practice and to listen to suggested policy amendments they might have.

## **Research Design**

This is a qualitative research design employing face to face, semi-structured interviews and focus groups as the main sources of data for exploring the experiences of ASD class teachers and principals in primary schools with ASD classes. I also conducted interviews with personnel from agencies and teacher education colleges involved in the education of children with ASD. Through my interview questions I sought to obtain the views of ASD class teachers on the CPD received in ASD interventions, with a focus on how this has informed their work. I explored their experience of professional support received from the DES and associated agencies such as the SESS, and of the support and leadership from school management. I also examined whether the ASD class teacher role had affected their relationship with colleagues.

**Interpretive phenomenological approach.** I adopted an interpretive phenomenological approach to the study, seeking to obtain the participants' subjective reality and 'world view'. In preparing a design to gather and analyse the data I drew on Creswell's (2009) six-step design plan (p. 185-193). To gather data, I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the four teachers who had taken some CPD in ASD interventions and were involved in designing and delivering ASD class programmes. Two of the interviewees were first year ASD class teachers, while two had three years' experience or more. This enabled me to get the perspectives of teachers new to this role as well as those of

teachers with more experience in the position. Each interview lasted approximately sixty minutes, was digitally recorded and transcribed with typed manuscripts produced. I analysed the interview content with the help of the NVivo 10 software package. For each interview, I drew from a schedule of interview questions which emerged from the research literature. These were agreed beforehand with my thesis supervisors.

I also interviewed school principals and officials from state agencies supporting the education of children with SEN. I hoped that this would provide me with a richer understanding of the wider context of SEN and ASD educational provision. There were two focus groups of primary school principals. It was initially planned that there would be four in each group. However, as previously indicated this arrangement changed to one focus group of four principals, one of three and an individual interview. Within these groups, I selected the principals of the schools from which the teacher participants were drawn. I also selected four principals from other schools. I drew from questions based on research literature and agreed beforehand with my thesis supervisors. Each focus group lasted for approximately sixty minutes, was digitally recorded and transcribed with typed manuscripts produced. I analysed the interview content with the help of the NVivo 10 software package.

Similarly, I conducted semi-structured interviews with two officials from agencies involved in providing for the education of children with ASD, and two personnel from the special education department of a teacher education college. One official from each of the agencies was interviewed, with two interviewees from the teacher education college. One official was involved in research and policy advice preparation. Another worked in a senior management position providing oversight on the organisation's work of providing education programmes in ASD to teachers and parents. The personnel from the teacher education college were experienced researchers in SEN with one having particular experience of ASD

related research. They were also involved in the design of teacher education programmes. Once again, questions were agreed beforehand with my thesis supervisor and based on the research literature. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed with typed manuscripts produced. I analysed the interview content with the help of the NVivo 10 software package.

I had also hoped to interview personnel from the DES. However, I was informed that due to the volume of requests it receives, it could not participate in my study. I also wanted to interview personnel from the special education section of another teacher education college, but I did not receive any responses to my correspondence.

**Rationale for chosen research methodologies.** My decision to use a qualitative research design was informed by a review of research literature exploring the experiences of teachers working with children with ASD and engaging in CPD in the areas of SEN in general and/or ASD specific interventions in particular. An examination of this literature identified a considerable number of pertinent papers that had a robust, qualitative research design (Balfe, 2001; Prather-Jones, 2011; Hanline, Hatoum and Riggie, 2012; Swanson et al., 2012, Mak and Zhang, 2013). This reinforced my view that a qualitative research paper examining the experiences of some teachers of children with ASD was possible and could possess some academic merit.

**Qualitative research in the Irish education context.** The regard with which qualitative research is held in Irish research and policy advice circles is evident in Parsons et al. (2009). In explaining the use of the word ‘evidence’ in the title the authors explain that this refers to “peer-reviewed empirical studies published in academic journals (including the collection of data which could be qualitative or quantitative in nature)” (p. 38). They also

note that a DES inspectorate report (2006) evaluating ASD educational provision was a qualitative study. Among their data gathering approaches Daly et al. (2016) also employed qualitative methods, conducting semi-structured interviews with teachers, SNAs and parents. The impact of these reports on policy formation in Ireland is evident as they are either regularly cited by the DES as evidence supporting its policy on the education of children with ASD or where commissioned by the NCSE to assist with shaping its policy advice to the DES. Thus, I believe that a qualitative research model is a manageable, viable and credible approach to take in completing this study.

### **Data collection methods**

The data collection methods used were a review and analysis of pertinent academic literature; semi-structured interviews with ASD class teacher participants; structured interviews with officials from various agencies and organisations associated with the education of children with ASD; and in-depth, focus group interviews with primary school principals.

**Conducting the literature review.** Yates (2004) identifies a good literature review as setting up for the reader why the subject being addressed matters. It allows the researcher to consider the appropriateness and relevance of the topic. Similarly, Marshall & Rossman (2011) identify the literature review's value in helping the researcher to define and re-define their research questions as possible gaps and needs are identified. It also allows the investigator to position their study within the wider field of related research. The first stage of this study involved desk bound research and analysis of international and national research pertaining to the education of children with ASD, including the impact that working with children with ASD can have on teacher self-confidence and sense of classroom effectiveness.

I also examined literature exploring factors impacting on attrition rates among SEN teachers in general and a particular focus on ASD. This stage of the research also examined research, reports and legislation informing Ireland's ASD education policy. The resources used for conducting the literature review have been outlined in the paper's first chapter.

**Semi-structured interviews.** The next stage of data collection involved separate face to face, semi-structured interviews with each of the teacher participants. The interview schedule (Appendix III) was piloted prior to these interviews. While the interviewer might come to the table with a set of key questions Robson (2011) notes the scope semi-structured interviews allow for the interviewer to modify and deviate from a set of pre-determined questions based on the interactions with the interviewee. The interviewer can follow up on interesting responses and omit questions not relevant for particular respondents. Opdenakker (2006) outlines the opportunity the synchronous, semi-structured interview process provides to observe and respond to the interviewee's social cues. However, the interviewer must also be careful to observe whether their body language or other social cues are influencing participants' responses.

**Focus group interviews.** Cohen et al. (2011) describe the focus group as a contrived setting, which allows a researcher to assemble a group to concentrate on a particular issue. While the focus group generally produces less data per individual than one to one interviews, it still facilitates a lot of data collection in a relatively short time. It can generate discussion and diversity of opinion allowing the researcher to observe group interactions and participant viewpoints (Flick, 2007). Robson (2011) describes the use of focus groups as a "highly efficient technique for qualitative data collection", enabling participants to share opinions and to provide checks and balances to each other's views (p. 294). However, he counsels against

allowing certain voices to dominate lest the views of the less articulate or extrovert be lost. He recommends that for an hour-long session, there should be approximately ten questions with responses audio-taped to allow for listening back over the content and the extraction of pertinent data. May (2003) also stresses the importance of having “a theoretically informed and user-friendly interview schedule” to use with those who are well positioned to address the issues (p. 205). Following a piloting of the questions, I conducted focus group interviews with one group of four principals, one of three and an individual interview with one principal to explore their experiences of managing a school with one or more ASD classes.

**Field Notes.** Field notes refer to the researcher’s records of observations made during the data gathering process. These may include annotations on participant behaviours; on the researcher’s feeling during an interview session; or accounts of the physical environment in which the interview takes place (Schwandt, 2015). While it can be difficult to write notes during interview or focus group sessions, it is recommended that notes are written as soon as possible. During the sessions, key words and phrases can be written down as an aide-memoire (Pyrzczak & Bruce, 2005). Keeping field notes can allow for reflection on what worked well and what may require amendment in the data collection process. They also provide the researcher with an opportunity for self-reflection about potential biases held or emotional responses to the information (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

I kept field notes to remind me of the interview environment and the appearance and demeanour of the participants. I also made annotations noting aspects such as tone of voice to guard against misinterpreting the meaning of words used by the interviewees. An early and important purpose for me, of keeping field notes was to monitor my response to the information being provided. For example, during my pilot interview I noted that when the interviewee was describing a child’s behaviours my mind was drawn to my own child with

ASD. I had to be careful that I didn't become lost in my own thoughts to the detriment of sustaining focus on the interviewee. I also had to be careful that when assigning meaning to the interviewee's responses, I was not transferring my feelings towards my child onto their relationship with their student.

## **Data Handling**

Raw and processed data was securely stored for the duration of the study, separate from the computer, on a portable hard drive securely stored under lock in my home office. All hard copy interview transcripts along with notes related to these are kept under lock. Upon my graduation from the course, unless otherwise agreed with the study participants, I undertake to erase all electronic data files and to shred all hard copy files. Any data retained at the end of the project will be archived securely thereafter at DCU Institute of Education, St Patrick's Campus. Access to this data will be restricted to the author, his principal supervisor and auxiliary supervisor. The data will only be retained with the participant(s) written consent.

## **Pilot Study**

**Individual interview pilot.** A key function of a pilot study is to trial a research instrument before use in the final study (Baker, 1999). It enables the researcher to gain experience using the research instrument; to identify logistical challenges to conducting the research and; to consider the research protocol's feasibility (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). I piloted the interview schedule for teachers (Appendix III) with a primary school resource teacher who also worked as an ASD class relief teacher. Although that teacher had several years' mainstream classroom experience it was their first year to work in an ASD class. As I listened back to the interview that evening and reflected on the experience I was aware that I was so concerned about the process (*Would my digital recorders work properly?*

*Would I get to cover all of the questions?)* that I initially sounded stilted in my enquiries. This improved as my nerves settled and the interview progressed. Also, as previously indicated, I had to ensure I did not transfer my feelings about my personal situation onto the interviewee. I learned that while I had to ensure I was properly prepared for my interviews, and that I had to try and create a comfortable space for the participant, I was not responsible for producing “good answers”. I had to trust the interviewee and let them tell their story. I was happy that the questions I used were appropriate and that they could be covered in the time allotted for the interview.

For the pilot, I recorded the interview on two devices, my laptop using a programme called ‘*Audacity 1.3*’, and on an Apple iPhone 5. The recording quality on both devices was of a clear standard. However, it was easier to transcribe the interview using the *Audacity 1.3* software as its functionality made the transcription process easier. It was also easier to have two panes open on my computer screen and to move quickly between these. While, as a precautionary measure I used both devices to record all of the interviews and focus groups, I used the *Audacity 1.3* recordings when transcribing. Also, initially during the pilot study I transcribed directly into NVivo 10. I found this cumbersome as it did not have the same functionality as MS Word. Thus, from that point on I transcribed into MS Word and then copied and pasted this file into NVivo 10.

**Focus group pilot.** The focus group interview schedule was initially piloted with a primary school deputy principal, with particular responsibility for overseeing their school’s SEN provision and, involvement in planning for the opening of the school’s ASD class. It was their first year to work in a school with an ASD class. I initially approached the school principal to seek the Board of Management’s (BoM) permission to conduct the research with

the staff members. I provided the principal with copies of the Plain Language Statement (PLS) (Appendix VII), the Informed Consent Form (ICF) (Appendix VIII) and my proposed interview questions (Appendix IV) and offered the chance to ask questions in relation to the study.

With the school's permission I recruited my volunteers and provided them with copies of the PLS and ICF and obtained their approval for the study. The focus group interviews took place in a small resource room in the school and, as with the individual interviews, were recorded using *Audacity 1.3* and the iPhone 5 'Voice Memos' app. Following this piloting of the focus group questions I ran a further pilot with a group of principals. I considered the data gathered from this to be of such value that I sought the participants' permission for its use in the study. All participants agreed to this. Conducting the interviews and focus groups and transcribing them provided me with valuable practical experience of carrying out research interviews and allowed for reflection on the interview process and questions used. There was no apparent confusion among the participants regarding the questions. Thus, I was satisfied that the questions posed were appropriate and could be covered in the time allotted for conducting the focus group interview.

## **Main Study**

I wrote to the BoM of the schools seeking permission to contact their principal and the ASD classroom teacher to request their participation in this study. They were informed that participation involved classroom teachers agreeing to a semi-structured interview lasting in the region of 45-60 minutes (Appendix VII). I planned to conduct these interviews in the school at the end of the teachers' school day. The BoMs of the relevant schools were also informed of my intention to conduct a focus group with a selection of school principals. I

initially planned to conduct the focus groups in a local hotel's meeting room, thinking this would provide a neutral setting. However, they took place in two of the contributing schools as this proved more convenient for the participants. As a gesture of appreciation for the participants' time and also a way to 'break the ice' at the outset I brought along some pastries. I checked with the host principal beforehand to check that this would be okay.

When conducting the focus group interviews, I began by asking each member to introduce themselves by name. This allowed me to quickly attach a name to each voice as I listened back to the session. Also, to increase my familiarity with the participants, I tried to name check individuals as they made contributions to the discussion. To guard against the possibility of particular participants dominating the discussion I continually observed the group to check for any non-verbal signs that a person might want to speak. When a person had finished speaking I checked if the group wanted to make further observations before moving to the next question. When asking questions, I began with different group members, so each participant was provided with the opportunity to lead into the next phase of the discussion.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews with officials from state agencies supporting the education of children with ASD. The purpose was to consider, from their perspective, the evidence supporting ASD interventions included in Ireland's CPD programmes for ASD class teachers. Also, I was interested in exploring how teacher feedback on these courses is obtained. Finally, I was interested in discovering how regularly the MCA liaised with professional bodies representing teachers/behaviour analysts/TEACCH/DIR-Floortime to ensure that standards of CPD content are being maintained and to keep abreast of research developments.

## Quality Assurance

Working to ensure my research work's reliability I employed the following procedures. I consulted with my supervisors regarding my planned participant interview schedules and ensured that the interview schedules aligned with the research literature and the research questions. Having transcribed the interview transcripts, I re-read them and listened again to the recordings to guard against transcription mistakes. This process allowed me to move from a general sense of the information contained within towards a more detailed analysis. Repeated listening to the interviews allowed a deeper appreciation of interviewees' tone and nuance. It also identified for me issues raised which required clarification with the participants. For example, in my interview with Suzanne she mentioned a TEACCH training programme, involving direct work with students, which she found particularly useful:

*M: These were pupils from a school that was local to...*

*S: Yeah, they're brought over from America, from North Carolina, all of the instructors.*

*M: The instructors are?*

*S: Yeah, em...*

*M: Okay, but you said there were children who were brought in, were there?*

*S: Yeah, yeah, the instructors come over from North Carolina and they go, and go to the local schools that have units or are special schools.*

*M: Okay, right.*

*S: And they decide then. They bring children, so you have a wide range group and a wide range of abilities that you work with, and you do work with every group during the time.*

As I listened back to the interview I was unsure whether the student groups were mixed ability groups or whether each group had students with similar needs and functioning at a comparable academic or behavioural level. Thus, I contacted Suzanne with my query and she clarified that the latter group structure was the dynamic.

## **Data Analysis**

In analysing the data, employing the NVivo 10 software package, I developed a codebook with the codenames alongside their definitions (Appendix IX). In devising this, I followed the eight-step suggestion of Tesch (1990) as outlined in Cresswell (2009, p. 186). This entailed taking the transcripts and reading them to divine the underlying meanings contained within. Following this, a list of topics was made with similar topics clustered together. Topics were classified under headings such as ‘Major Topics’, ‘Unique Topics’ and ‘Others’. From these, shorthand codes were created and used to highlight different segments of the text. I also kept memos to record my comments and reflections on the data. I read through the interview and focus group transcripts again while listening back to the relevant digital recordings. This was to ensure that interviews were accurately transcribed. It also allowed me to pick up on the nuance of participants’ tone. As I identified the various themes I extracted pertinent participant quotes (Appendix X). It was important that the participants’ voices were clearly evident and present to support and illustrate research findings. I also considered my themes and findings in the light of the research literature. In seeking to establish the trustworthiness of qualitative research Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to the four categories of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Credibility.** Through my literature review I endeavoured to deepen my appreciation of the complexity of the topic. I was conscious of my position as the parent of a child with ASD, and as a person who had advocated on behalf of an ABA school. I wanted to guard, as much as possible, against personal biases in the study. Thus, before conducting interviews, I discussed with my supervisor and ancillary supervisor my research plan including my proposed interview schedules and methods for data collection to ensure that it was a coherent

and valid process. In interrogating my research topic, I used multiple perspectives (Brantlinger et al., 2005). I also sought to be forthright about my perspective as a parent and teacher as well as attempting to understand and disclose my personal beliefs and the assumptions and biases held (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

I interviewed teachers and principals from different primary school types, spokespersons from agencies involved in ASD education policy and CPD provision, as well as personnel from the special education department of a teacher education college. I also sought participation from SESS and DES. Though they could not participate I read DES circulars, government acts and *Dáil* (parliamentary) submissions to give me a sense of their position. When I conducted the interviews and focus groups and analysed the interview data, I sought affirmation from study participants to ensure I was accurately interpreting their contributions. I also provided drafts of my work to my thesis supervisors.

Throughout the interview process, I worked to establish an interpretative validity, to get a sense of the participants' phenomenological worlds, to see things through their eyes (Burke Johnson, 1997). As the interviews took place I used 'clarification probes' (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 54). These allowed me to reflect back what the participant was saying, to check with them that I was correctly interpreting their words and inviting clarifications (King, 1994). I also provided participants with verbatim transcripts of their interview or of their focus group session, inviting them to review and identify any inaccuracies.

***Audit trail.*** To reinforce my study's credibility, I maintained a physical audit trail to demonstrate the research steps taken. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to the maintenance of an audit trail as an important trustworthiness technique in research. Koch (2006) contends that it provides the reader with a picture of the work done and a sense of the researcher's thoughts,

thus increasing the reader's trust in the study's validity. I preserved an audit trail to demonstrate how I worked through my study to arrive at my findings. When reporting the findings, I used sufficient quotes and thick descriptions to provide evidence for my interpretations and conclusions (Brantlinger et al. 2005).

I maintained a record of the literature review using *RefWorks*. I kept a record of documentation used to recruit research participants. I maintained a log of the dates and locations of interviews and focus groups conducted. I made audio recordings and transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups. Repeated listening allowed me to focus on the interviewee's tone as well as words, leading to a deeper appreciation of the content. This also allowed me to reflect on my own place in the interview process, to be attentive to my biases and to consider how I might be impacting on participant responses. I also kept field notes generally related to descriptions of the physical interview locations; my observations of the interviewee, reflection notes on the interview and self-reflection notes concerning how I had felt during and after the interview process. I sought and engaged in professional development in relation to NVivo and used NVivo 10 to analyse my data, initially picking out words and phrases that struck me, and breaking the content down into themes and sub-themes. I checked these for resonance with the current research literature, noting where my findings corresponded and diverged.

**Transferability.** In qualitative research, 'transferability' denotes the extent to which a study's results can be generalised to other contexts or settings. Denscombe (1998) highlights the need for a 'thick description' outlining the place and context of the research, and of the participants. The provision of this detail allows readers to determine how applicable the study is to their own context (Brantlinger et al., 2005). A description of the teacher and principal participants is provided earlier in this chapter. These participants work within the

Irish education system, and in mainstream primary schools with one or more ASD classes. While schools with different patron bodies were successfully sought, all participant schools are governed by the same legislation and DES circulars. Also, the study sought the views of teachers working in ASD class settings. It did not seek insights into the experiences of teachers working with students with ASD in a mainstream class setting. The findings made in this study which relate to the perspectives of ASD class teachers do correspond with findings in the research literature. Similarly, there is a parallel between the principal related findings and the research literature.

**Dependability.** Another criterion identified by Lincoln & Guba (1985) as important in establishing research trustworthiness is ‘dependability’. The dependability of a qualitative study refers to the consistency and logic of the researcher during the research process. This stems from the researcher’s account of work undertaken and the adaptations made to the study as it developed (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As discussed and detailed earlier, I maintained an audit trail during my research and discussed findings made in the context of the research literature. I also consulted with and received feedback from my thesis supervisors as I worked through drafts of chapters.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability in a study is concerned with whether the findings made could be independently verified by another researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). It asks whether the data gathered and the researcher’s analysis of this is buoyed by the material gathered and described in the audit trail. Are the findings made supported by the literature or is there a coherency to findings made that may diverge from other research findings or which may not have emerged at all prior to a researcher’s work? This must be clear for the reader to

see and allows them to confirm, for themselves, the quality of the data and the study's trustworthiness ((Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

## **Ethics**

Approval for my research work was sought from and granted by the DCU Institute of Education, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee (REC) and any work which involved human participants was not undertaken until this was obtained. All participants in the study were provided with a Plain Language Statement and two copies of an Informed Consent Form. Once they were satisfied that they understood the nature of the study and the expected extent of their participation the consent forms were signed and witnessed. From this consent form participants knew that involvement in the study was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without penalty. Participants were provided with one copy while I filed the other in a secure location.

There were no risks to the participants in taking part in this study. A potential benefit for teacher and principal participants was the opportunity to voice their views and reflect on their experiences. Also, the study could potentially influence, in some small way, the future direction of teacher CPD which may be of some benefit to the teaching profession and to students with ASD. For participants from the various agencies involved in the education of children with ASD it may have provided the opportunity for them to reflect on their work in this area.

Every possible effort was made to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants through the use of pseudonyms and not providing any identifiable features in the report. However, because the number of participants was small anonymity could not be guaranteed. The data collected will not be used for any purpose, other than that stated at the

beginning of the project, without the permission of the participants. All of the data will be destroyed on my graduation from the course.

## Chapter Four - Findings and Discussion Chapter

### Introduction

This study aimed to examine the experiences of class teachers and school principals educating students through the ASD class model in Irish primary schools. An interpretative research design was employed utilising qualitative methods of data collection. This included in-depth, individual semi-structured interviews with four ASD class teachers selected through purposive, stakeholder sampling. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with two representatives from the special education department of a teacher education college; a representative from an organisation involved in the allocation of teaching resources to schools and the commissioning of research and provision of policy advice to the DES; and one representative from an organisation involved in the provision of ASD specific PD courses for teachers. The purpose of these interviews was to consider their perspectives on PD for teachers and principals and on current practice in the Irish setting. They also sought to examine how these organisations liaise with relevant professional bodies to ensure standards of CPD content are maintained. Two focus groups, each consisting of four participants, were held with school principals, selected through purposive, stakeholder sampling. While the principals shared the common experience of leading primary schools with an ASD class the researcher was interested in learning of their different interpretations of that experience and from their interaction and discussion with each other. Audio records of the interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded.

**Structure/organisation of the chapter.** The decision was made to combine the findings and discussion into a single chapter with the view that this provides greater clarity and coherence for the reader. Each main section of the chapter presents and describes the findings made in relation to that theme. This is immediately succeeded by a discussion of

these findings in the light of the research literature. For this study, it was important that the voices of the teacher and principal participants, in their own words were heard. Due to word count considerations, and to assist the narrative flow there is a limit to the use of participants' verbatim quotes. From the analysis of the interviews and focus groups, a number of overlapping themes and key findings emerged. In discussing these themes, I refer to the research literature and draw upon the comments and observations received through my interviews with representatives from the special education department of a teacher education college and two organisations involved in the allocation of teaching resources, commissioning of research, delivery of policy advice and provision of PD for teachers and parents.

### **A Summary of Key Themes and Findings**

From the teacher interviews and principal focus groups, three key themes emerged (Appendix XI), access to and engagement with CPD including the value of professional learning communities (PLCs); leadership challenges; and changed workplace dynamics. From these, a number of sub themes appeared, and these are outlined in Figure. 3. While there were common overarching themes, beneath these there was some difference between the expressed needs of teachers and principals. These are discussed in the succeeding sections of this chapter with reference to the research literature.



Figure 3: Key Themes from Teacher Interviews and Principal Focus Groups

**Continuous professional development.** Teachers and principals valued CPD.

Teachers sought easier access to courses on ASD interventions. They reported receiving little ASD related content during their ITE. They expressed concern about their qualifications for ASD class work and spoke of the positive impact of ASD specific CPD. They identified the aspects of CPD considered most useful, including the interventions covered and modes of CPD delivery.

Principals wanted timely access to relevant CPD for teachers and spoke of teachers starting in ASD classes without adequate training. Both principals and teachers noted the absence of ASD related programmes for SNAs and spoke of the implications. Principals criticised the absence of specific CPD for principals, identifying the need for courses centred on practical skills and information for the management of the extra administration accompanying the ASD class. They also wanted to improve their ASD knowledge, thus increasing their capacity to support the ASD class teacher's work, something they perceived as a significant leadership challenge.

***Professional learning communities.*** For personal support and new knowledge acquisition, all teachers and principals identified the importance of Professional Learning Communities (PLC). While all teacher respondents spoke of continuing good relations with colleagues, each indicated that their ASD class role had altered the relationships and suggested some feelings of isolation from co-workers. CPD provided opportunities to meet fellow ASD class teachers and share knowledge and experiences. Affirmation received from fellow ASD class teachers provided satisfaction and encouragement. Great value was also placed on the school principal's support. All principals encouraged their CPD and links with ASD class colleagues in other schools, and regarded this as a crucial professional support, which they did not feel fully equipped to offer.

All of the principals also spoke of their need for professional support in ASD class management and their sense of professional inadequacy around ASD issues. They depended on fellow principals to share information and provide guidance on ASD class set up and administration. They sought advice on dealing with student related issues. This dependence on each other stemmed from what was considered an absence of direction and information from bodies such as the DES and NCSE.

Julia, a spokesperson for a state funded organisation involved in research and the provision of SEN policy advice to the DES, stated that her organisation had not issued any policy advice regarding the principals' role around ASD classes. However, in a review of current ASD class provision, principals had been consulted and she indicated, "*if the function of the principal comes through when we really analyse our findings... we would address it.*" This study's findings suggest that the ASD class has introduced new challenges for school principals, many of which they did not feel fully equipped to manage.

**Leadership challenges for principals and teachers.** Having an ASD class altered the principals' leadership demands. They reported a substantial increase in administrative duties without adequate guidance from the DES or NCSE. They spoke of difficulties encountered in resourcing the class and outlined their knowledge deficits around ASD and ASD interventions. Consequently, they questioned their capacity to professionally support the ASD class teacher and, to lead teaching and learning for the ASD class as they could for mainstream groups.

Similarly, teachers identified their increased workload in the ASD class with some doubting their ability to effectively manage this. They spoke of the increased managerial and administrative duties required, including the preparation and amending of IEPs; personnel

management of SNAs including work schedule planning and training provision; meetings with ancillary professionals; and meeting and dealing with the expectations of parents.

**Changed workplace dynamic.** Joan’s entire primary school career was spent in a special class environment. Although initially feeling on the “outskirts” of the staff, this changed as her experience grew. For the other three teachers, while their ASD class work brought significant challenges and increased stress levels, they did not always feel this could be discussed with colleagues. They feared adverse judgement for experiencing difficulties managing a class of six students. This was particularly prevalent for the two teachers who had recently started in the ASD class. Another reason offered for not sharing with colleagues was concern that stories of ASD class challenges would discourage other from working there. In addition, there was a sense that colleagues without ASD class experience could not identify with the challenges. Thus, teachers valued the opportunities to meet with other ASD class colleagues, and appreciated affirmation received from them.

The relationship dynamic had also changed for all of the principals. They did not feel expert in guiding the ASD class teacher’s work. Thus, the professional relationship differed to one with a mainstream class teacher. They questioned their adequacy in leading the class and identified their dependence on the ASD class teacher to guide them on ASD class matters. They also outlined the increased amount of time spent trying to access ASD class supports. Findings relating to these three themes and associated subthemes (Fig. 3) will be presented and critically examined with reference to research literature.

## **Continuous Professional Development**

**Introduction.** A common finding among teacher and principal participants was the importance of teacher access to ASD specific CPD. It was recommended that this start prior

to commencement in the ASD class, as such access proved difficult. On-going CPD, evolving to meet teacher needs was also recommended. Teachers were mostly positive about the quality of CPD and the impact on their sense of classroom confidence and effectiveness. However, concern was conveyed that content often failed to advance in line with teachers' changing needs. There was also some criticism from teachers and principals regarding CPD scheduling as current timetabling saw too much class contact time missed. Principals welcomed CPD availability for ASD class teachers but criticised the absence of CPD related to principals' challenges around ASD class management.

**Participant perceptions of CPD.** Participants were generally positive about the content of courses, identifying CPD as positively affecting their sense of classroom confidence and effectiveness. Benefits acknowledged included teaching skills' development, increased ability to plan the classroom environment, and IEP preparation. For example, Lyle described a C-ABA course as *"most beneficial...from a teaching skills point of view and then adapting the behaviours"* and recounted how a course in TEACCH *"really informed...my classroom layout and how I approached things."* Likewise, Suzanne spoke of TEACCH enabling her to improve her classroom layout while PECS and Social Stories provided skills *"applicable day to day in the classroom."* Teachers most commonly identified as beneficial, CPD considered directly and practically applicable to daily classroom life. Commonly referenced were TEACCH, C-ABA, PECS and Social Stories. However, timely and on-going access to CPD was a challenge, as was access to on-going support. Course content repetition was also identified as a challenge with the suggestion that the suite of CPD programmes did not properly consider more experienced ASD class teachers' needs.

**Access to CPD.** Of the four ASD class teachers, none held postgraduate ASD or SEN qualifications prior to taking up their position. There was a general feeling among teacher and

principal respondents that ASD specific training was necessary and they criticised difficulties accessing pre-placement CPD. For example, Bernadette proposed that teachers should receive pre-training in ASD interventions thus enabling them to more effectively address classroom issues:

*B: Well, I'd love the, if, you know, you knew that you were going to go into an ASD class that you could attend any courses relating to ASD ... I know having done courses prior to coming in here it definitely, you feel okay I'm, I can do this, I have a certain skill set already going into it rather than going off the deep end."*

Being declined pre-appointment access to *SESS* and *Middletown* courses frustrated her. Similarly, Charlotte, a primary principal, wanted a longer preparatory period before opening ASD classes to allow for training. Her teachers had no prior ASD experience. However, the DES informed her staff training would be provided after the class opened:

*C: We would have preferred to have a lead in period before enrolling the children ... But, that wasn't available. What we had was I went with a teacher who was interested at the time in taking the class, to a day's in-service in Athlone, an introduction to ASD.*

Charlotte's fellow principal Dino also criticised a lack of pre-training. He fought for teacher pre-training and believed if the school had not shown, "*sheer bolshiness...the class would have opened with the six children and a teacher who had no training whatsoever on day one*".

All principals considered on-going CPD in ASD interventions as essential for teachers' work. Charlotte welcomed staff opportunities to take accredited courses but felt course timetabling must change to reduce teacher absence from the classroom. This she saw as unfair to students. She recommended ASD training for SNAs and bus escorts along with practical courses on areas such as manual handling. Hattie spoke of ASD class teachers' need

for professional support due to the work's intensity, while Dino wanted additional training and qualifications for teachers of students with ASD. Correspondingly, Katie suggested that the new four-year ITE programme should offer the possibility of a specialist module in SEN. She stressed the importance of on the job training and regular up-skilling. Similarly, for Natalie education and ASD should be "*a very structured part of the undergrad*", thus reducing ASD class teacher need to attend a lot of first year in-service, a situation she described, particularly around sourcing substitute teachers, as "*a nightmare*".

Maurice, spokesperson for a cross border body providing CPD in ASD interventions, said pre-CPD was available to ASD class teachers. He suggested that access difficulties could be an issue of timing rather than capacity. In his experience, teachers usually received their next year class assignment in the final term. With this late notice course places may be full and not immediately available. Akin to Natalie's point, he proposed addressing this challenge through making ASD specific training an element of ITE courses:

*M: But I think there's growing recognition now that every teacher when they're qualified is going to experience certainly special needs in their classroom but equally with children with autism.*

This point echoes that made by spokespersons from the SEN department in a teacher education college. In the course of their three-year ITE programme, there was "*one specific session on autistic spectrum disorders*", lasting for one hour in a 30-hour module examining the wider area of SEN. However, they added that the SEN module was not a discrete component of the ITE programme. Rather, it was linked to the other ITE elements and they posited that, with appropriate adaptation everything else covered on their programme was relevant to SEN teaching, "*that there isn't this esoteric specialist pedagogy that only applies to these children and nobody else.*" With the change to a four-year ITE programme, they

foresaw greater scope for student teachers to take SEN modules and for this knowledge to be embedded in their work.

**Specialist pedagogy.** The views of teachers and principals in this study corresponded with those espoused by Jordan (2008) and, Alexander, Ayres and Smith (2015), that specialist pedagogy is required to effectively teach some students with ASD, and were at variance with the views of Florian and Linklater (2010) which focus on a pedagogical philosophy of learning as a teacher-pupil partnership, and see teacher skills as adaptable and capable of achieving effective outcomes for all students. Both groups identified the need for access to some post-ITE specialist training for ASD class work:

*J: I think the skills that we learn in college are huge and they do cater for a lot of what we're going to face when we come in. But really, it's a different, it's a different job altogether. So, I think there could be something for new teachers coming in.*

Thus, while seeking assistance with adapting familiar pedagogies, they also sought instruction in implementing new ASD interventions.

**Availability of CPD for principals.** The absence of specific CPD programmes for principals was criticised. Prior to opening the ASD class, most had attended a one-day course offering a general overview of ASD. However, as Hattie recalled, “*very little of it was principal related*”. When asked whether she received any CPD to assist her in managing the ASD class Yvonne responds:

*Y: No, it didn't happen.*

Katie also called for principal specific CPD focusing on ASD class management issues, and offered the DES funded *Misneach* (an Irish word meaning ‘courage’ or

‘hopefulness’) model for newly appointed principals as a possible structure template.

*Misneach* offers supports “in the key professional areas of school leadership including -

Leading Learning, Leading People, Leading the Organisation and Managing Self’

(Professional Development Service for Teachers, 2016).

Most of the information and support that Natalie received came through contacting other principals and learning from their experiences.

*N: Nobody [from the DES] is telling you what you’re actually entitled to [for the ASD class] ... it’s just pure chance rather than just somebody saying look, this is how you go about opening it up; this is what you need; this is what you’re entitled to; what’s available to you.*

Dino described a booklet assembled by principals of primary schools with ASD classes. This offered practical pointers to principals and BoMs opening ASD classes. Katie hoped that with the DES review of ASD education policy, the booklet would be submitted for consideration while Dino felt that they “*really could do with holding proper seminars and talking people through it.*” Yvonne had over ten years’ experience as principal of a school with ASD classes. Noting principals’ support needs, she described herself as “*a helpline*” to others as “*they’re all being approached...to open ASD units but they’re not being told what’s involved*”. She recommended the provision of “*a map*” detailing practical steps for opening an ASD class. This need stemmed from a perceived absence of direction and information from bodies such as the DES and NCSE. For example, when asked of the DES supports received when opening an ASD class Natalie responded:

*Na: Em, none...I didn’t know what it was supposed to be, I didn’t know what it was supposed to look like. Em, the teacher had no experience in, to do with autism and, yeah none ...Yeah, it was my hardest thing in taking over as principal because there was nobody to tell me.*

Principals also spoke of their dearth of ASD-related knowledge and its impact on their capacity to support the ASD class. For example, Dino described his concerns:

*D: So, I'm gleaning information, I'm building it, I am interested, I do read but no, I'm not leading the learning in the class for children with autism in the same way that I like to try to get to leading learning in the school in general, do you know what I mean?*

Again, this is indicative of the desire that principals in this study have for access to ASD related CPD.

**Recognition of the evolving nature of CPD content.** As the NCSE (2015) prepared its ASD policy advice, the INTO (2014) provided a submission document. It recommended teacher “access to CPD that builds on and deepens their knowledge, skills and competencies in special education. This is particularly relevant for teachers who have already completed the existing SESS courses” (p.7). While it described SESS courses as “excellent”, the INTO suggested longer, more in-depth courses were needed. It called for access for all teachers to postgraduate courses in ASD and greater flexibility around course timetabling to promote accessibility. Joan agreed with the need for progressive course content and suggested, “*You can get into a bit of a rut doing the same thing all the time*”. In a comparable vein, though happy with the quality of most courses initially taken, Suzanne felt as her knowledge grew, programme content was not developing to meet her needs. Too much time was lost revisiting introductory content:

*S: But some of those courses... you go in and for the first two hours you're breaking down, "What is autism?", and for some of us, some of us are doing all of the courses now and we are getting trained and I particularly don't want to sit for two hours when I could be learning something else"*

**Professional Learning Communities.** The importance of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) was evident from the teacher interviews and principal focus groups. While teachers still enjoyed good relations with colleagues, working in the ASD class had changed the relationships' nature. It was suggested that while school colleagues were generally supportive they lacked ASD class experience rendering advice offered on ASD

class matters of limited value:

*S: I think they [other teachers] support all the teachers in the units and I don't doubt for a second that they're very supportive of the job but there is a divide. They don't, I feel like mainstream teachers don't understand autism.*

*J: Because if I'm sitting in a staffroom in a mainstream school there's only one or two teachers that know exactly what I'm doing every day.*

In addition, the ASD class teachers reported hiding the reality of ASD class issues for fear of discouraging colleagues from working there. For instance, Lyle spoke of his reluctance to openly discuss his work. Teachers also spoke of the opportunity that CPD attendance provided to meet and share experiences with fellow ASD class teachers:

*J: So, I think CPD is a great opportunity to meet people and to talk.*

*M: Okay, with people who are in very similar situations to you?*

*J: Exactly.*

Affirmation from fellow ASD class teachers was a source of work satisfaction, helping to assuage doubts about their classroom performance:

*B: Or even to go [to CPD] and, you know, if you see something that someone's suggesting, and you say, "Well, I do that", ... And then, you know, it kind of affirms it for you I suppose, sort of, you know?*

Principals encouraged CPD and links with ASD class colleagues in other schools as essential professional support they mainly felt unequipped to offer. For example, Hattie described an informal local schools network allowing principals to meet and discuss ASD class matters. It also facilitated meetings between ASD class teachers, a "*teacher professional community type*", to share ideas and good practice. She regarded the ASD class teacher's role as "*a very isolated job*" and said her school intentionally opened two classes to try and address this. Like Dino, she felt her support "*wouldn't be much good, so they could have each other.*" She recommended that, if possible, schools open two ASD classes as two

teachers working together would improve practice standards. Another teacher support need she identified was a facility allowing them to debrief about work:

*H: Even if it's you know a small cluster group that they can vent within networking but that they understand that it's not about, it's not you. None of this is you or your fault*

## **Discussion – Continuous Professional Development**

Teacher participants sought improved access to PD programmes in ASD interventions. Furthermore, there was an expressed desire for on-going CPD, and a recommendation that programmes evolve to meet teachers' changing needs. While the teachers were committed to inclusive education, they questioned their capacity to effectively educate ASD class students without the development of their pedagogical knowledge and a support network. A key support identified was engagement with other ASD class teachers. While teachers continued to feel part of their immediate school community, they voiced concerns that mainstream colleagues could not fully identify with their work experiences. Thus, the support and counsel of other ASD class teachers as part of a PLC was valued.

Teachers also valued their school principal's support. However, principals questioned their leadership capacity to effectively support their ASD class teachers. Comparable to the teachers, they supported an inclusive education system and largely regarded ASD classes as marking a positive development for their schools. However, there was a need to develop their knowledge of ASD. They supported CPD access for teachers and recommended the creation of specific CPD programmes for principals. They faced new management challenges related to meeting the needs of students with ASD and accessing appropriate resources to support ASD class teachers and students. Just as teachers valued their ASD class colleagues' support, principals spoke of the importance of support and information received from fellow principals.

**CPD access and content for ASD class teachers.** None of the teachers in this study held postgraduate qualifications in SEN or ASD, and principals possessed little prior knowledge of ASD and ASD interventions. This is unsurprising in the Irish education context considering the small percentage of teachers with postgraduate qualifications in ASD or SEN (McGough, 2007; NCSE, 2009; Flatman-Watson, 2009a; 2009b). The UK situation is similar to Ireland insofar as teachers of children with ASD are not required to hold an initial SEN qualification in ASD. In contrast, each US state requires licensed special education teachers. To be licensed the teacher must hold a bachelor's degree in special education, though some states will require the teacher to be qualified to Master's Level (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 2004).

Scheuermann et al. (2003) and 'Model A' (Department of Education and Science, 2007) recommend ASD specific training for teachers prior to their commencement as ASD class teacher. This corresponds with the expressed requirements of teachers and principals in this study. However, accessing pre-ASD class placement CPD remains challenging and this is impacting teacher confidence as they begin this work. 'Model A' (Department of Education and Science, 2007) also recommended pre-service training for SNAs. Still, this was not implemented, and it remains that SNAs cannot access DES funded PD programmes. This study finds that the weight of their training rests primarily with the ASD class teacher, a task for which the teacher has not received formal training, and which adds extra administrative duties. The need for clarification around the role of the SNA is indicated in the *Value for Money and Policy Review of the SNA Scheme* (DES, 2011) which found a divide between the DES vision of the SNA role as a non-teaching position, and how schools were utilising SNA support. DES provision of training for SNAs and support for schools might positively address

this lack of clarity. Focus groups conducted as part of the SNA review “affirm the benefits of SNA training” with subsequent recommendations that the DES “consider how best to address the training needs and training programmes provided to SNAs” (p. 17). Such programmes, they contend, should reflect the duties of the SNA as outlined in DES circulars (DES Circular 0030/2014). SNAs surveyed by Logan (2006) identify a need for accredited training courses for SNAs. Currently, many further education colleges offer SNA training programmes attracting Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 5 or 6 awards. However, these courses do not address an issue that emerges in Logan (2006) and is also evident in teacher observations in this study. Namely, SNAs often provide, contrary to DES directives, educational assistance and guidance to the students under their care.

Although the SERC report (Department of Education, 1993) stressed the importance of specialist SEN training for teachers, the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) found little progress made in that area. Teachers in Ireland working with ASD students possessed “little or no knowledge of ASDs” and it recommended that, “teachers appointed to classes for children with ASDs be given access to a certain body of knowledge prior to beginning to teach or as soon as possible afterwards” (DES, 2001, p. 266). Ware et al. (2009) found, stemming from that recommendation, “ASD specific teacher education at pre-service and in-service levels...has improved considerably” (p. 23). This study also finds that, with the establishment of the SESS and MCA and an increase in postgraduate programmes in teacher education colleges, improvement in the range and availability of courses in ASD interventions had occurred since 2001. However, it also finds teachers meeting ongoing difficulties accessing pre-service ASD PD, with this affecting their capacity to teach their ASD class students. In addition, there are concerns regarding the progression of course content in line with growing teacher knowledge. Teacher responses in this study identify a need for initial basic teacher training and the development of a training pathway to

deeper knowledge of ASD issues, needs also identified in the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001), Ware et al. (2009) and the INTO (2014).

**Inclusive pedagogy.** Teacher and principal participants wanted to develop their capacity to educate and support their ASD class students. Teachers commenced their ASD class role without specific training or understanding of ASD. While they sought to adapt their teaching knowledge they believed that education in ASD specific interventions was required. Principals concurred with this need for specific teacher education and for the development of their own knowledge of ASD, to enable them to support the students and ASD class teacher. The ASD class had also brought new administration duties and resource requirements.

Florian and Linklater (2010) argue that in developing their abilities to include children with SEN, teachers do not need new specialist pedagogies. Rather, they can develop what they already know, to create an inclusive pedagogy defined by seeing students as partners and co-contributors in the learning process. The contributors from the SEN department of the teacher education college spoke of the scope that the move to a four-year ITE programme allowed for the development of “*a totally different model, a much more integrated model, coherent model something we’ve been looking to develop for years but couldn’t do so because of the overload on the three-year model*”. Within the new programme there was a stronger focus on inclusive education, the student teacher’s exposure to SEN had significantly increased with compulsory modules in first and fourth years and a two-week SEN placement in third year. Student teachers could also take a major specialism in special and inclusive education which can run “*throughout the degree and it amounts to probably between 15 and 20% of the whole degree*”. Also, collaborative work between the education

and special education departments meant that now “*curriculum subjects [taken by student teachers] are integrated with the principles of inclusive education.*”

Jordan (2008) also strongly supports the concept of inclusive education. She counsels that when models of inclusive education were being introduced in the UK in the 1990s:

The content and the teaching approaches of the National Curriculum in mainstream schools were not changed to accommodate children with ASD, as it was assumed that the content was of equal relevance to all children, albeit requiring modification and ‘breaking down’ to make it accessible in some cases; approaches were geared to a mythical ‘norm’ of how children think and learn (p. 12).

She sees specialist pedagogy, determined by the student’s needs, as necessary for teaching some students with ASD. Jordan (2005) also spoke of the need for teachers to understand ASD’s complexity, to better meet individual student’s needs. A similar view was held by the authors of the International Review (NCSE, 2009). This corresponds with those of this study’s teacher and principal participants.

Studies such as *Interventions for Autism Spectrum Disorders – State of the Evidence* (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009) and *National Standards Project* (National Autism Center, 2009) also point towards evidence-based educational interventions for ASD. They concurred that these generally stemmed from behavioural science. The NSP (NAC, 2009) also overtly identified TEACCH, PECS and Social Story as “emerging treatments” with more evidence of efficacy required. There are a number of studies supporting the effectiveness of TEACCH as an ASD specific intervention (Panerai et al., 2009; Ozonoff & Cathcart, 1998; Van Burgundies, Reicher & Schopler, 2003). Wong et al. (2014) write of the increased demand for effective educational and therapeutic interventions arising from the increasing prevalence of ASD and find sufficient scientific evidence to support classifying certain interventions as evidence-based practice (EBP). In total, they identified 27 such interventions

including PECS; discrete trial training; pivotal response training and video modelling. Identification of EBPs, they suggest, provides an opportunity for the design of “technical eclectic/evidence-supported programs” for children with ASD. However, resonating with Jordan (2005) and Odom et al. (2010) they cautioned that “the most important evidence supporting an EBP ... is the progress the student makes when the EBP is implemented” (p. 33). This points towards the need for effective teacher education, if it is to “have a positive impact on the development, learning, and life outcomes of children and youth with autism” (p. 291). With the range of interventions that could constitute a student’s tailored education programme this presents challenges around the provision of teacher education programmes (Dillenburger, 2011).

**Specific programme of CPD for principals.** Principals identified their need for specific CPD around ASD class administration and the support of ASD class teachers. Currently, in the Irish context, there is no CPD programme expressly designed for principals of schools with ASD classes. Findings from the research literature concur with the principals’ views and suggest that the absence of specific CPD for principals has been an on-going, unresolved matter within the Irish education system (Department of Education and Science, 2001; NCSE, 2009; Flatman-Watson, 2009b; Travers et al., 2010). The INTO (2002) identified great support and a positive disposition among principals towards the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream schools. However, they faced serious challenges in the absence of adequate training and supports. In a further INTO submission (2014) to the DES, entitled *Education of Children with Autism*, the principal’s key role and the continuing need for adequate supports and PD opportunities were identified. The *Evaluation of the Special Education Support Service (SESS)* (PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC), 2012) also recognised the principal’s vital role in this context. In the international context studies

highlighting the importance of principals in ensuring the success of schools' SEN programmes and the need for recommended specific pre- and post-appointment leadership training include Zaretsky, Moreau & Faircloth (2008) and Horrocks, White & Roberts (2008).

**Professional development supports for ASD class teachers.** The creation of a suite of state funded ASD related short courses, along with postgraduate programmes available through teacher education colleges, indicates teacher demand and need for ASD related CPD. A recommendation from this study's teacher and principal participants was a period of induction for teachers prior to ASD class placement. Furthermore, it is recommended that schools receive adequate information and resources from the DES and NCSE before opening the ASD class. Regarding CPD, teachers call for an evolving suite of courses and content to meet their developing requirements. An important observation from teachers is the opportunity CPD affords to meet fellow ASD class teachers, to share information and to debrief about their work. At times, this is considered of more benefit than the formal course content, reflecting Kennedy's (2014) framing of a democratic approach to CPD with teachers acting as change agents, shaping course content, identifying, and leading their own teacher education needs.

In the Irish context, the need for suitable supports and PD opportunities for SEN teachers has been repeatedly identified (Department of Education, 1993; Government of Ireland, 1995; Parsons et al., 2009; PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC), 2012). For example, the SERC report (Department of Education, 1993) found that while the quality of SEN teacher training was high there was insufficient capacity to meet demand. It called for greater capacity within the system at both pre-service and CPD stages. Fifteen years later

Parsons et al. (2009) also addressed the issue of increased capacity and the need for education programmes to evolve with teacher needs. They recommended the development of “training pathways from basic awareness raising to accredited training and continuous professional development” and that “studies should examine the influence of training on practice and evaluate outcomes for individuals with ASD” (p. 128). This is a very important submission and aligns with Guskey (2002) and King (2014). Furthermore, the evaluation of the SESS (PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC), 2012) investigated the impact of CPD, its accessibility for teachers, the appropriateness of course content and, the development of teachers’ knowledge and skills. It identified teachers’ desire for specialist training in ASD specific interventions and again suggested that timely access to CPD and the development of course content to meet teachers’ changing needs remained as significant issues. Once again, these observations align with Kennedy’s (2014) call for a move away from a dictated, managerial approach to CPD, towards a more democratic and autonomous model. Teachers criticised course content repetition and voiced concerns about CPD programme timetabling and the adverse impact on teacher class contact time. They could identify a lot of their support and education needs and, very importantly, could detect what was not working for them.

Both teacher and principal respondents in this study identified the need for pre-ASD class placement training for teachers, in effect, describing a programme of induction. In the Irish system, the issue of induction programmes for teachers of pupils with ASD has existed for some time and remains a live issue. The experiences highlighted by the teachers and principals in this study resonate with Balfe’s findings (2001). The Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) overtly citing Balfe (2001) highlighted the dearth of teachers qualified in ASD and the need for prior and early stage training. Similarly, the INTO (2002) also recommended “comprehensive orientation and induction programmes”

along with the creation of comprehensive CPD plans for teachers and SNAs working in ASD classes (p. 64). Subsequently, the INTO (2014) recommended that attendance at such programmes should be “mandatory” for those commencing work with students with ASD (p. 7). The Teaching Council’s *Droichead* programme indicates a realisation that newly qualified teachers require on-going support beyond the guidance and supervision provided during ITE (Teaching Council, 2015). It’s vision for CPD is outlined in *Cosán: The National Framework for Teachers’ Learning* (Teaching Council, 2016). It promotes inclusive educational practice and supports “teachers’ learning aimed at improving their capacity to address and respond to the diversity of students’ needs” (p. 18), However, while *Cosán* perhaps offers a useful structure through which ASD class teachers can be supported, it is noteworthy that the Teaching Council does not call for mandatory PD for teachers in this area (Teaching Council, 2016).

**Positive effects of Professional Learning Communities.** There is a body of research literature supporting the positive impact of PLCs on teachers’ PD and, by extension, positive student outcomes (Jones, 2009; Kennedy, 2014; King 2016). The key role that school management can play in encouraging and facilitating PLCs is also apparent (Stoll et al., 2006; Gebbie et al., 2012). The importance of learning from colleagues was evident in this study’s findings. While principals questioned their ASD class leadership capacity, their support was highly valued by the ASD class teacher. Despite their concerns, principals actually described the development of a distributed form of leadership. Their perceived lack of knowledge meant they placed greater trust in their teachers to lead the ASD class, often sought their counsel when considering ASD class issues, encouraged teacher engagement with CPD and supported the development of PLCs.

Regarding CPD, teachers described the additional benefits accruing from meeting with colleagues from other schools, often learning as much from informal conversations as from the prescribed course content. This sits with Kennedy's (2014) description of the social constructivist view of democratic professionalism with teachers interacting in a social space, building knowledge through their interactions. It is a collective and internally propelled dynamic with teachers sharing and acquiring new knowledge. While there is an absence of literature specifically exploring the impact of PLCs among teachers of children with ASD or principals leading schools with ASD classes, there is a small body of literature examining the effect of PLCs among teachers of children with SEN.

**PLCs among teachers of students with SEN.** The ASD class teachers in this study reported that their school colleagues and principals were generally very supportive. However, while appreciating this, some experienced a sense of isolation within the school. This arose from a belief that these colleagues could not fully identify with their professional challenges. Based on ASD class figures for the 2016/17 school year, across primary and secondary level there are 254 schools with one ASD class (NCSE, 2016). One of this study's principals, Hattie, reported that to promote collegiality and opportunity for professional learning, her school opened two ASD classes, so colleagues would have someone on-site who could relate to their experiences. For ASD class teachers, great support was derived from engagement in PLCs with ASD class colleagues from other schools. PLCs for teachers of students with SEN have shown to improve teacher effectiveness, teacher connectedness and dissemination of professional knowledge and practice (Gebbie et al., 2012; Jones, 2009; Nelson et al., 2013). Among the teachers in this study there was evidence of the growth of what Wenger (1998, 2010) describes as communities of practice. Teachers with a common interest in ASD and education were coming together, sharing knowledge and endeavouring to apply this in their

classroom work. However, these relationships tended to develop in an ad hoc manner and did not appear to have the framework of regular meeting or communication times. While there was a sharing of knowledge taking place, there was not a structured repository of knowledge or deliberate facilities to allow ASD class teachers to reflect on their practice or agree shared goals. However, while these PLCs might be in a nascent stage of development, there is evident promise and potential for teachers to commune and play a lead role in their own professional development. Something akin to the Autism Competency Framework (ACF), (Wittmeyer et al, 2012/2015) might offer a very good framework for determining and working towards common goals.

## **Leadership Challenges of the ASD Class**

**Introduction.** As outlined in the preceding section a key theme emerging from the principal focus groups was the importance of informal professional networks in informing their efforts to support their ASD classes. Improved structures for opening and resourcing classes were identified as key needs. They saw an absence of adequate support from the DES and, in some instances, from agencies such as NCSE. They described enduring challenges faced in securing ASD class resources and uncertainties regarding their ability to effectively support the ASD class teachers.

ASD class teachers reported an increased workload, including a number of new managerial and administrative duties. These included the preparation of student IEPs and work schedules, the management of SNAs and liaising with external professionals. Some of the teachers doubted their ability to manage this work effectively. These issues will be addressed in the succeeding section of the chapter, which considers the changed work place dynamic for ASD class teachers.

**Principals' experience of working with DES and NCSE.** To allow for the appointment of staff and provision of initial training, Charlotte's school requested a longer lead in period before opening the ASD class. However, the DES informed that training would be provided when the class had opened. Hattie's school BoM informed the DES that it would not open without assurances of clinical service supports for students. She and BoM representatives attended meetings with the DES, NCSE and a State funded ancillary service provider. She recalled, *"there was an awful lot of pressure put on and the pressure was relentless, but we refused to open without the services and we eventually got services on the 4th of November."* It was a very difficult time, which she described as *"real politicking"*. The DES saw its remit as education and viewed the school demand as a Department of Health and Children matter. Her position, shared by the BoM, was that *"we are educationalists, they are clinicians, and the children need clinical supports for us to provide the education."* She felt the DES provided little information beyond two letters related to refurbishing the ASD class. The first identified a small grant for the purchase of resources while the second outlined the availability of a €6500 grant to furnish the room. She was frustrated with a lack of guidance and information and provided the example of school transport for students:

*H: It took us from November to April to arrange the transport [with] parents crying out for it...And then in April when it was given to us literally months afterwards, the first call I got was to say, "your transport is arranged" from Bus Eireann, "who is your bus escort?" And I said, "What's a bus escort?" because nobody had said anything to us.*

Neil's first experience of opening an ASD class was in 1998 and he described an experience similar to those detailed by Charlotte and Hattie. When the DES initially approached the school, he recollected being *"promised lots of things in terms of clinical services, lots of things including the fact that an inspector would sit on the enrolment board"*

*and would help with decisions so that we'd be matching pupils."* His BoM agreed to open the class, but the anticipated supports did not materialise:

*Ne: Of course, as soon as we opened our doors that was the last we heard of anyone...there was no continuity of service.*

Neil is now principal of another school that also has ASD classes. He agreed to open the classes on *"the basis that I knew there would be no services. And I was proved right in that."* He contended that while there was little support when he initially opened an ASD class there is even less now in terms of clinical and psychology support:

*Ne: So, when, when we decided to open here I took the view that we wouldn't be seeing too many clinical people and we haven't. And at this stage I couldn't even tell you, I met a psychologist today, she came into the school but it's a long time since I saw one.*

*M: Okay, right.*

*Ne: And as I'm speaking I'm saying I'd better check and see if we've any sort of support at all because I don't think we have.*

*M: Right, for your class for children with autism?*

*Ne: Yeah.*

Natalie also felt that there was no support or guidance from the DES once the class opened:

*Na: It was I didn't know what it was supposed to be, I didn't know what it was supposed to look like. Em, the teacher had no experience in, to do with autism and, yeah none.*

For her it was the most difficult aspect of taking over as principal. When asked if she received any assistance from the NCSE in planning for the ASD class she replied:

*Na: No, none. Em, the new teacher, her dad came in and painted the room. We happened to have a free classroom, so it was just to try and make that into a classroom for the child ... I felt what was the point in buying all these*

*resources when we didn't know where the child was at and that's what it was, trying to build slowly and then figure it out.*

Katie's experience was comparable to Natalie's insofar as she did not recall receiving DES or NCSE support. With regard to the DES, she said the school was *"given nothing. I mean I can't even say 'very little' because we were given nothing."* From the NCSE, *"nothing, nothing. We didn't even get a letter or a brochure or a handbook"*. Similarly, when asked about the support received in running the ASD classes in her school Yvonne responded:

*M: Right. Do you feel that as principal of the school that the support and guidance offered by the Department or by the NCSE to you is adequate?*

*Y: Well, its non-existent so does that cover that?*

It was commonly felt by the respondents that the support offered by the DES and NCSE was inadequate, failing to meet the schools and principals' needs. A criticism of the DES was that its primary concern was on finding placements for students with insufficient focus on the quality and suitability of the placement. Hattie described the support and guidance offered to schools as *"totally inadequate"* with the best support actually stemming from networking with other principals with ASD classes. She also received useful support from the *National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)*, a representative body that facilitates networking and endeavours to support BoMs of both special and mainstream schools in their efforts to provide for students with SEN:

*H: "They knew things that I needed to know that I didn't even know I needed to know."*

Neil says he knew little about ASD when first opening an ASD class. He *"just muddled along"* and attributed progress made to the teachers' professionalism, conducting

their own research and attending CPD. When asked whether the DES or NCSE support received were adequate, Dino responded, *“Absolutely not”* and claimed, *“They’re not interested in the quality of teaching and learning”*. Natalie held that the DES and NCSE focus was on getting classes opened and *“ticking boxes...once they’ve spaces for children.”* Katie concurred with that point adding, *“That’s all that they care about.”*

**Capacity to provide leadership to the ASD class teacher.** Although holding a diploma in SEN, Charlotte felt unequipped to offer professional guidance for the ASD class teachers’ work. She *“knows a bit about ASD”* and had taught some children with ASD who were *“very high functioning [but] it’s very different when you’re in special classes.”* She stated that *“there’s no curriculum...there’s no blueprint there.”* She was advised by the SESS to implement the AISTEAR programme (an early childhood curriculum framework) with the younger children but deemed it of limited use. She suggested that too much is demanded of the teachers, that due to lack of clinical supports which she described as *“minimal”* they *“need to be educator plus OT, speech and language, psychologist, psychiatrist and they do feel overwhelmed.”* She defined the actual role she played with the ASD class teachers as *“nearly a counsellor”* where she would sit with a teacher and listen to them *“debrief”*:

C: *I don’t think, well in my case my colleagues would not look for professional support. They’d want a cup of tea and to offload.*

She outlined the resource and funding deficits faced in managing the ASD class. In endeavouring to ameliorate the situation, she saw her role as chasing supports for students and teachers:

C: *I spend my day on the phone you know, fighting and campaigning...I mean, clinical services are minimal. And then our parents would employ private*

*clinicians out of their own pockets. So that's another thing that I would do to support the teacher, is to try and get those services.*

Neil also considered himself unqualified to offer professional support or advice to the ASD class teacher. He tried to “*encourage them and [look] at them in wonder and awe*” for the work they did. Bob held a similar position. When he joined his school, he thought he had an understanding of ASD, but this quickly changed:

*B: I went to my school three years ago thinking I had an understanding of autism. Half an hour later I knew I knew nothing. And as Neil said I'm in wonder and awe of these teachers and SNAs on a daily basis who work with these children.*

He described the learning curve as “*huge*” and commented, “*the work and time commitment has been massive.*” Rather than professionally guide the teachers he saw them as professionally guiding him.

Hattie also questioned her ability to offer professional guidance. She regarded her ASD class teachers as best equipped to make decisions about matters such as a child's placement in the class. Similar to Charlotte, she described her role as pursuing supports, sourcing CPD opportunities for staff and endeavouring to access clinical supports for students. Like Charlotte, Hattie also supported staff through providing debriefing opportunities:

*H: But I would see very much my role is really debrief, my role was literally holding people's hands, my role was going in and saying 'Look, go down to the staffroom and get yourself a cup of tea' while the hair has been torn out or their glasses smashed or something really, you know, in terms of physical behaviours.*

Prior to the SESS offering training she went to her BoM requesting, “*mandatory training*” for staff so “*that they can be safe.*” She was concerned they were not trained to manage some of the behavioural challenges some students presented.

**Benefits deriving from practical experience.** Natalie took a number of CPD courses in relation to ASD. Although she heard that principals could not attend some courses, she attended anyway. This, coupled with seven years' experience of having an ASD class meant she felt "*a lot better now*" about offering guidance and support to teachers though she "*wouldn't have in any way all of the answers*". She considered knowledge building as essential, offering the example of meeting with parents of children with ASD. For some she was the first professional they met following their child's diagnosis and they expected she would understand the reports and determine if the school could meet the child's needs:

*Na: CPD through the SESS and Middletown and through Beechpark and just all of those different ones, that's helped a lot.*

Yvonne also felt her years of experience had enabled her to deliver support to her ASD class teachers. However, this was not the case in her initial years and she suspected that many principals experience significant difficulty in providing such support:

*Y: Well, [ASD class teachers] definitely need a different type of support. I, at this stage, I'm here ten years. At this stage I definitely feel I can support them because I've learned an awful lot myself. But I certainly wouldn't have felt that in my first couple of years.*

Yvonne's point is perhaps illustrated through the example of Dino's experience. His school had just started its second year with an ASD class and he felt "*very, very much that I'm not qualified for this and I don't have the knowledge that I need to do it*". While he would "*have great confidence in [his] own understanding and ability*" advising on children in the mainstream classes, this was not the case with ASD class matters:

*D: I'm not the expert and you know, the teacher who's dealing with the children day in and day out and has done a lot more training than I have...I'm not leading the learning in the class for children with autism in the same way that I like to try to get to leading learning in the school in general.*

**Principal's recommendations for leadership supports/training.** Neil expressed the critical value of having a principals' support group and the need for PD for principals in "how to deal with people, structures, policies, all that kind of admin area, you know." He posited that the process of opening an ASD class requires streamlining:

N: *Like for example, this is our third attempt, we got a letter in February asking us to express an interest and we replied immediately. We had a Board meeting and we replied. Then we got from the NCSE, 'You must contact the Department.' So, we contacted the Department. They sent out a ream of forms that you have to fill out what are you going to do. We're now waiting for funding. So that will probably drag on until it gets to a stage where you can't start anything until July or August. And then you're rushing to get finished for September. No sort of cohesion or sort of oversight of the whole process.*

For him the system does not allow time for adequate staff training or planning. He provided the example of having no play space for the children and the difficulty in acquiring funding to remedy this. When asked to identify where he felt responsibility for this rested he stated, whoever decided on policy in the DES. Neil also identified the need for better working relationships between schools and external agencies providing support services for students. He believed schools are held accountable for how they support the child but that the agencies were not to the same extent.

Likewise, Bob saw a "huge need for policy development" around ASD classes while Hattie felt there was a need for joined up thinking. She suggested that ASD classes were set up due to parent pressure arising from high profile court cases with not enough thought subsequently expended on how these classes should operate:

H: *But the reality is there is no overall policy, there is no agreement you know, what is actually in the best interests of the children and you know what, in some cases it's not ideal. It is not what's needed and schools while they're willing to do their best...it doesn't mean we're necessarily doing the best...I think maybe there's a need for a national forum at this stage of principals and specialists listening to principals talking about 'What are we doing? Is this good enough? Is this the right provision for children with autism and if not, what is required to make it?'*

Hattie also spoke of the need for legal advice and “*a central store where you can shop for all the information and needs you have.*” She proposed that such a repository would be “*amazing*” as managing an ASD class crosses so many categories of need. Charlotte agreed that principals need to know more about legislation and where and how to access information. She suggested a full-time support service for principals whether offered through patron bodies or organisations such as NABMSE.

**Agencies’ views regarding CPD for principals.** In an interview conducted for the purposes of this study Julia, a spokesperson for an organisation involved in resource allocation for ASD classes as well as the preparation of policy advice for the DES, said that as part of the policy review pertaining to current educational provision for students with ASD, “*I am presuming and I’m pretty certain that the principals will be involved in that.*” Her organisation initially met with a group from the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN). The questions asked were those that had been asked of each group in the consultation. At this consultation, it was proposed that, as part of the process, her organisation should meet specifically with principals of schools with ASD classes in relation to their experiences. This meeting did take place:

*J: I wouldn’t like to exaggerate what it is in the sense that that’s not a structured piece of research. That was more just a, it was a consultation that we had. It was very valuable.*

Julia said that separate to the consultation process, her organisation commissioned independent research to inform policy advice in relation to the evaluation of provision and that “*part of the evaluation of provision is the principals’ experience.*” She added that to date her organisation had not issued policy advice related to the functions of principals of schools with ASD classes and that it does not specifically form part of the terms of reference of the

current work. The current policy on ASD education provision predates the establishment of her organisation. However, if as part of their current consultation and research process, *“the function of the principal comes through when we really analyse our findings, if that comes through for us as an issue to be addressed we would address it.”*

Maurice, the spokesperson for a cross border body providing CPD courses in ASD interventions, said it did not currently provide specific CPD for principals but would like to do so. The matter had been raised on a number of occasions with the senior management team, and staff from the organisation had linked in with principals. However, the perception was:

*M: It has never gone anywhere because the level of interest [from principals] has been pretty small to be perfectly honest with you.”*

He stressed his organisation’s indebtedness to a cohort of principals for assistance provided in giving feedback and in communicating news of their work to other principals. His organisation was engaging in more whole school training programmes and working to ensure the participation of management in this. The guiding viewpoint was that up-skilling a whole school should include teachers, SNAs and principals. They also engaged with principals and deputy principals through conference presentations. However, he suggested that principals might not seek training in ASD prior to opening a class, as they could not appreciate the work involved at that point. Nevertheless, whatever about difficulties that might exist in getting principals to attend training programmes he was certain that a need existed:

*M: Now, specific training for principals I think there is a need, very definitely there is a need because the management of ... units for children with autism, there is very clear and specific requirements there I think that would benefit principals hugely... Certainly it is one of the suggestions that has been put*

*forward for future planning for CPD, that we offer a module for school principals.*

## **Discussion – Leadership of the ASD Class**

**Barriers to the effective administration of ASD classes.** From an analysis of submissions received the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) identified a number of key challenges associated with the establishment of ASD classes. These included ASD class teachers and principals feeling unsupported in their work and spending a lot of time on the set up and management of ASD classes with minimal DES support. The contributions of teacher and principal participants in this study suggest that these continue as animate issues. Teachers spoke of the challenge of commencing their ASD class placement without a period of induction. They identified difficulties in managing SNAs. They cited difficulties presented by student behaviours, often in the absence of ancillary, clinical supports. Principals spoke of the information and resource deficits experienced during initial class set up, deficits that endured long after the class had opened. They felt that the DES and NCSE were not responsive to the school's needs, resulting in the class opening without needed supports. Principals also noted an absence of ASD related CPD for principals which they felt impacted on their capacity to provide effective leadership in this area.

Sixteen years earlier, submissions to the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) also included recommendations that training in ASD not only be provided to classroom teachers but also, “training and awareness raising for school principals, boards of management and mainstream classroom teachers” (p. 269). It further recommended that the DES consider principals increased duties when calculating schools' staffing quotas,

taking the position that principals required “direct support from the Department through its Inspectorate and through appropriate advisory services.” (p. 170). The submissions of principals in this study suggest that an absence of progress in this area. They articulated difficulties encountered in the set up and on-going management of the ASD class and their need for more support and guidance. Former Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn, acknowledged the need for more clarity around the DES policy on ASD and education. He was “mindful that greater clarity would be useful for schools and parents and accordingly my Department is currently in the process of preparing a comprehensive statement of existing policy within the boundaries of one document” (Response to Parliamentary Question, 23/03/13). Principals in this study concur with the Minister’s identification of the need for greater clarity, particularly so if accompanied by improved levels of DES support for principals and schools. McCoy et al. (NCSE, 2014) also identified such a need, calling for clear information and guidelines for schools as they suspect that some principals might be confused about the function of a special class and the extent of the resources available. They also recommend a re-alignment of the resource allocation model for schools to ensure that those schools with most SEN students are receiving an equitable share. At the time of writing the policy document envisaged by the Minister has yet to be issued to schools.

**Effective leadership practice.** Principals recommend the provision of specific and improved collaboration between schools and external agencies. Their responses indicate a significant interest in attending CPD and suggest a high uptake level should provision be made. Natalie and Yvonne’s experiences suggest that as principals’ experiential knowledge grows, their capacity to provide leadership to teachers around ASD class matters, and support of fellow principals, grows. Principals’ also highlight the benefits of PLCs for knowledge and information sharing, particularly in the reported absence of adequate supports from the government departments and state agencies.

The central importance of the principal in leading school change is well established (Riehl, 2000; Ware et al., 2009; Ainscow and Sandhill, 2010; King, 2011; Travers et al., 2014; Daly et al., 2016). For example, Riehl (2000) highlighted the crucial role of leadership in introducing and embedding inclusive practices in schools, while Ainscow and Sandhill (2010) describe the principal as a “leader of leaders”, empowering teaching staff and encouraging team based methods towards school improvement (p. 408). Likewise, Travers et al. (2010) noted teacher participants’ identification of “the key role of the principal in leading and supporting inclusive policies, attitudes and practices” (p. 174). Meanwhile, in a comprehensive study of the role of special schools and classes in Ireland, Ware et al. (2009) identified the pivotal role of the principal and recommended that any principal related CPD include substantial SEN elements. Similarly, King (2011) speaks of the principal encouraging collegial collaboration and leading the generation of an organisational capacity for change. She notes that principals who attended CPD related to a project were more likely to invest their time in that project.

Daly et al. (2016) also spoke of the “importance of the availability of CPD for principals in their management, administrative and instructional-related duties specific to ASD-provision” (p. 19). Examining educational provision for students with ASD in Ireland, when reporting on primary schools, across five sites they found management structures ranging from good to excellent, with principals displaying a strong commitment to the inclusion of students with ASD, and staff’s professional development. Teachers also spoke highly of their regard for their principals’ support, particularly regarding arranging teacher access to CPD. Principals’ commitment to their students and staff, and teachers high regard for their principal’s support were also evident in this study. Again, similar to this study’s finding, principal participants in Daly et al. (2016) reported attending CPD to assist their

leadership capacity but noted the absence of principal specific CPD on ASD. Principal participants in my study spoke clearly about their desire and need for CPD. They expressed concern about their depth of ASD knowledge and their capacity to lead the teacher and class. While the primary school principals in Daly et al. (2016) appear to report more favourably on their experiences of including students with ASD, comparable with their colleagues in this study they identify a range of added challenges that the work brings. These include additional administration tasks including, “applying for additional supports...managing staff-burn out; managing children’s behaviours that challenge...and ensuring that the child’s placement in the school continued to be an appropriate placement” (p. 90)

Principals in this study spoke of a lack of support at government department level, and a lack of guidance and resources from the DES and NCSE at the time of initial ASD class set up. This did not improve after the initial opening, with one principal suggesting that circumstances actually worsened over the years, and another describing the ongoing absence of ancillary supports for students. Again, this was evident in Daly et al. (2016) who found that the “adequate level of support from external services to assist schools in promoting an inclusive school culture was unacceptable in all sites” (p. 90). Participants in this study reported that an absence of adequate supports and information placed more work on teachers and principals.

### **Changed Work Place Dynamic**

**Introduction.** Teachers and principals described a changed work place dynamic stemming from their work with ASD class students. For teachers, this centred on a change in the nature of their relationship with colleagues along with a change to work practices. For principals, it centred on the increased administrative burden they faced and, as outlined in the

preceding section, doubts about their professional capacity to support the work of their ASD class teachers.

**Teacher relationship with colleagues.** Teachers continued to enjoy good relationships with colleagues and reported that they remained part of the school community. However, working in the ASD class had altered the dynamics of the relationships. For example, Lyle still felt part of the school, attributing this to working there a long time and having established relationships with colleagues. However, when asked if the nature of the relationship has changed, he replied:

*L: Most absolutely yes. Yes, yes, yes. And as you know, as I said...we are a very hard-working school, we are a very child centred school but...I do get the impression that we like to work hard on things we do, as opposed to learning about new things.*

A colleague suggested that his workload must have reduced with having three SNAs in the class. This, he saw as a lack of understanding among colleagues about ASD and ASD class challenges:

*L: So again, that's a lack of knowledge, of how there are three SNAs there because the children need three SNAs. Em, and almost having three SNAs makes my life more difficult because now I'm a manager as well as just a teacher, you know.*

He described a questionnaire distributed to forty staff members as part of his postgraduate studies in ASD. Six were returned. Some colleagues confided that they did not return them as they did not understand ASD and were reluctant to reveal this. He also offered an example centred on the experience of teachers who substituted when he was on in-service. In his first year in the ASD class he was absent for forty-two days due to attendance at CPD. He felt that once colleagues covered in the ASD class they did not want to return as, *“they didn't understand it, so they started to avoid it.”*

*L: You know, "If I go in there am I going to come out bruised", you know, and it's not the case, but you know, like a Chinese whisper thing, if you say one thing it grows legs and then there are people running for the hills, you know, and again that's just a lack of awareness. So, again, it's just about, be careful who you talk to.*

Thus, if a challenging situation arose in the class he usually avoided discussing this with teaching colleagues:

*L: I very rarely talk about that in the staffroom because you don't, so, you know I would debrief with my two, with the SNAs but very rarely with my teacher colleagues.*

He only tended to share “*the good stuff*” and tried “*to promote the class and to promote how well it's going.*”

Suzanne’s experience was ASD class teachers still felt valued and included as staff.

Yet, resembling Lyle’s assessment, there were periods when she noticed a change to the workplace dynamic and questioned her colleagues’ capacity to empathise with her work challenges:

*S: I completely feel, all of us in the unit one hundred percent feel like we’re exactly the same member of staff, we’re consulted about everything the same as everybody else. Sometimes you can feel a little bit like, ... “Okay, your hard thing today was that somebody didn’t know how to spell a word and my hard thing was I got slapped and punched and bit.”*

Similar to Lyle, this left her reluctant to discuss her work, which could be a source of frustration:

*S: Sometimes I do feel that way, sometimes you’re sitting in the staffroom and you’re like, “Oh well, you’ve had to deal with thirty-two twelve-year olds” and, em, I’m complaining about two children that were screaming out of six. But then other times as I say you wish it was 1:1 ...because there’s a particular child who shouldn’t be in a class of 6:1, should be in a class of 1:1 but there’s nothing you can do.*

Joan had worked in the ASD class environment for fifteen years and thought that

while it could change how one felt as a staff member, with time and experience it became easier to cope:

*J: I think as you get older it gets easier. I would say when I started teaching I felt a little bit on the outskirts and I felt it was because I wasn't a mainstream teacher that maybe I didn't really fit in.*

She recollected that, as the ASD class model was new at that time many teachers did not understand the class structure. However, she now felt her sense of being on the outskirts was due to “*youth and inexperience*”. As her confidence grew it stopped being an issue. Nonetheless, even though her school had ASD classes for over ten years she reported a continuing reluctance among some staff towards engaging with them. She actively promoted the class, believing colleagues could benefit from her accumulated experience and knowledge:

*J: I would have encouraged lots of teachers here not to rule out the ASD classes... But there was a little bit of negativity around it for a few years and maybe that was just a time in the life of the school when there was.*

**The teacher-principal relationship.** Yvonne and Natalie, through experiential learning and attendance at CPD, felt somewhat equipped to advise on curriculum content and ASD classroom strategies. However, as noted some felt ill equipped to offer such support and regarded their primary functions as obtaining resources and providing moral support. For example, Dino felt devoid of the professional experience and knowledge to assist the ASD class teacher effectively and was instead reliant on that person to direct him.

However, the teachers in this study placed great value on their principal's support. Joan regarded her principal as “*very supportive*” and interested “*in the whole area of autism.*” Similarly, Suzanne felt supported by her principal who she regarded as having a keen understanding of her work. Her principal's feedback helped her to cope more effectively

with challenges. From speaking to other teachers at CPD, she knew that not all experienced that level of support:

*S: I am definitely one of the most supported teachers I have ever come across from the point of view of my principal being so involved in the units and in the courses.*

When experiencing difficulties Bernadette said, “*I feel like I can always go and knock on the principal’s door if there’s you know something, if there’s chaos happening [laughs]*”. Lyle also appreciated his principal’s support. They had regular meetings and she enquired about the work, but he was given independence and trusted to do his job:

*L: I meet with the Principal every week...and she’ll make sure that I’m doing it in a responsible manner and everything else. But at the same time, I feel that I have the support if I need it but I’m kind of left to do my job at the same time.*

**ASD class teachers: Classroom management duties.** The majority of Joan’s career was spent working in ASD classes. However, for the other three teachers their initial years were spent in mainstream classes. Working in the ASD class had brought significant changes and challenges with regard to classroom management and their need to provide leadership both in the immediate class environment and with teaching colleagues.

**Time management.** Bernadette found teaching a class with a wide age range challenging. She outlined planning difficulties, such as setting up individual student timetables and “*trying to get time with each of them every day*”. She painted a picture of a busy and hectic environment:

*B: You know, and trying to group them to try and get more time with them and just the logistics [of] the day. And, you know, you’re managing two SNAs as well and you’re trying to, you know, let them get a break, let yourself get a break, let the children get a break.*

Regarding timetabling difficulties, she described challenges that planning for normal school events and celebrations could bring. It could cause significant upset for the students. To illustrate, she provided the example of Christmas concert preparations:

*B: They're all being taken out left, right and centre and that's out of the routine and that's upsetting the children, that's got you know, it's kind of logistics, is the biggest challenge initially.*

These challenges had abated as her ASD class experience grew and as she became familiar with the students' personalities, "*their little quirks and different things, their likes and dislikes.*" She had learned to take a step back at times, to "*stop talking and give them a chance...that time to just, you know, figure things out.*"

She could also find it difficult to balance between time working on national curriculum and students' other programmes or needs. Trying to determine a student's priority needs was challenging:

*B: And it's very difficult...to write IEPs, that sort of thing. What are the actual priorities for this child? Is it that they can read to the same level as they should be or is it that they can come into school every day without having a meltdown? And you kind of have to, it's difficult to decide...because your teacher hat is telling you: reading, writing. It's hard to kind of balance it.*

Lyle identified time management as his biggest challenge, trying to cope with the increased workload. When working in mainstream he had to prepare yearly plans. When he transferred to working as a resource teacher, he had to prepare student IEPs. Now he had to prepare both, while also training and managing the SNAs and making time to meet with the various visiting professionals working with the children:

*L: So, I'm missing that time, so, trying to catch, for me I think the biggest challenge is time management and the workload, keeping everything just ticking over.*

***Personnel management in the classroom.*** Working with SNAs had increased Lyle's workload as he managed work schedules, training provision, and prevention and diffusion of conflicts. He did not receive training for this work and felt that, as SNAs cannot access DES funded in-service, responsibility for their training lay with him. This came on top of myriad other duties, without adequate supports. This frustrated him, and his description of his role was similar to that painted by Charlotte of her ASD class teacher:

*L: Its small things, its low-level stuff that builds up and eventually you explode. Em, but again because they're not trained it's about training SNAs... support services aren't great so, as well as being a teacher I'm a psychologist and an OT and a speech and language therapist and when we do have services they're nearly always privately funded, there's all the paperwork behind that, there's correspondence, there's forms to fill in.*

Likewise, Suzanne had not received training in managing SNAs. However, she was required to be manager as well as a teacher. While she enjoyed good relationships with her SNAs, describing them as “*fantastic*” people with great ideas, she was “*constantly stressed about having them*” and feared being judged as “*not a good teacher.*” Joan thought that working with SNAs brought fear for many mainstream teachers used to being the only professional in the room. She greatly valued her SNAs but like Lyle, was often challenged by the demands of managing their timetable and training. She replied, when asked if she had most responsibility for their training:

*J: Yes, and that's a big fault. A lot of the courses are set up for teachers only and then, you know, as far as I'm concerned there's four of us in the classroom, we're a team and if I go on training I would like that my special needs assistants to be there so we all come back on the same page.*

She tried to hold weekly work meetings with the SNAs but “*it’s quite difficult to find the time in a week, you know*”. As in Joan’s case, Bernadette enjoyed her SNAs’ support but noted the extra classroom management responsibility it brought.

***Liaising with external agencies.*** Generally, teachers were happy with the quality of provision when they or their students received it from support agencies. However, access and continuing support could prove difficult. Lyle stated that the NEPS psychologist was available to him “*at the end of a phone*” should he have a query and he described the SESS courses he had availed of thus:

*L: I have to say the courses I've done, I think they've been brilliant, I've really enjoyed them, I've got a lot from them. But from a support point of view I think, you know, probably not.*

He felt that the on-going support from the SESS and the NCSE had not been there and that it was more helpful to consult with someone “*who knows the child in front of me*” and that “*knowing the specific cases is a lot more beneficial.*” He understood though the ethical considerations concerning circumstances under which identified children’s needs could be discussed. He noted that the majority of his students’ service providers were privately funded by parents. He welcomed this support but acknowledged the attendant time demands of paperwork and meetings to discuss students’ needs. For example, meetings with visiting psychologists could mean “*that I’m not in my class for half an hour or an hour*”.

Bernadette felt she received adequate support but worried that service providers were overloaded:

*B: I, to a point, yes... you know they're there, you know, at the other end of the phone or the end of an email. I feel like they're so understaffed and they are so stretched.*

Suzanne felt fully supported by the agencies. For example, she described *Beechpark* services support as “*fantastic*”. Through this agency, her students could access multidisciplinary support from “*a psychologist, a speech and language therapist and an occupational therapist*” though not of her students were supported by this agency. However, when the clinicians visited they were willing to offer general advice around issues that might arise with other children.

**Some challenges of teaching students with ASD.** For Joan a foremost challenge, when teaching children with ASD compared to neurotypical children, centred on students’ behavioural needs. She tried hard to empathise with the student, figuring out the roots and purposes of behaviours:

*J: But, you know, dealing with behaviours and understanding where the behaviours come from as opposed to, that child was just playing up or, you know, being bold or whatever. So, kind of understanding where the child is coming from more and you having to know so much more about the child.... So, I do think you’re kind of becoming a bit of a psychologist as well at the same time, you know [laughs].*

She asserted that neither ITE nor subsequent CPD courses had taught her to create a behaviour management plan. In addition, working on effective communication methods with pre-verbal or non-verbal students could be challenging and time consuming. Comparable to Bernadette’s point, she found dealing with the different ability levels of the students challenging:

*J: So, I just think it’s a minefield...But I do think if [the DES] could get it right, that you’re teaching children with mild learning difficulties or moderate or severe and not mild and moderate together.*

For her, ASD class work could be “*very tough*” and “*all consuming*”. However, she saw a mainstream class as also having “*different stresses and strains*” as teachers deal with large

class sizes or manage misbehaving students without parents' support. She had tried on a couple of occasions to move from ASD class work but always returned as she considered it "a lovely job."

Suzanne identified adopting new teaching approaches, differentiating lesson content and "making every single step of a day simple enough for a child to understand and thinking ahead" as her primary challenges. She described planning for a swimming trip which for some students meant months of preparation, breaking down the outing into small steps in an effort to ready them. Engaging in such planning could be stressful as she frequently wondered whether she had planned sufficiently and suspected that "meltdowns" and bouts of anger that students experience "ninety-nine percent of the time...was because they didn't understand something...I had not put that step in place." She currently worked with children with ASD in the 9-12 age range and spoke of the challenges faced working around areas such as sex education and depression:

S: *A lot of it is a sensory thing like, you know, with sex education and stuff they'd be like touching themselves inappropriately and I'd have to be teaching around that. Use of toilets, things like that, public and private places.*

She was also concerned about her students whom she described as higher functioning:

S: *I find when you're working with children that are higher functioning depression and things like that come in, bullying, all of those matters really come to a head.*

This was difficult work, particularly when the student may not have strong receptive or expressive language skills. When faced with such situations she described as "fantastic", Beechpark services support. Nevertheless, she experienced job-related stress and put herself under pressure, always thinking ahead and planning for IEPs. Her class group's academic ability could range "from junior infants to 6<sup>th</sup> class and... [we're] supposed to meet all of those in one day." Just as principals identified their need for a dedicated support service

Suzanne recommended similar for ASD class teachers, particularly as in the majority of the schools of which she was aware these teachers were *“either newly qualified or have been recently qualified. So, their training is not in any way special needs and they’re learning on the job.”*

To try to meet students’ needs, Lyle also had to amend his teaching approaches, using more activity based methods. Building relationships with individual students also proved challenging. He sensed that sometimes it was not necessarily ASD that prevented this but rather a student’s co-occurring needs such as a sensory processing disorder. Attempting to connect with a student had on occasion presented ethical issues. He offered the example of a child who responded particularly well when receiving edibles as re-enforcers. He saw their use in this way as controversial and this was *“difficult for me and I nearly had to change my own ideas and opinions of it to use it”*. Discussion with a NEPS psychologist and approval from the parents persuaded him to maintain the tactic.

## **Discussion – Changed Work Place Dynamic**

**Commitment to inclusive practice.** The ASD class teachers in this study presented a strong commitment to meeting students’ needs. This corresponds with similar findings in studies of inclusive practice in Irish schools (Rose et al., 2015; Daly et al., 2016) which also found strong levels of staff commitment towards their students with SEN. However, the ASD class teacher role required significant work practice changes and a substantial increase in time commitment.

While teachers often reported a lack of knowledge around specific teaching approaches, Rose et al. (2015) observe that teachers who engage in PD report favourably on course quality and the positive impact on classroom practices. They recommend that all

teachers receive access to CPD in SEN, thus enabling students to better access the curriculum. This recommendation echoes the Task Force report's (Department of Education and Science, 2001) assertion that the successful inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools requires each staff member to understand their responsibility, and involves "a change in attitudes, understanding and knowledge" (p. 125). Daly et al. (2016) found very positive examples of whole staff knowledge and commitment to the inclusion of students with ASD. However, the submissions from teachers in this study suggest that there is still significant work required to reach such a whole-staff responsibility space. They outline difficulties faced communicating with school colleagues about ASD classwork, and an apparent lack of understanding among their fellow teachers around ASD, associated needs that students with ASD might have and the nature of the ASD class.

Talmor, Reiter and Feigin (2005) found that without necessary supports teachers of children with SEN could experience a sense of powerlessness contributing to feelings of burnout. Teachers most commonly sought assistance from a SEN teacher and support from the wider school community, along with an adaptable curriculum for the students. The teachers in this study sought provision of similar supports to assist and sustain them in their work. These elements are evident in an 'integrative model' of inclusion for students with ASD offered by Ravet (2011). This model focuses on whole school autism awareness and review of provision, along with the ASD training for key staff in the school could provide ASD class teachers with. It is sixteen years since the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001), cited by the DES as supporting its policy on the education of children with ASD (Minister for Education and Skills, 2017) recommended similar whole school approaches to supporting students with ASD. However, it is apparent from participant

contributions that such a vision has not been realised and the framework to support such a vision remains partially constructed.

**Classroom role of Special Needs Assistants.** Teachers in this study appreciated the support of the SNAs in their classroom. However, they identified challenges faced around personnel management. Some teachers experienced insecurities centred on thoughts of their work being adversely judged by the SNAs. The important role that SNAs can play in supporting inclusive practices in schools was identified by Logan (2006) who found that SNAs in Irish schools were largely very positive about their work and felt appreciated by their principals and classroom teachers. However, while teachers and principals were generally very welcoming of SNAs work, there was some confusion about the role with SNAs seeking more work-related support and advice and identifying their need for accredited training. All groups identified a lack of time as a barrier to consultation and effective planning. These points resonate with findings made in this study. For example, the teacher participants expressed the appreciation that they had for their SNAs but also spoke of the extra administration duties expected of them. Managing time demands and personnel issues proved difficult. Although the DES issued a circular clarifying the duties of the SNA (DES, 2014), it appears that confusion around the role remains.

**Specialist pedagogy for ASD.** ASD class teacher participants spoke about the efforts they make to adapt their existing knowledge to appropriately meet their students' needs. However, it is clear that the prevailing view among the teachers and principals is that a specialist pedagogy is required to meet the needs of many of their ASD class students. There has been considerable academic discussion centred on whether students with ASD require a specialist pedagogy. Florian and Rouse (2009) hold a view that teachers must be disabused of

the idea that they do not possess the capability to teach all students. Rather, they should be aware of human differences and willing to learn new strategies for working with students with different needs. The contributors from a teacher education college spoke of the new four-year ITE programme which involves specialist modules and placement, with an increase in modules dedicated to SEN. Also, they said that there was an enveloping inclusive education theme through the whole programme. They make the point with regard to all children with SEN that the course content, *“with appropriate adaptation and modification is relevant to teaching these children as well. That there isn’t this esoteric specialist pedagogy that only applies to these children and nobody else.”* However, Alexander, Ayres and Smith (2015) contend that the optimum way for schools to provide effective educational settings for students with ASD is to ensure teachers are trained and receive ongoing support in the use of a range of Evidence Based Practices (EBP). They highlight what they regard as a lack of availability on university programmes of specialised training for teachers in EBP for students with ASD. Similar to the finding in this study they also identify a lack of ongoing support and supervision for teachers in the use of EBP. The need for suitable supports and PD opportunities for SEN and ASD teachers working in the Irish education system has been identified in a number of significant reviews (Department of Education, 1993; Department of Education and Science, 2006; Parsons et al., 2009), while EBPs for the education of students with ASD are identified and discussed in a number of studies (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009; National Autism Center, 2009; Odom et al., 2010; Wong et al., 2014).

Three of the teachers in this study were qualified mainstream teachers with another holding restricted recognition to work in special school settings. However, all of them sought knowledge of specialist approaches to teach children with ASD. They outlined their endeavours to adapt existing knowledge prior to starting in the ASD class and spoke of the

positive changes that took place as they got to know the students and better understood the dynamic of the class. However, they also identified a need to learn new approaches to working with their students. Working in the ASD class had introduced work related stresses comparable to those outlined by Balfe (2001) and Talmor, Reiter and Feigin (2005). These were related to uncertainties around professional knowledge and capacity to meet students' needs. As teachers engaged with CPD and developed their skills, this improved. They identified TEACCH, C-ABA and PECS as practical interventions and particularly useful in the classroom. It can be argued that, as indicated by the teacher education college contributors, that such interventions are not actually ASD-specific but rather adaptable for use with any student. However, within the Irish context, training in the use of these approaches to working with students with ASD are not included as core modules in current ITE programmes but do form a part of specialist modules. Nor is access to SESS courses in these approaches generally available to mainstream class teachers. Thus, the ASD class teachers were expressing the need for skills acquisition beyond those garnered through ITE or mainstream class work, the need for more beyond the modification of skills and knowledge already held. The need for skills development for teachers to enable them to meet the needs of students with SEN effectively was also identified by Rose et al. (2015, p. 4). The report noted the concerns that some parents of children with ASD had about the ability of teachers to meet the needs of their children due to knowledge and skills deficits. Similar concerns were also evident in submissions to the NCSE (2015). Perhaps, if full-time teachers of students with ASD had access to an autism-specific course of not less than 450 hours, including access to interventions such as ABA, TEACCH and PECS, as recommended by the Department of Education and Science (2006), teachers would grow in confidence in the role and any concerns held by parents and other interested parties would abate.

**Provision of ancillary supports for students with ASD.** The Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) also highlights the need for ancillary supports for many students with ASD. The teacher participants outline difficulties encountered accessing such supports for their students. When supports are received, whether through public or private sources, the quality of support is considered very good. These correspond with a similar finding in Rose et al. (2015). However, the provision students receive appears to come mainly from private practitioners funded by the parents. While this is welcomed, it does lead to another time commitment for teachers due to the requirement of meeting with professionals around reports and recommendations. This, in turn, creates a loss of class contact time with the students. There is no allocation of hours available to schools from the DES to free up ASD class teachers for this work.

Teachers spoke of their need for ancillary supports. While additional therapeutic supports were frequently recommended for students, often times they did not receive them. Those in receipt often accessed them from private practitioners funded by the students' parents. While teachers welcomed these professional inputs, it did increase their workload. When external professionals visited they typically requested to meet the teacher, resulting in lost class contact time. Following these meetings there were often recommendations which fell to the teacher to implement, again adding to their workload. For example, Bernadette identified stress experienced when writing student IEPs; how to prioritise student needs, whether to primarily focus on social skills development or academic learning. Often, she had to draft these without support from other professionals. The NCSE (2006) guidelines for the development of IEPs place a great emphasis on collaboration between professionals and parents. For Bernadette, such collaboration was not taking place.

**Distributed leadership in action.** Teacher participants spoke of the value of their principal's support. However, principals outlined their concerns around their capacity to offer effective support, as well as their dependence on the ASD class teacher to advise and guide them. Similar to McCoy et al.'s (2014) finding, they identified difficulties encountered around the ASD class set up and accessing class resources. Difficulties encountered by schools accessing adequate supports for their students with ASD is also evident in Daly et al. (2016) and NCSE (2015). However, similar to the principals surveyed in Daly et al. (2016) principals maintained their commitment to inclusive practice and persevered in spite of these challenges. They continued to submit resource applications to the DES and NCSE; to consult with fellow principals in an effort to obtain new knowledge and share information; to encourage ASD class teachers' engagement with CPD and fellow ASD class teachers. In carrying out this work, they displayed a commitment to ensure effective teaching and learning for every child in their school.

The importance of such commitment to attainment for students with SEN is identified by Riehl (2000); Fullan (2004; 2005); and Ainscow and Sandhill (2010) who recognise the importance of principals in leading transformative change in schools. Similarly, King (2011) refers to an "enabling form of leadership" creating a culture conducive and sympathetic to teacher collaboration, to the creation of PLCs to further knowledge and skills acquisition (p. 153). There is trust vested in the teachers and they are empowered to lead school change. This study's principals display a commitment to this distributed, transformative model of leadership. However, they do not always appear to be conscious of this and it may be that, in some instances, it has organically grown out of necessity rather than through considered design. Such a model of leadership, whether stemming as an accidental consequence from adverse conditions or from a deliberative process, could be considered as a strength and opportunity for school development. As noted, there is an absence of CPD for principals

around the whole area of leadership with regard to ASD classes (Daly et al., 2016). Principals also articulate a lack of practical support and guidance from the DES and NCSE. Both the SERC report (Department of Education, 1993) and the Task Force (Department of Education and Science, 2001) highlighted the need for additional supports for school principals, supports that remain to be fully provided. The need for additional supports is also recommended by the NCSE (2015). Clear guidance on the set up and resourcing of ASD classes might alleviate some of the frustration experienced by principals. Again, the lack of clarity experienced by principals in this area was noted by the NCSE (2015). The provision of CPD centred on issues of leadership as it relates to inclusion, particularly as it relates to the inclusion of students with ASD attending special classes in mainstream, could be beneficial. It could lead principals from a point of focus on what they perceive as their professional deficits and, at times their failing of teachers, to the realisation of an opportunity for positive change and potential stimulus for school improvement.

## **Summary**

This study's main purpose was to examine the experiences of ASD class teachers, as well as exploring the experiences of principals leading schools with ASD classes. While both groups were very committed to the inclusion of students with ASD in their schools and noted benefits of this for students and the wider school population, they also identified serious concerns about the system of support for the ASD class. Teachers were generally positive about CPD quality and enthusiastic about on-going engagement with PD. It was generally felt that ITE did not contain a lot of SEN content and did not prepare one for ASD class work. Thus, education programmes in ASD specific interventions were required. Engagement with CPD increased their sense of confidence and effectiveness in the ASD class. However, they were unhappy that initial, pre-ASD class placement access to CPD proved difficult to obtain.

Furthermore, there was concern that the suite of CPD courses offered through SESS and MCA did not evolve to meet more experienced ASD class teachers' needs.

Teachers also identified their changed work place dynamic. In the ASD class, they had to contend with increased managerial and administrative loads. Apprehensions were articulated around their ability to meet students' needs and, as mentioned, the need for specialist training in ASD interventions was identified. While ASD class teachers continued to enjoy good relations with school colleagues, the nature of the relationship had changed. There was a sense that those without ASD class experience could not fully appreciate the nature of the work. These factors combined to create some work-related stress for some of the teachers and there was a recommendation for the establishment of groups of ASD class teachers to provide support and opportunities for knowledge sharing. However, teachers were appreciative of their school principals' support and spoke of its value.

Interestingly, due to a lack of ASD-related knowledge, principals identified the doubt they possessed about their ability to effectively support the ASD class teacher. Principals identified an absence of CPD for principals around ASD and recommended its provision. They spoke of the importance of CPD for the ASD class teacher and were critical of difficulties met in trying to secure pre-placement access. They criticised a perceived lack of adequate support from the DES and NCSE for the establishment and on-going management of the ASD class. Much of the information and assistance received came from fellow principals. They acknowledged the importance of informal professional networks as a way to disseminate information and provide professional support. They also voiced their support for the establishment of similar support modes for ASD class teachers. Recommendations deriving from these findings will be presented and discussed in the concluding chapter.

## Chapter Five – Conclusions and Implications

### Introduction

In this qualitative research study, I sought to ascertain the experiences and insights of primary school, ASD class teachers in the Irish education system. Another central focus was an examination of the leadership experiences and insights of principals of Irish primary schools with ASD classes. It was important that, to the largest extent possible, the research participants' voices were heard in their own words. Through conducting semi-structured interviews and analysing their content, a picture of the professional lives and personal perspectives of ASD class teachers was drawn. Focus groups were used to garner a significant body of data, providing an insight into principals' experiences. To obtain a broader view of matters related to ASD class provision, I also interviewed personnel from a teacher education college, an organisation involved in providing policy advice in SEN to the DES and an organisation involved in the provision of education programmes in ASD interventions.

While there is a body of literature related to ASD class teachers' experiences in the Irish context, considering the growth in ASD class numbers it remains quite small. Balfe (2001) offered a personal and particular reflection on working in the ASD class teacher role. Studies such as Ware et al. (2009) and Rose et al. (2015) examine special class provision and educational inclusion practice in Irish schools. They include teachers among their research participants, but do not specifically focus on ASD classes or ASD class teacher experiences. McCoy et al. (2014) do examine the experiences of ASD class teachers and principals. They identify successes and challenges faced by special class teachers and make recommendations for professional supports and training required. Similarly, Daly et al.'s (2016) examination of educational provision for students with ASD considers the experiences of teachers and

principals across early intervention, primary and post-primary school settings and includes semi-structured interviews with twenty-one principals and forty-eight teachers. My study, while also examining the experiences of teachers and principals, focuses on a small number of special ASD classes in primary school settings.

Thus, although this is a small-scale qualitative study it does offer a new, insightful contribution to the existing body of literature pertaining to Ireland's ASD class model. The study's main findings will be summarised along with the conclusions drawn. A reflection on the implications is offered, at local school level for teachers and principals, as well as at national level regarding policy on the education of students with ASD through the ASD class model. Consideration is also given to possible areas for further study related to this subject matter.

## **Summary of Main Findings**

**Findings related to ASD class teachers.** The ASD class teachers participating in this study were very committed to their work and to the inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream schools. However, they expressed concerns about their capacity to properly provide for their students. They found that the dynamics of the ASD classroom as well as many of the skills required of them differed from those of a mainstream class environment. Teachers did adapt the pedagogical knowledge they already possessed to inform their work with the students. However, they also identified the need for training in specialist interventions. Those they most valued, such as TEACCH, C-ABA and PECS would be identified as constituting EBPs (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009; Wong et al., 2014).

While they generally found the work very rewarding it could also be very demanding, challenging, and stressful. The teacher participants did not hold academic qualifications in ASD interventions prior to taking up the ASD class position. This is unsurprising in the Irish context and in keeping with previous research findings (Balfe, 2001; Flatman-Watson, 2009a; 2009b; NCSE, 2009). The ITE programmes they took did not offer any specific modules on ASD or ASD interventions and the teachers welcomed access to CPD in ASD interventions. They typically found engagement with CPD an informative experience and of practical benefit to their work. Besides actual course content they valued the opportunity it provided to engage with other ASD class teachers in a professional learning environment. They were critical that access to ASD specific CPD offered through SESS and colleges of education was only typically available once the teacher had commenced their ASD class placement. They also criticised the failure of course content to progress in line with the evolving needs of teachers as their experience and knowledge grew. Maurice, spokesperson for a cross border body providing CPD in ASD interventions, recognised this as an issue but said that his organisation did have CPD available for teachers pre-ASD appointment. He suggested that difficulties accessing places may be due to timing rather than capacity. With teachers often not getting their next year class assignment until the final term, this did not give much time to arrange CPD and course places may be full and not immediately available. With the growth in inclusive education models he believed that every class teacher would experience working with children with ASD during their career. Thus, he recommended making ASD specific training an element of ITE. The participants from the SEN department of a teacher education college saw the change to a four-year ITE programme as offering more opportunities for student teachers to take SEN modules and for this knowledge to be embedded in their work. This coupled with the other ITE elements, all of which with appropriate adaptation was

relevant to SEN teaching, would better prepare newly qualified teachers for their work with students with ASD and SEN.

Teachers reported that working in the class had altered their work place dynamic. While still maintaining good relationships with colleagues they often felt unable to discuss ASD class matters with them. They feared being adversely judged for experiencing difficulties. They also felt that mainstream class teachers could not fully appreciate the challenges faced by ASD class teachers. Working in the class had also significantly increased their workload and teachers identified difficulties encountered in relation to time management. There was a lot of preparation and planning required for students' IEPs and the differentiation of lessons. Personnel management duties linked to having SNAs working in the classroom also increased the time demands. While teachers greatly appreciated having the SNAs and the value they brought to the class, it also necessitated that teachers managed their work schedules, provided training and resolved disagreements that arose. These articulated concerns and workplace stresses resonate with similar findings in Logan (2006). Teachers also called for access to training programmes for SNAs which registers with similar recommendations by the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) and Model A (Department of Education and Science, 2007).

**Findings related to principals.** Comparable to the position of the teacher participants, principals contributing to this study were very committed to the inclusion of students with ASD in their schools. They outlined what they saw as benefits including the dissolving of barriers between students, the demystifying of SEN for teachers and for neurotypical students and the enrichment of school life. However, there were also strong concerns related to their capacity to support students with ASD. These included a lack of clinical supports for students; timely training opportunities for teachers; an absence of

relevant training for principals and a lack of ongoing professional supports to support the ASD class. Without appropriate training and supports for teachers and students, the extent to which schools could meaningfully meet the needs of students in the ASD class was questioned.

While Irish legislation and education policy mandate inclusion for all there was a strong sense that this did not materialise into practical support for school principals as they sought to realise this vision of the inclusive school. Principals lacked confidence in relation to their ability to provide professional support to their ASD class teachers. They questioned their qualifications to fulfil the function and criticised what they perceived as a lack of support from the DES and the NCSE concerning the establishment and continuing management of the ASD class. The need for such support is evident in the research literature. The SERC report (Department of Education, 1993) recommended the provision of extra supports for principals working in SEN environments while the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) found that a lot of principals working with students with ASD felt unsupported in carrying out this work and identified an absence of support from the DES. It recommended extra supports to assist with the increased administrative load, including a dedicated advisory service, as well as programmes to raise ASD awareness among principals. Flatman-Watson (2009b) highlighted the low percentage of principals who possessed academic qualifications in SEN and posited that they “may not have sufficient understanding of the child’s needs” (pp. 161-2) while an INTO report (2014) identified the need for sufficient supports for principals including access to pertinent professional development programmes. Daly et al. (2016) also found an absence of specific ASD related CPD for principals and noted principals’ descriptions of the increased

administration tasks that the inclusion of students with ASD brought. Also, they reported inadequate levels of external supports to assist schools with embedding inclusive practices.

The findings from focus group interviews with principals suggest such professional challenges endure and that significant deficits in supports remain. They identified the absence of specific CPD designed around their needs. Having the ASD class brought new challenges to their work and drew significantly on their work time. They struggled to find resources for the class and outlined the lack of multi-disciplinary supports to assist the students and, by extension, the schools. Principals were very thankful of the practical information and support garnered from their principal colleagues which they saw as partially filling a gap that they argued should be met by the DES and NCSE. Julia, a spokesperson for an organisation involved in resource allocation for ASD classes as well as the preparation of policy advice for the DES, said that her organisation had not conducted any specific examination of the principals' role with regard to ASD classes, or issued any particular advice in this area. However, her organisation was currently reviewing ASD education policy and she expected that if the principals' function emerged as an issue from that work, it is something that they would examine. Maurice, the spokesperson for a cross border body providing CPD courses in ASD interventions, said that his organisation recognised specific management challenges presented by ASD classes. It had not offered any particular programmes in this area but was open to providing CPD designed for school principals. He suggested that principals might not attend such courses prior to opening an ASD class, as they might not appreciate the work involved. However, he saw the need there and was sure it would be included in future CPD options.

Teachers placed great value on the support of their school principals and regarded them as approachable and understanding of their work. Principals placed a lot of trust in their

ASD class teachers and praised the quality of the work that they provided. Similar to the finding in Daly et al. (2016), they sought to secure the resources and create the conditions which would allow the ASD class teachers to do their work, including facilitating access to CPD programmes. However, while principals in this study exhibited the type of distributed and relational leadership skills outlined by Zaretsky, Moreau and Faircloth (2008) they did not appear to fully appreciate this fact or note it as a strength of their management. Instead, principals tended to focus on what they perceived as their deficits and voiced concerns about their capacity to provide effective professional support to their ASD class teachers.

**National policy on the education of children with ASD.** Legislation such as the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), EPSEN (Government of Ireland, 2004) and the Disability Act (Government of Ireland, 2005) denote a commitment in the Irish context to an inclusive system of education which endeavours to identify the needs of SEN students and the supports required to meet those needs. In 2013, the Ombudsman for Children recommended that the DES produce such a written policy document on the education of children with ASD. The Minister for Education acknowledged that its publication would be useful for both parents of children with ASD and for schools (Response to Parliamentary Question, 23/03/13). Initially the Minister instructed that the document outline the current policy position. This was amended, with the NCSE instructed to prepare new policy advice in this area. This was furnished to the DES in late 2015 (NCSE, 2015). At the time of writing the DES has not published a policy document on the education of children with ASD. The contributions from participants in this study strongly suggest that in relation to the administration of ASD classes, guidance and clarity from the DES would be beneficial. Principals overtly called for the provision of same and outlined the difficulties encountered with the setup and ongoing management of their ASD classes. These included problems around the physical furnishing of the rooms; absence of information concerning grant aid and

other supports available to the school and the students; accessing CPD for teachers and themselves. The NCSE (2015) received similar submissions from principals and recommended the provision of ASD related PD for school leaders.

Notwithstanding the Minister's acknowledgement that the absence of a collated policy document may adversely impact policy clarity for schools and parents (Response to Parliamentary Question, 23/03/13), it is possible to consider Ireland's ASD education policy using Riddell's (2003) framework. For example, the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) promotes equality among students and the right of parents to send their child to a school of their choice. While this might appear to suggest a strong markets framework, in practice for those students seeking an ASD class placement this choice can be very limited. Schools are not legally obliged to open ASD classes and a shortage of ASD class places can mean the preferred school is not a real option. Looking through a legal framework lens, parents/guardians do have the right to an education placement for their child and the right to appeal a refusal to enrol under Section 29 of the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998). The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) further acknowledged the right of those with SEN to an appropriate education and recognised the importance of parents/guardians' involvement in their education. However, many provisions of the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) remain unenacted, such as an independent Special Education Appeals Board which parents could petition if concerned about their child's prescribed educational placement, or a student's statutory right to an IEP. Also, regarding teacher knowledge, there is no mandatory obligation for the teachers assigned to work in ASD classes to engage with any CPD in that area. While both Acts (Government of Ireland, 1998; 2004) suggest elements of consumerism in play, speaking of the rights of the student and the important role of parents, in practice there appears to be a limit to the strength of their voice. There also appears to be a limit to the strength of the principal and teacher voice as

they seek to meet the needs of students with ASD without access to adequate training opportunities and resources (Department of Education, 1993; Balfe, 2001; Department of Education and Science, 2001; 2006; INTO, 2002; 2014; NCSE, 2015). When analysing Ireland's education policy on ASD, one can see elements of Riddell's (2003) model in operation. However, the predominant element appears to rest within a bureaucratic framework. It can be argued that it is an impartial, centrally controlled model, with all schools in receipt of state funding expected to implement the same policy and all students technically able to access the same suite of resources as needed. However, although parents/guardians might have the right to appeal to the law courts or to the Ombudsman for Children to protect their children's rights, this can be an arduous, lengthy, and potentially costly process. There is no purposely designed, independent body to arbitrate on educational provision issues in a timely or non-adversarial way. Similarly, there is no independent body to which principals or teachers can appeal if they contend that their school is not being adequately resourced, or access to professional training is not being appropriately provided.

## **Conclusions**

This study provides a contribution towards the body of research that currently exists relating to the experiences of teachers working in ASD classes in Irish primary schools. It highlights the commitment that the teacher participants have to their students and the desire they have for CPD programmes to assist them in effectively carrying out their work. It also provides an insight into the challenges faced by the teachers around managing the classroom, accessing resources, and meeting the disparate needs of their students. We see the great satisfaction that derives from student successes as well as the stresses and concerns stemming from anxieties around professional competence to effectively execute the role and concerns around the volume of work attached to organisation of the ASD class. It deepens our

understanding of the ASD class dynamic and some of the barriers to the effective educational inclusion of students with ASD that remain in place at classroom level. While there is much debate in the research literature concerned with whether teachers require a specialist pedagogy to work with students with ASD, participants in this study reveal an interesting insight. They speak of drawing on what they had learned as mainstream teachers and adapting that for work in the ASD class. However, they also identify the benefits that derived from the receipt of training in what might be termed ASD specific interventions. The new four-year model of ITE, as outlined by the participants from the special education department of the teacher education college, offers the possibility of increasing numbers of teachers commencing their careers with a stronger grounding in SEN and ASD. They described a programme with a philosophy of inclusive education informing all aspects, greater collaboration between special education and other departments, and more opportunities for student teachers to take specific SEN modules and gain practical experience of special class settings.

This study also offers an insight into the experiences of principals around their leadership of the ASD classes. As with the teachers, their commitment to making a success of the ASD class and meeting the needs of the students is evident. There is an abundance of studies examining the importance of effective school leadership in SEN settings and, in the Irish context there have been a number of reports outlining the necessity for the effective support of and training for principals around the area of inclusion of students with ASD. However, it is evident from the focus groups conducted for this study that there are shortcomings regarding assistance offered by the DES and NCSE in relation to the administrative demands of the job. Participants reported that rudimentary information was not always readily available and that promised supports were not always forthcoming. There is also an absence of CPD programmes designed for principals around leadership in this area.

Julia, a spokesperson for an organisation involved in ASD class resource allocation and the preparation of policy advice for the DES, said that the particular needs of principals was not something that they had considered. However, if it emerged as an issue in their review of policy it would be examined. Meanwhile Maurice, the spokesperson from one of the organisations interviewed questioned whether principals would attend training courses. He did see a need for programmes for school leaders and said that his organisation would provide these. The responses received from principals in this study suggest that there is a strong appetite for such support. Maurice also felt that teacher access to CPD in ASD might be impacted by date of class appointment rather than any shortage of places on programmes. If this is a timetabling issue perhaps it can be effectively addressed through closer consultation between schools and CPD providers.

At the time of writing, it is eighteen years since the DES first recognised ASD as a distinct disability requiring special educational provision and it is sixteen years since the publication of the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001). Since that time there have been some 600 ASD classes opened in primary schools with an additional figure in the region of 200 opened in secondary schools. However, a lot of the problems identified by the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) around the set up and management of classes and the availability of training for teachers and principals remain as live issues. There still appears to be an absence of guidance for schools in relation to the administration of ASD classes. The promised policy document would benefit schools, parents and students. It would assist with evaluating the current system and inform discussions around identifying current good practice, areas of practice and provision that require development and evidence-based elements that could be introduced to improve current policy.

## **Implications of the Study for Policy and Practice**

**Obligatory modules in ASD.** The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) outlined the Irish State's commitment to a policy of inclusion for children with SEN and identified that schools should be properly resourced to meet the needs of its students. It mentions the duty of the DES Inspectorate to "to advise recognised schools on policies and strategies for the education of children with special educational needs" (p. 17). We now work in an education system where the majority of mainstream schools have among their student body many children with SEN, and students with ASD. The teachers in this study spoke of the dearth of instruction received on ASD during their ITE. With the move to a four-year programme of ITE there is an opportunity to ensure that all teachers begin their careers with a good grounding in SEN and ASD. The participants from the teacher education college participating in this study outlined some of the programme developments that they were making in this area. The move to a four-year ITE programme allowed for the development of a more integrated model, within which there was a stronger focus on inclusive education. Student teachers now took compulsory SEN modules in first and fourth years along with a two-week SEN placement in third year. They could also opt for a major specialism in special and inclusive education which could run through the four years of the degree, constituting approximately one fifth of their degree. Also, the new model saw increased collaboration between the education and special education departments ensuring that the various curriculum subjects taken by student teachers were also considered in the context of inclusive education principles.

Based on the findings from this study, I recommend the introduction of obligatory SEN/ASD modules for ITE students with one of the teaching placements taking place in an ASD class. With the requirement that PME placements take place in different schools, at least

one placement should be in a specialised environment to begin the work of growing appreciation among the wider teaching community of the practical challenges and rich benefits of having an inclusive system of education. The Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) recommended the prioritising of training for all staff involved in the education of students with ASD. With the increasing number of students with ASD attending special or mainstream classes in mainstream schools the likelihood is that every staff member will have some involvement in their education. Thus, it is imperative that they are properly educated and empowered to meaningfully fulfil this function.

**Training and management of Special Needs Assistants.** A recommendation from this study is that, as SNA appointments are sanctioned and funded by the DES and their duties outlined in DES circulars, the DES should play a central role in training provision for SNAs and in supporting schools around the use of SNA provision. Though the DES had previously noted the importance of training in ASD for SNAs (Department of Education and Science, 2007) it does not currently provide this, and teachers spoke of the weight on them to provide such training in the classroom. A recognition of the need for such training and a recent positive development is the provision of a subsidised rate for SNAs on the DES approved ICEPE (Institute of Child Education and Psychology Europe) *Understanding Autism* course ([http://icepe.eu/cpd/Understanding\\_Autism](http://icepe.eu/cpd/Understanding_Autism)). Previously this rate was only available to teachers employed in the Republic of Ireland.

In 2014 the DES issued a circular to schools concerning the SNA scheme. It referenced the Value for Money and Policy Review of the SNA scheme (DES, 2011):

However, the Review also found that the purpose of the scheme and the allocation process is generally not well understood within schools or by parents. It found that the deployment of SNAs in schools had in practice moved away from the objectives

originally envisaged, which was to provide for children's care needs, and had moved towards SNA involvement in behavioural, therapeutic, pedagogical/teaching and administrative duties (Department of Education and Skills, 2014, p. 3)

The DES clarified its position that SNAs do not have any teaching or pedagogical role to play (Department of Education and Skills, 2014). I would also recommend that the DES consult with schools, whether directly or through the NCSE around how schools use their SNA resources. This will allow it to determine why schools were apparently misusing the scheme and to ponder whether there are compelling reasons to consider redefining the SNA role or introducing a teaching assistant grade similar to the UK model.

**Supports for school management.** Considering the centrally important role that principals play in supporting staff and leading new school programmes it is imperative that they are prepared for and supported in this work. Research considered in this study also points to the important part that state organisations play in providing leadership and ensuring the success of new projects in the school space. With specific regard to the support of ASD classes, it is vital that the DES provides clear information to principals concerning class setup and administration, including the model of ancillary supports available to students. The publication of the DES policy on the education of children with ASD would also be useful in this regard. A recommendation is that such a document include appendices providing detailed guidance on the steps involved in the ASD class setup; information on funding and resources available; information on evidence-based interventions approved by the DES for use in the ASD classes; and a directory of useful organisations and contacts to support the successful management of the ASD class. A further recommendation is that the DES streamlines the application and establishment process for ASD classes and that the DES and/or NCSE appoint named personnel to guide and assist schools with this process.

I recommend the introduction of a specific programme of CPD for principals enabling them to deepen their understanding of ASD and its implications for the education sector as well as providing practical guidance and support for the establishment and ongoing administration and support of the ASD class. This might go some way to addressing what appears to be a significant gap in the Irish context.

**Building the knowledge base and learning communities.** I recommend that prior to taking up their ASD class role, teachers are given access to appropriate CPD programmes. This would deliver some teacher education in ASD and ASD interventions and is important considering the absence of ASD specific modules in the ITE programmes taken by serving primary school teachers. Such a move might ensure that teachers beginning their work as ASD class teachers come to the role with a stronger knowledge base.

Another recommendation I have relates to support structures for ASD class teachers. There is evidence in this study of the creation of informal support networks among ASD class teachers and among school principals. Considering the research evidence supporting the positive impact of PLCs on the work of SEN teachers and principals the researcher recommends the establishment of formal PLCs in this area. Considering the work taking place through approved programmes such as the PDST's *Misneach* (Professional Development Service for Teachers, 2016), or the Teaching Council's *Droichead* programmes (Teaching Council, 2015), the establishment and support of such PLCs could be facilitated through these organisations. The Teaching Council's *Cosán* (2016) also presents a possible opportunity for the creation and support of such professional networks. It acknowledges that teaching only really takes place when students are learning. It recognises the importance of both informal and formal learning opportunities for teachers and identifies the need for collaborative as well as individual occasions for learning. It also notes the need for the

creation of a space allowing for collaborative reflection, for teachers to share and learn from each other's knowledge and experience. Indeed, it calls for more "teacher-led and less provider-driven CPD" (p. 5).

Both teachers and principals in this study spoke of the benefits derived from meeting and sharing with other ASD class teachers. As well as moral support these meetings also facilitated the sharing and dissemination of practical advice and lessons derived from experiential knowledge. For teachers, these meetings tended to occur at CPD events. For principals, they were informal gatherings or meetings at management events. I recommend that the DES, teacher associations and management bodies consider bringing a more formal structure to these supports through the creation of a network of PLCs and/or the provision of a dedicated online forum for ASD class teachers to meet and share information.

**CPD in evidence based practice.** I recommend a review of CPD provision offered through SESS, Middletown and any relevant programme in receipt of public monies to ensure that course content is structured to meet the needs of all teachers working in ASD classes. While longer courses attracting postgraduate qualifications might offer participants the opportunity to acquire more in-depth knowledge, I recommend a review of SESS and Middletown in-service content and timetables to examine whether there is too much repetition of content and whether they adequately respond to teachers' developing needs. Also, I recommend that in light of a number of studies (Tweed, Connolly & Beaulieu, 2009; National Autism Center, 2009; Odom et al., 2010; Wong et al., 2014) the DES conducts a review of CPD provision in ASD interventions to ensure that funding is prioritised for courses in evidence-based practices. I also recommend regular consultation between teacher education colleges and the DES to explore cooperative practice to ensure quality of standards and coherency of provision for teachers in the area of ASD interventions.

**A cohesive model of education and healthcare provision.** The Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001) recommended that the Minister for Education advise the Health Minister on the need for family and child support plans for children with ASD. It also recommended the need for specific training for speech and language therapists around their work with children with ASD. This goes some way to recognising the suite of ancillary supports needed by many students with ASD to enable them to benefit from their school placement. Both the teachers and principals in this study spoke of their students' needs for ancillary supports and the ongoing difficulties faced in accessing these, a finding that was also evident in Daly et al. (2016). As an initial step in addressing these issues I recommend the establishment of a sub-department between the Departments of Education and Health, to oversee the provision of health-related supports to students with ASD and other categories of SEN. Currently, the National Education Psychological Service (NEPS) provides a specific service for schools. This could be considered as a model for the creation of other service providers or expanded into the creation of an organisation dedicated to providing multidisciplinary supports in school settings. This service should be under the control of a dedicated Minister of State with a ring-fenced budget flowing from the aforementioned ministries.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This is a small-scale study. With regard to investigating the experiences of ASD class teachers, four different primary schools were included in the study. These were drawn from schools under different forms of patronage. For principals, the number of different schools represented was eight, seven from Dublin and one from a neighbouring county. These were also drawn from schools under different patronage, and from areas with different socio-economic profiles. However, the relatively small number of schools limits the reliability of

the transferability of findings to the wider ASD class teacher and/or principal populations. Due to time constraints, I did not have time to present my findings to participants in the study. Thus, their reactions and responses to the findings do not form a part of the study. I plan, upon completion of my work, to send a copy of the findings to the participants.

I did not receive direct participation in this study from representatives of the SESS or DES. The SESS is an agency of the DES. When the SESS was contacted, a representative said that requests for participation in my study should be directed to the DES. When the DES was contacted a representative stated that the normal practice for the DES inspectorate was to decline requests for assistance with research projects due to the time commitment required. They continued that the DES would compile a listing of official responses to requests for information related to the education of children with ASD. This was not received. It would have been beneficial to the study to have the direct participation of the DES and SESS.

I also sought the participation of the special education departments in two teacher education colleges. However, I did not manage to gain access to one of these and did not receive responses to the correspondence I sent to them. I believe that it would have been helpful to my study to have their input.

There is the possibility that the themes principally considered in the study are those upon which I most wanted to focus. As outlined in this thesis' opening chapter I am the parent of a child with ASD and I have advocated for educational provision for my child and for other children with ASD. Prior to commencing this study, I had written to the DES and to the NCSE in relation to DES policy on educational provision for students with ASD. The concerns expressed in my correspondence are similar to concerns expressed by participants in this study. Regarding this I am conscious of the desire to 'see what one wants to see'. To

increase the reliability of my study I considered my findings in the context of other research studies and academic papers to examine whether such themes were evident in the work of others. I also consulted with my thesis supervisors through the research and writing of the thesis.

## **Recommendations for Further Studies**

**Revising the curriculum.** Teachers and principals mentioned difficulties faced in adapting the curriculum for use with some of their students. For example, Charlotte was advised by SESS to use the AISTEAR programme with younger students in the ASD class but felt that it was of limited use. With older students Suzanne spoke about the challenges faced in relation to issues such as sex education and dealing with student depression. The NCCA (2007) has issued guidelines for teachers working with students with GLD based on adapting the curriculum to enable access. I recommend that the DES commission a study to consult with stakeholders, including students and families, to examine the relevance of the current primary school curriculum for some students with ASD. Curriculum guidelines should be developed to ensure an appropriate education for students with ASD.

**Further research on the experiences of ASD class teachers and principals.** In considering the Ireland's special class model in providing an appropriate education for students with ASD, Dillenburger (2011) opined that it is humanly impossible for a teacher to be competent in all the elements that could constitute an eclectic model of provision for students with ASD. In this study, Charlotte spoke of the excessive expectations that she felt was placed on ASD class teachers around the number of functions they were expected to fulfil in the absence of adequate ancillary supports. Teachers spoke of the challenges they faced in areas such as IEP construction, adapting the curriculum and personnel management.

There is certainly increased availability of training opportunities for teachers working with students with ASD and there is a growing body of evidence pointing towards EBPs.

However, I recommend that larger scale research examining the experiences of ASD class teachers takes place exploring their experiences of working in the ASD class. One focus of this study might explore the processes that teachers use to choose and implement a particular intervention or combination of interventions with their students. Experts in the various EBPs might form part of the research team to examine the fidelity of application of the various interventions.

I also recommend further research into the experiences of principals. This study found that they encountered challenges attached to having an ASD class in the school and harboured concerns about their capacity to effectively provide leadership in this area. While they did exhibit great perseverance in their work and demonstrated a model of distributed and transformative leadership there was not an overt appreciation of this. Further research could uncover whether these issues relate to a wider principal population.

## **Epilogue**

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, in the context of the Irish education system, the 1998 recognition of ASD as a distinct disorder requiring specific support marked a significant development as did the attendant roll out of the ASD class model as a response to meeting the needs of students with ASD. In 2003 students with ASD constituted 9 per cent of all students attending special classes. By 2009 this had increased to 27 percent, with the NCSE's CEO stating that classes for children with ASD now comprised 60 per cent of the special classes in primary schools (McCoy et al., 2014). This rapid expansion of ASD classes, the growth in the number of students with ASD now attending mainstream schools and the

necessity that the needs of these students are effectively addressed, continue to present significant challenges to our education system.

The foreword to the Task Force report (Department of Education and Science, 2001), counsels, “The completion of this report represents not an end but a beginning”. It is a noteworthy statement on two fronts. Firstly, despite it being the first substantial piece of work in Ireland focused specifically on the educational needs of children with ASD, making extensive recommendations related to policy and practice, the report acknowledged that the consideration of ASD as a distinct disability in the Irish education context remained at a nascent stage. Secondly, it acts as an invitation to ongoing discussion and research in this field, that its findings were not absolutes but more staging posts on a longer journey.

In the succeeding years, there has been a relatively small amount of research work conducted into the experiences of teachers working in the ASD class environment. Similarly, there has been a scarcity of research focusing on the experiences of principals leading schools with ASD classes. This study adds to the small body of research exploring these areas. It provides evidence that ASD class teachers and principals are very committed to the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream schools. However, it also points towards profound concerns that both groups hold with regard to a number of barriers to effective inclusion taking place and to the success of the ASD class model. These included concerns about their own skill sets, ongoing difficulties accessing resources and ancillary supports for students and the absence of adequate supports from organisations such as the DES and NCSE. The study also contributes to our understanding of how the ASD classes are operating at school level. I hope that this work proves to be of some practical benefit to Ireland’s education system, that it provides food for debate and will be quickly joined by the voices of more

researchers equally interested in exploring ways to support schools in their work with students with ASD.

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## Appendix A

Source: Research Report on the Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland. p. 95 (NCSE, 2009)

**Table 16. Breakdown of teacher qualifications by school type**

DES designation of school	Total no. of schools responding	Total no. of teachers	Dip in Special Ed.	Dip in Learning Support	Cert in ASD	Birg Cert in ASD	Birg Dip in ASD	MSEN	M.Ed (spec ed)	Masters in Autism	Dip for teachers of the Deaf	Dip for teachers of the Blind	BCABA – ABA course (Trinity)	Other Qualifications
<b>Special Schools</b>														
Physical disability	5	58	25	6	0	0	0	4	8	0	0	0	0	0
Hearing impairment	2	42	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	29	0	0	0
Visual impairment	1	6	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
EBD	6	34	17	3	1	0	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
MGLD	28	316	85	6	3	5	2	4	13	2	3	0	2	0
ModGLD	29	327	88	11	9	8	5	7	7	1	2	0	1	2
Severe/ profound GLD	3	21	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
ASD	4	30	7	2	1	2	1	0	0	0	3	0	2	0
Specific learning disability	2	17	6	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Multiple disabilities	1	9	1	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other school	2	4	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>864</b>	<b>238</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>

*Percentage of Teachers working in Special Schools with a postgraduate qualification in ASD*

<b>Total Number of Teachers</b>		<b>864</b>
<b>Total Number of Teachers with Cert in ASD</b>	<b>14</b>	
<b>Total Number of Teachers with Birmingham Cert in ASD</b>	<b>18</b>	
<b>Total Number of Teachers with Birmingham Cert in ASD</b>	<b>10</b>	
<b>Masters in Autism</b>	<b>03</b>	
<b>Total Number of Teachers with BCaBA</b>	<b>05</b>	
<b>Total with postgraduate ASD qualification</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>(50/864)*100 = 5.78%</b>

*Percentage of Teachers working in Special Schools for Children with ASD with a postgraduate qualification in ASD*

<b>Total Number of Teachers</b>		<b>30</b>
<b>Total Number of Teachers with Cert in ASD</b>	<b>1</b>	
<b>Total Number of Teachers with Birmingham Cert in ASD</b>	<b>2</b>	
<b>Total Number of Teachers with Birmingham Cert in ASD</b>	<b>1</b>	
<b>Masters in Autism</b>	<b>0</b>	
<b>Total Number of Teachers with BCaBA</b>	<b>2</b>	
<b>Total with postgraduate ASD qualification</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>(6/30)*100 = 20%</b>

## Appendix B

### Suggested Educational Placement and Programme –

#### Department of Education & Science

##### **Model A: Autism specific class for pupils with a confirmed autism diagnosis and with mild special educational needs.**

###### **Stage 1:**

Allocation to this model is based on professional evidence that references a mild degree of learning difficulty. In some exceptional cases, younger children (aged 4-5 years) may be allocated to this model in the first instance, on an assessment basis, even if more significant learning difficulties are in evidence. This would occur in cases where indicators of progress have been documented. In the main, the degree of autism is also likely to be in the mild to moderate range, with the exception of pupils who are described as having 'high functioning autism'.

Given the individual differences that apply to pupils within the autistic spectrum, this enables children within a specific range on the autistic spectrum, and with broadly similar learning needs to be placed in the same class. This provides a framework for the delivery of the curriculum, where shared as well as individual learning, social and behavioural objectives can be targeted.

In this model it is also envisaged that children are progressively working towards integration with mainstream peers, for social integration in the first instance, and in relation to curricular integration at a later stage, if progress is good. The pupil's allocation to Model A represents the first stage in a three-stage process.

###### **Stage 2:**

Once the pupil has been recommended for inclusion in a specific model, and when a placement has commenced, the teacher, parents, speech and language therapists, educational psychologists and other professionals who are actively involved in the case identify the specific learning, social and behavioural targets that are a priority in a particular planning cycle. It is envisaged that the range of interventions listed in the model provides a menu that can be used to try to match the learning, social and behavioural needs of the child to particular interventions. This provides a framework for the Individual Education Plan (IEP) and represents the second stage in this process.

###### **Stage 3:**

The third stage involves the implementation of interventions by teachers and other professionals to meet the learning, social and behavioural targets that are specified in the Individual Education Plan.

The following subsections outline the constituent components of Model A.

## **1. Teaching Framework:**

- > The pupil would be taught in an autism specific class. The management of the curriculum for each pupil within the class would be the responsibility of the Class Teacher.
- > The Class Teacher's teaching qualification should be recognised by the Department of Education and Science.
- > In the Special Class the pupil would have a Special Needs Assistant. This assistance would initially be available on a 1:1 basis in most cases, although this should reflect the level of support which a particular pupil requires.
- > The level of Special Needs Assistance, and its utilisation would be reviewed annually.
- > Each pupil would have an Individual Education Plan (IEP);
- ^ The pupil's IEP would be designed by the Class Teacher and would be reviewed half-termly in conjunction with the pupil's parents and other professionals who are involved in the delivery of the pupil's programme.

## **2. Model of Intervention:**

The model of intervention would be delivered using a combined skills approach. Depending on the needs of the pupil it would involve the following core elements:

- > ABA - as a core element of the programme in some cases. In other cases, ABA may be a smaller component of the programme offered; this would be agreed on the basis of professional advice and in agreement with parents. This programme would relate to the delivery of both individual work and small group work, as appropriate.
- > TEACCH would also be introduced to the pupil as an integral part of the programme. In particular, the visual timetable would be the main aspect of TEACCH that would be included in the pupil's daily schedule. This may be supplemented with other elements of this programme to promote pupil independence, if deemed appropriate.
- > The utilisation of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) as an integral part of the pupil's communication system, if appropriate.
- > Access to Speech and Language Therapy (if deemed appropriate on the basis of relevant professional reports). This would be provided in school as part of an integrated educational/language based programme.
- > Access to Occupational Therapy (if deemed appropriate on the basis of relevant professional reports).

- > Access to a range of multi-sensory experiences.
- > Emphasis on the development of self-help skills to promote pupil independence.
- > A graduated model of integration with non-autistic peers to promote social and language development. If progress continues, then more extended periods of integration can be planned. In the early stages, integration would be supervised by the Special Needs Assistant, but directed by the Class Teacher.

### **3. Training:**

- > The Class Teacher would receive ABA training, prior to taking responsibility for the class;
- > The Special Needs Assistants would also receive ABA training;
- > Both the Class Teacher and the Special Needs Assistants would receive training to effect the consistent implementation of the TEACCH programme; in particular, this relates to the application of visual timetables for each pupil.
- > There would be advice and supervision from an ABA specialist. This input should interface with agreed social and educational targets. With increased teacher competence and confidence it is envisaged that this level of supervision should decrease over time. This would be supplemented by further training, as required.

### **4. Contact with parents:**

This can be organised in the following ways:

- > Through daily feedback in relation to individual pupil target sheets;
- > Home-school diary where successes or other notable events are recorded;
- > Review of the IEP at half term meetings;

### **5. Length of School Year:**

- > This should be extended to enable the pupils to continue their educational and social experiences during part of the month of July.

### **6. Annual Review:**

- > Annual review would be convened by the class teacher. This review will involve more detailed professional discussion. It would consider the constituent components of the programme and any resource implications associated with it.

- > This could involve an Educational Psychology review, by an Educational Psychologist working for NEPS, or under the aegis of NEPS if there are concerns regarding aspects of the placement, or if transfer to another form of provision is being considered.

## **Appendix C**

### **Individual Teacher Interview Questions**

1. How many years have you been working as a primary school teacher?
2. How many years have you been working as a teacher in an ASD unit?
3. How did you decide that you would like to work with children with ASD?
4. Prior to starting work in an ASD unit what knowledge did you have of ASD?
5. Do you hold a post-graduate qualification in Special Needs Education/Autism Specific Interventions?
6. What CPD courses did you take prior to taking up this position?
7. What CPD courses have you taken subsequently?
8. Is there any particular course(s) that you have found particularly useful? Please explain.
9. Is there any particular course(s) that you did not find useful? Please explain.
10. Do you receive on-going supervision or support in any of the interventions that you have covered through CPD? If so, what form does this supervision/support take?
11. Do you feel that taking part in CPD has improved your sense of confidence and effectiveness in the classroom? Please explain.
12. Do you feel supported professionally in your position as a teacher working in an ASD unit? Do you feel you receive adequate support through SESS?
13. Do you feel you have the support of your work colleagues/school management? Please explain.
14. Has working in an ASD unit changed the way you feel as a member of staff in the school? Please explain.
15. What would you identify as the main challenges you have faced teaching children with ASD compared to teaching neurotypical children?
16. What do you consider to be the most rewarding aspects of working as a teacher in an ASD unit? Are there any negative aspects?
17. Based on your experience what recommendations, if any, would you make regarding the professional supports/training required by teachers working with children with ASD?

## **Appendix D**

### **Questions for a Focus Group of School Principals**

1. For how many years has your school had an ASD unit(s) attached?
2. Why did school management decide that it would open up an ASD unit(s)?
3. What type of support/guidance did you receive from the DES when you decided to open up an ASD unit?
4. What support/guidance did you receive from the NCSE when you decided to open up an ASD unit?
5. Do you feel that the support/guidance offered is/was adequate? Please explain.
6. Do you feel equipped to offer professional support to the teacher(s) working in the ASD unit(s)?
7. What knowledge of ASD did you have prior to opening an ASD unit(s)/taking up a position as principal of a school with an ASD unit(s)?
8. Have you undergone any CPD in relation to ASD since you opened an ASD unit(s)? If the answer is yes, what courses did you take?
9. Did you find the courses beneficial? Please explain.
10. Has having an ASD unit(s) in the school impacted in any way on the extent of your workload (e.g. administration; caring for the needs of children with ASD; liaising with external agencies)? If so, how?
11. What do you regard as the main benefit(s) to the school of having an ASD unit(s)?
12. What do you regard as the main challenges(s) to the school of having an ASD unit(s)?
13. Based on your experience what recommendations, if any, would you make regarding the professional supports/training required by teachers working with children with ASD?
14. Based on your experience what recommendations, if any, would you make regarding the professional supports/training required by principals leading a school with an ASD unit(s)?

## **Appendix E**

### **Questions for Agencies Personnel**

1. Can you direct me to research studies which support the effectiveness of the disciplines/interventions/ approaches for use with children with ASD that are offered through SESS and Middletown Centre for Autism as part of the Continuous Professional Development programmes for teachers of children with ASD?
2. What role does your agency play in deciding which disciplines/interventions/ approaches for use with children with ASD are offered as part of the Continuous Professional Development programmes for teachers of children with ASD?
3. Can you direct me to research papers and/or studies that underpin the Department of Education and Skills' current policy on the education of children with autism and its use of the ASD unit model?
4. Does your agency have a role in ensuring that acceptable standards of training offered through the SESS and/or Middletown Centre for Autism in the disciplines/interventions/ approaches for use in the classroom with children with ASD are maintained?
5. Does your agency have a role in ensuring that acceptable standards of teacher delivery of these disciplines/interventions/ approaches for use in the classroom with children with ASD are maintained? How does it carry out this function?
6. In the context of its work in the area of ASD does your agency regularly liaise with professional bodies representing teachers/behaviour analysts/ TEACCH/DIR-Floortime? If so, how and why?
7. Currently it appears that SESS provided CPD in ASD interventions is not typically available to teachers until they have taken up their position in an ASD unit. Has your agency any role in advising on or determining the CPD model or timetable for teachers of children with ASD?
8. Has your agency conducted any research into the experiences of principals of schools catering for children with ASD through the ASD unit model? If so, what form did this research take?
9. Did your agency issue any policy advice related to the functions of principals of schools catering for children with ASD through the ASD unit model? If so, when did this advice issue?

## **Appendix F**

### **Special Education Department (College of Education) Interview Schedule**

1. In terms of teaching children with ASD, prior to the introduction of the new four-year Bachelor of Education Degree, what specific modules were offered to student teachers during their Initial Teacher Education programme?
2. With the introduction of the new four-year programme have any additional modules/content related to the teaching of children with ASD been added? For example, does the Special and Inclusive Education (SIE) specialism have content specifically related to the teaching of children with ASD? If so, how did the course architects decide upon this content?
3. How did the course architects of the Graduate Certificate in the Education of Pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders offered in NAME College decide upon the course content?
4. Upon completion of the Graduate Certificate in the Education of Pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders graduates have the option of advancing to the Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs (with Specialist Studies in Teaching Pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders)? What is the content of these specialist studies and how was the content decided upon?
5. Does the Masters in Special Educational Needs contain modules specifically related to the education of children with ASD? If so, what form do these modules take?
6. What other forms of CPD for the teachers of children with ASD does NAME College offer?
7. How are the quality and effectiveness of the undergraduate, postgraduate and CPD programmes offered by NAME College measured?

## Appendix G

### Plain Language Statement

This is a qualitative research study. It will aim to evaluate the research evidence base that supports Ireland's policy on the education of children with autism and to consider what qualifications are needed to be a teacher of children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and to consider the professional challenges presented to teachers of children with ASD. The study will look at the structure and elements of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) offered to teachers of children with ASD in the Republic of Ireland and explore the impact, if any, that this CPD has on a teacher's sense of confidence and effectiveness in the classroom.

This will be done by getting the views of teachers of children with autism on the CPD that they have received regarding autism specific interventions, with a particular focus on how this has impacted on their sense of effectiveness in the classroom. Participation in the study will involve agreeing to take part in an interview lasting in the region of 45-60 minutes. There may be a short follow up interview. The purpose of this would be to seek clarification on matters raised in the first interview. I will also be conducting a focus group with a selection of school principals as well as interviews with officials from various State agencies supporting the education of children with ASD.

I plan to informally approach principals and teachers I know working in the primary education sector to see what schools they know that have long established or newly established ASD units. I will then get the school contact details through school websites or other publicly available media.

I plan to recruit participants by approaching the schools through initially writing to the school Board of Management. In this letter, I will outline what my research proposal is and seeking the permission of the Board to write to the principal and teacher working in the ASD unit to see if they would be interested in taking part in the study.

Teachers who agree to take part in the Research study will be required to take part in an individual interview session with the researcher that will last for approximately sixty minutes. Four teachers will be selected to participate. Also, four school principals will be selected to take part in a focus group. The purpose of this focus group is to facilitate the principals in sharing their views about managing a school that is catering for children with ASD. The study will also involve interviews with officials from State agencies and private organisations that support the education of children with special needs.

There are no anticipated risks to the participants in taking part in this study. Benefits to the participants from taking part in the study are the opportunities to voice their views and to reflect on the experiences that they have had.

Every possible effort will be made to protect the anonymity/confidentiality of participants through the use of pseudonyms and not providing any identifiable features in the report. However, because the number of participants is quite small anonymity/confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. The data collected will not be used for any purpose other than that stated at the beginning of the project without the permission of the participants. Both electronic and hard copies of data will be kept in secure storage. All of the data will be destroyed on my graduation from the course.

Involvement in this research study is voluntary. Participants may withdraw from the study at any point. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the study are completed.

**If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:**

The Administrator,  
Office of the Dean of Research and Humanities,  
Room C214  
St Patrick's College,  
Drumcondra,  
Dublin 9.  
Tel +353-(0)1-884 2149

# Appendix H

## Informed Consent Form for Participant

### Research Study Title

Building on Solid Foundations? - A Consideration of What Constitutes Appropriate Qualifications for Teachers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Their Impact on Teacher Sense of Confidence and Effectiveness in the Classroom

### Purpose of the Research

This qualitative research project is being undertaken as part of the course requirements of the Doctorate in Education (Ed.D) programme in St. Patrick's College Drumcondra. The main purpose of the research is to evaluate the evidence base that supports Ireland's policy on the education of children with autism and to look at contemporary research into educational and behavioural interventions for children with an autism spectrum disorder. Following this I plan to explore what qualifications one requires to be a teacher of children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and to consider the professional challenges faced by teachers of children with ASD. I will pay particular focus on the structure and elements of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) offered to teachers or aspiring teachers of children with ASD in the Republic of Ireland and to explore the impact, if any, that engagement with this CPD has on a teacher's sense of confidence and sense of effectiveness in the classroom.

### Requirements of Participation in Research Study

Participants who agree to take part in the research study will be required to take part in an individual interview session with the student researcher. This will last for approximately sixty minutes.

### Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary

I am aware that if I agree to take part in this study, I can withdraw from participation at any stage. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the Research Study have been completed.

All data will be held in a locked cabinet in the researcher's residence. Computer files created for the purpose of holding the research data will be password protected. All data will be destroyed upon the researcher's completion of the Doctorate in Education course.

Where the sample size is very small, it may be impossible to guarantee anonymity/confidentiality re participant identity. However, every effort will be made to ensure that the identity of participants will be protected through the use of pseudonyms and not providing any identifiable features in the report. Data collected will not be used for any purpose other than that flagged at the outset of the project without the permission of the participants.

### Participant – Please complete the following

(Circle Yes or No for each question).

Have you read or had read to you the Plain Language Statement?	Yes/No
Do you understand the information provided?	Yes/No
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	Yes/No
Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?	Yes/No

### Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. The researchers have answered my questions and concerns, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

*PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE:*

*NAME IN BLOCK CAPITALS:*

*WITNESS:*

*DATE:*

## Appendix I

### Teacher Interviews NVivo Codebook

Name	Description	Number Of Sources Coded	Number Of Coding References	Hierarchical Name
CPD courses in ASD	CPD in ASD courses taken since taking up the ASD class position	4	7	Nodes\CPD courses in ASD
CPD Increased Confidence in the Classroom	Has CPD positively impacted on teacher confidence and how?	4	14	Nodes\CPD courses in ASD\CPD Increased Confidence in the Classroom
Not so useful CPD	Were there any CPD courses or aspects of delivery you did not find useful?	4	13	Nodes\CPD courses in ASD\Not so useful CPD
Useful CPD	Which courses and what aspects of CPD have you found most useful?	4	13	Nodes\CPD courses in ASD\Useful CPD
Knowledge of ASD Prior	What knowledge of ASD did you have as you took up your ASD class position	4	5	Nodes\Knowledge of ASD Prior
Specific Quals ASD Prior	Did you hold any specific ASD related qualifications prior to your work in the ASD class?	4	7	Nodes\Knowledge of ASD Prior\Specific Quals ASD Prior
Ongoing Supervision	Did you receive ongoing supervision of your ASD classwork e.g. from experts in particular interventions	4	10	Nodes\Ongoing Supervision
Post Grad Quals in ASD	Does the teacher hold a postgraduate qualification in an ASD related discipline?	4	5	Nodes\Post Grad Quals in ASD
Supported Professionally as a Teacher in ASD class	Does the teacher receive support in their ASD classwork?	4	12	Nodes\Supported Professionally as a Teacher in ASD class
Changed how you feel as a colleague	How are your relationships with teaching colleagues?	4	10	Nodes\Supported Professionally as a Teacher in ASD class\Changed how you feel as a colleague
Issues around SNAs	What is your experience of working with SNAs in the ASD class?	2	4	Nodes\Supported Professionally as a Teacher in ASD class\Issues around SNAs
Support from Work Colleagues and or Mgmt	What type of support, if any, do you receive from teacher colleagues and school management?	4	14	Nodes\Supported Professionally as a Teacher in ASD class\Support from Work Colleagues and or Mgmt
Teaching children with ASD Why	Why/how did you decide that you would like to work with children with ASD?	4	6	Nodes\Teaching children with ASD Why
Main challenges working with children with ASD	Have you faced any particular challenges working with students with ASD in the ASD classroom?	1	3	Nodes\Teaching children with ASD Why\Main challenges working with children with ASD
Teaching experience - ASD class	How much experience do you have working in an ASD class?	4	6	Nodes\Teaching experience - ASD class
Teaching Experience - Mainstream	How many years experience do you have working in a mainstream class environment?	3	3	Nodes\Teaching Experience - Mainstream

# Appendix J

NVivo Analysis - Create Codebook.nvp - NVivo Pro

FILE HOME CREATE DATA ANALYZE QUERY EXPLORE LAYOUT VIEW

Go Refresh Open Properties Edit Paste Copy Merge Cut Copy Paste Merge

Workspace Item Clipboard Format Paragraph Styles Editing Proofing

Nodes Look for Search In Nodes Find Now Clear Advanced Find

Nodes Cases Relationships Node Matrices

Name	Sources	References
CPD courses in ASD	4	7
CPD Increased Confidence in the Classroom	4	14
Knowledge of ASD Prior	4	5
Specific Quals ASD Prior	4	7
Not so useful CPD	4	13
Ongoing Supervision	4	10
Post Grad Quals in ASD	4	5
Supported Professionally as a Teacher in ASD class	4	12
Changed how you feel as a colleague	4	10
Issues around SNAs	2	4
Support from Work Colleagues and or Mgmt	4	14
Teaching children with ASD Why	4	6
Main challenges working with children with ASD	1	3
Teaching experience - ASD class	4	6
Teaching Experience - Mainstream	3	3
Useful CPD	4	13

Drag selection here to code to a new node

Specific Quals ASD Prior

Teacher Interview Bern... (1)  
Teacher Interview Joan (1)  
Teacher Interview Lyle (3)  
Teacher Interview Suza... (2)

<Internals\Teacher interview Lyle> - 3 references coded [1.59% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.64% Coverage

No, I've done some, over the years I've done some, like when I was about to teach 1st class and there was a boy in the class with ASD so I did the ICEP course, 'Understanding Autism' online and then...

M: How long is that course? Is that the 10 hour course is it?

L: Twenty hours.

Reference 2 - 0.54% Coverage

So that was it really, that's all I had. Now, I'd done the INTO course, the online course for learning support/resource teachers and I'd done different things at different stages on assessment and stuff. Online courses over the years.

PMCC 4 Items Sources: 4 References: 7 Unfiltered

## Appendix K

### Sample of Teacher Interview Responses indicating CPD's positive impact on teacher confidence in the classroom.

#### [CPD Engagement - Increased Confidence in the Classroom?](#)

[<Internals\\Teacher Interview Bernadette>](#) - § 1 reference coded [1.93% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.93% Coverage

B: I think so yeah. Yeah.

M: And how so?

B: Or even to go and, you know, if you see something that someone's suggesting, and you say, "Well, I do that", you know. Because there's times you're thinking Oh God, am I doing the right thing? Am, I, you know, is this the best thing to be doing or are there other ways of doing it? And then, you know, it kind of affirms it for you I suppose, sort of, you know?

M: Yeah. As if you were at a, if you were at a meeting with other teachers?

B: Yeah, yeah. Em, and you know, definitely I think, I think it's good for your confidence to kind of, or to feel like you've got a bank of ideas or resources or something you can go to.

[<Internals\\Teacher Interview Joan>](#) - § 4 references coded [3.45% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.62% Coverage

J: Absolutely, absolutely, for lots of different reasons, you know. It's always useful to remind yourself of what you're doing and why you're doing it and getting back to basics which is a huge thing. Sometimes you're so busy trying to implement the curriculum and doing all these things that you have to remind yourself, these are little three and four year olds that we're trying to nurture here, you know, and they need to play and they need to learn to have fun and to interact and sometimes we do get a bit caught up with the English and the Maths and the History and, you know, CPD is very important from that point of view, to bring us back to what's really important.

Reference 2 - 0.73% Coverage

J: All those things are important, but I think to bring it back to basics sometimes and as well as that, to interact with other teachers that are in this industry. Because if I'm sitting in a staffroom in a mainstream school there's only one or two teachers that know exactly what I'm doing every day.

Reference 3 - 0.52% Coverage

J: So, I think CPD is a great opportunity to meet people and to talk.

M: Okay, with people who are in very similar situations to you.

J: Exactly.

M: Almost, like a learning community or a supportive teacher community.

Reference 4 - 0.58% Coverage

Absolutely, yeah. I think the more the merrier really, you know. The more information we have the more we can pass on to the children, the more we can help them in a way that suits them, you know. I mean knowledge is power really, isn't it?

[<Internals\\Teacher Interview Lyle>](#) - § 3 references coded [3.55% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.61% Coverage

Yeah, absolutely, I do, and I know every time I come back from courses I know, you know, everything changes, in fact we had a new SNA, she joined us this year and she was quite nervous about joining us. We kept saying to her, things change her all the time you know.

Reference 2 - 1.70% Coverage

I know they say that children with autism like things to be kept the same, but it doesn't happen because, you know, you learn, and you change things and you implement different things. So, yeah absolutely I mean if you think of, you know, as I said, C-ABA is used all the time. Now, I guess I was using, I think that's the nice thing about ABA, that you use a lot of it without knowing why or how and probably sometimes using it wrong. Em, we use that all the time. So, if you walk into our room, you'll see timers, you know, token economies. You'll see that we're, you know, constantly thinking about how to, how to help things. What I guess our difficulty with ABA is at the minute is, we're using it more to fight fires at the minute.

Reference 3 - 1.24% Coverage

We're not at the stage where we can recognise you know, implement it before something happens. And the TEACCH as well, you know, this year I did that in May and this year as a result a lot of my strategies are, or a lot of my teaching, my lessons are more activity based and we have Velcro out of everything, everything is visual. Em, so yeah, I do think, intensive interaction as well, as I've said I've used a lot, and sensory processing. I think the information you get from them is helpful in just understanding, you know, in trying...

[<Internals\\Teacher Interview Suzanne>](#) - § 6 references coded [3.68% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.61% Coverage

Absolutely, absolutely. I feel informed, I feel like when an issue comes up I know exactly what to do. Em, I have literature if I need it to look back on, you know, you get given books, you get given all of their forms, everything when you're at the CPD. So, I know that if, okay, if I don't remember the lecture itself I know I have the books to refer to.

Reference 2 - 0.12% Coverage

Em, I know so much more about the ins and outs of methods to do things.

Reference 3 - 0.87% Coverage

M: Okay, could you tell me what you mean by that?

S: Okay, let me see, em, say for instance I was doing PECS and I came across a roadblock and I didn't know what to do. Before probably in my first year I would have, I would have just given up and said, "Right, okay, this clearly is, there's an issue with this whole system and it's just not going to work, and I would have stopped it and gone with something else, whereas through my training I know just to pare everything back, start again, look, record.

Reference 4 - 0.53% Coverage

We did em, another course we did with SESS that was very good was C-ABA so it was ABA and because, obviously we're not full ABA here but there was so many things from the ABA. For instance, at the moment I have a child who's biting. I have different issues going on in the class and I then observe, take notes.

Reference 5 - 0.81% Coverage

It would have been, but I found, like I met manys a roadblock in my first year because it was all so new to me. I had obviously worked with children with autism and I was hired because I had the experience that was good enough. But still, it was all very new to me day to day in a class. But this school in particular, the teachers that existed already in the units, as well as the principal, the principal is very involved in the units. So daily I went with a list of issues.

Reference 6 - 0.73% Coverage

Em, I've met many different types of teachers from many different types of schools at all of the courses. That was another thing about the courses, em, getting to talk to people in different situations and I can safely say that I am, this school is definitely, I am definitely one of the most supported teachers I have ever come across from the point of view of my principal being so involved in the units and in the courses.

## **Initial Notes on emerging theme regarding Teacher Views indicating CPD's positive impact on teacher confidence in the classroom.**

Teachers valued:

- The courses they see as being directly transferable to their work in the classroom
- The opportunity to meet with colleagues in similar situations and learning from each other

### **Accessing CPD Courses prior**

Prior to being appointed to the position of teacher in the ASD class Suzanne had not taken any ASD related CPD course

Lyle had obtained a place on the two-day TEACCH course offered through SESS, after he had been appointed as teacher in the ASD class but before he actually worked with the children. He also took a twenty-hour online Institute of Child Education and Psychology (ICEP) course called 'Understanding Autism'.

Joan's primary school was one of the first with an ASD class as part of a mainstream school. She recalls that prior to taking the students into the class the DES offered staff school based training in *PECS* and *TEACCH*.

When Bernadette discovered that she was to become teacher in the ASD class she explored the possibility taking CPD through the *SESS* and *Middletown Centre for Autism*. She found it was difficult to access courses "if you're not in the setting already" as for "a lot of the courses the requirement was that you be working in an ASD class" which was overtly stated on the application form (BIT). Prior to starting in the ASD class, through putting "a spin on it" she got a place on the *SESS* two-day *TEACCH* course. She described as "a bit ridiculous" the difficult in obtaining places on the courses as she had "no training specific to ASD at all".

### **Views on CPD Benefits**

Following appointment to the ASD class Bernadette felt there were a lot of ASD courses available through *SESS* and *Middletown*. She described the courses she took as "great". (BIT) These included the two-day *TEACCH* and 'Intensive Interaction' through *SESS*, a two day "Managing Anxiety" and a workshop on sensory processing offered by *Middletown*.

Joan recalls that at the time her school set up an ASD class there "was a big focus on TEACCH." (JIT) She does not recall who organised the training but shortly after taking up the position in the class she took a week block each of TEACCH and PECS. She described both programmes as "fantastic" with TEACCH being "very practical, very applicable, and lessons that you're taking into the classroom with you." (JIT)

He described the C-ABA course as "the most beneficial...from a teaching skills point of view and then adapting the behaviours." He felt the *Intensive Interaction* course was very good for developing teaching skills "from a language point of view", and it up-skilled him in ways "to encourage the children to interact and to speak more and to use their language, to use the language they have." (LIT) He was "not a fan" of on-line courses and did not benefit much from the *ICEP* ones. He felt the content quality was not of an acceptable standard and that at times "their information was incorrect".

Following appointment as teacher in the ASD class Suzanne has taken a lot of CPD courses, mostly through the SESS as a part of her Postgraduate Diploma in Autism course. Her school principal has been “very open about informing [her] of any courses...and allowing [her] to go on the courses”. (SIT) She found the two and five-day TEACCH as well as the PECS and Social Stories courses particularly useful as the contents were “applicable day to day in the classroom” and provided the example of TEACCH allowing for the manipulation of the classroom environment to provide structure for the student. The course allowed participants to work directly with children with “a wide range of abilities” and Suzanne felt that because she got “so much first-hand experience with that I was able to bring all of that back into the classroom with ease.” (SIT)

### **Impact of CPD on teacher sense of confidence and effectiveness in the classroom**

Bernadette felt that engagement with CPD **has improved her sense of confidence and effectiveness in the classroom**. Firstly, **if a fellow course participant devises an idea that Bernadette is already implementing with her students she sees this as an affirmation of her work**. She also states that **meeting other teachers at CPD often leads to getting “a bank of ideas or resources or something you can go to” and that this is “good for your confidence”**. (BIT)

For a number of reasons **Joan also experienced increased levels of confidence and sense of effectiveness from her engagement with CPD**. Firstly, she stated that it was **always a useful exercise “to remind yourself of what you’re doing and why you’re doing it** and getting back to basics which is a huge thing.” (JIT) Similar to the point made by Bernadette, Joan also believes that **CPD offers an important opportunity to interact with other teachers working in ASD classes** as in her own school *“there’s only one or two teachers that know exactly what I’m doing every day.”* For her, CPD offers a *“great opportunity”* to meet and talk and she sees her fellow participants as a **supportive learning community**.

In relation to the impact of CPD on his sense of confidence and effectiveness in the classroom **Lyle is certain that it improved both**. He offers examples of how it **helps him to cope with the changing environment of the classroom**. He **speaks of the impact that C-ABA** has had on his work with the children, that **“we use it all the time”** and that he is continually thinking about how to improve things in the classroom. (LIT) One challenge he feels with the use of ABA is that he is currently applying it in a reactionary mode and he would like to implement it in a proactive, preventative way. He speaks of the **positive impact that taking the SESS provided TEACCH programme** has had on his classroom practice. As a result of the programme a lot of his lessons are “more activity based”. The **information received** from courses such as Intensive Interaction and Sensory Processing he **considers “helpful in just understanding” the needs of his students**. (LIT)

In response to whether CPD **has had a positive impact on her sense of confidence and effectiveness in the classroom** Suzanne responded **“Absolutely, absolutely. I feel informed; I feel like when an issue comes up I know exactly what to do.”** (SIT) Even though she had experience of working with children with ASD prior to becoming teacher in the ASD class, experience which she feels influenced the principal’s decision to offer her the job, she found that “still, it was all very new to me day to day in a class.” (SIT) If she does not remember everything covered in the lecture she **has her notes to review and knows the books to consult**. **Prior to engagement with this CPD she felt that when faced with a challenging situation in the classroom she would not have handled it well**. Suzanne also speaks of the **positive benefit of the SESS provided C-ABA course** describing it as **“very good”**. She feels it **strengthened her ability to record what was taking place for a child and to take in things that prior to taking the course she “might not have seen.”** (SIT) In turn it has led to better IEPs for the students. **Similar to Bernadette**

**and Joan she feels that an added benefit of CPD, something positively impacting on that sense of confidence and effectiveness, is the opportunity that attending offers to meet with teachers working in other schools.** Listening to the experiences of other teachers had led her to believe, “I am definitely one of the most supported teachers I have ever come across from the point of view of my principal being so involved in the units and in the courses.” (SIT)

