

**The Impact of Including Autistic Students in the ‘Leadership for Inclusion’ Team at an Irish
Mainstream Post-primary School: An Exploratory Case Study**

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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 Doctor of Education 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.

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Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

ABA: Applied Behaviour Analysis

AGPG: Autism Good Practice Guidelines

CDT: Critical Disability Theory

CIM: Collaborative Initiative Meeting

CLI: Collaborative Leadership Initiative

CLT: Collaborative Leadership Team

DE: Department of Education

DES: Department of Education and Skills

DIR: Developmental, Individual-differences, and Relationship-based model

EPSEN: Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs

IU: Intolerance of Uncertainty

L1LP: Level 1 Learning Programme

L2LP: Level 2 Learning Programme

LCVP: Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

LFG: Leadership Focus Group

Lfi: Leadership for Inclusion

LAOS: Looking at Our Schools

NCCA: The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NCSE: National Council for Special Education

PP: Post-Primary

ROI: Republic of Ireland

RTA: Reflective Thematic Analysis

RF: Researcher/Facilitator

SEBD: Social Emotional Behavioural Difficulty

SEN: Special Educational Needs

SENO: Special Education Needs Officer

SIM: Student Initiative Meetings

SIT: Social Identity Theory

SFG: Student Focus Group

SVR: Student Voice Research

SSE: School Self-Evaluation

TA: Thematic Analysis

TALIS: Teaching and Learning International Survey

TLFG: Teacher Leader Focus Group

TY: Transition Year

UNEFA: United Nations Education for All

UNCRPD: United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with
Disabilities

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

VSS: Voluntary Secondary Schools

Abstract

The Impact of Including Autistic Students in the ‘Leadership for Inclusion’ Team at an Irish Mainstream Post-primary School: An Exploratory Case Study

Rachel Ryan

This study explores the impact on its processes and outcomes of including students within a ‘leadership for inclusion’ (Lfi) team, which, at the time of the study, was involved in reviewing critically and developing a range of policies and practices that affect young peoples’ experience of belonging and inclusion at a mainstream post-primary (PP) school in Ireland. It explores how their participation can impact on group processes and relationships between and among team members and on outcomes, including alterations to policies and practices related to experiences of belonging and inclusion at the school concerned.

The study is important and timely in light of the relative paucity of literature and empirical investigation of how adults facilitate student voice and leadership. It draws upon existing research and literature on the value of harnessing student perspectives, particularly those of autistic students, in developing inclusive policy and practice. This evidence is used to set the context for the investigative element of the work, to investigate the impact of involving autistic students in an inclusive leadership team operating in a mainstream PP school.

The study employed a sequential case study design that used qualitative data gathering over two phases. It was guided by a conceptual framework. Phase 1 involved five Student Initiative Meetings (SIM) and five Collaborative Leadership Initiative (CLI) team meetings, with autistic students setting the agenda. Phase 2 comprised three focus group discussions with all participants of the CLI to delve deeper into Phase 1 findings and address the research questions. The findings are examined and interpreted within the context of the literature review provided.

The study highlighted key processes and outcomes that contribute to positive changes in school culture and practices. Central to these processes were the co-construction of leadership, shared decision-making, and collective responsibility among students, teachers, and leaders. The principal played a pivotal role in promoting inclusive practices, fostering genuine dialogue, and addressing systemic inequities. Teachers experienced empowerment through the development and consistent adoption of effective practices, while students gained a sense of ownership and agency, actively contributing to school decision-making and improvement efforts. Furthermore, it was identified that the creation of safe spaces and authentic student-teacher partnerships was essential for fostering relational care and safety. As a result, the outcomes included enhanced student engagement, motivation, and a greater sense of belonging, which ultimately led to a more connected and inclusive school environment. These changes collectively contributed to the transformation of school culture and the improvement of institutional practices.

This study contributes to current knowledge in the areas of collaborative leadership for inclusion at the school level, the mobilisation of learner voices, particularly those of autistic students, and the empowerment of both learners and teachers in driving sustainable change within educational settings. By challenging traditional perspectives and practices, the research highlights the potential to reduce or eliminate 'soft barrier', policies and practices that often hinder inclusive education in PP schools and contribute to the marginalisation of autistic and other vulnerable students. The findings provide valuable insights that can inform efforts to create more inclusive and equitable school environments. While the outcomes must be interpreted within the specific context of the study, they offer relevant applications for those interested in fostering inclusive practices in other educational settings. The study thus advances understanding in areas that promote collaborative leadership, elevate the voices of marginalised learners, and empower teachers and students to enact lasting, positive change in school.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The successful inclusion of autistic students in Irish mainstream PP schools has been a consistent challenge for educators, with some voicing concern regarding the educational and social outcomes for those students (Goodall, 2015). There is also a concern that the voices of autistic students are not being heard within research and policy formation (Goodall, 2019). In Ireland, inclusive education discourse promotes the development of mainstream schools for all, both at primary and PP education levels. While there have been signs of systematic improvement, there are also significant shortcomings reported, in particular, a failure to enact the full provisions of the Education for Persons with Special Education Needs (EPSEN) Act (Government of Ireland, 2004). At a school level, while commitment to developing inclusive practice has been found (Drudy and Kinsella, 2009; Rose et al., 2015), many “variations” of practice exist where schools are at “different stages in this process” of moving towards inclusion (Rose et al., 2015, p. 2).

There has been progress in facilitating inclusion in mainstream classrooms, which are perceived as more stimulating and demanding learning environments with greater academic engagement and achievement, enhanced social interaction and skill development, and decreased dropout rates (Winter and O’ Raw, 2010). However, this positive outcome is not consistently observed among autistic students, leading to doubts about the effectiveness of mainstream inclusion (Goodall, 2019). Moreover, there is a general theme in extant research that emphasises the unfavourable educational encounters experienced by young autistic students’ (McGregor and Campbell, 2001). Additionally, there appears to be a widespread misconception that the academic capabilities of many autistic young individuals imply that they can effectively manage the varied demands of mainstream school environments (Moore, 2007; Moorewood, Humphrey and Symes, 2011). Alternatively, McGregor and Campbell (2001, p. 202) are among those who have found that “the bustle and unpredictability of a mainstream class could be confusing or even distressing, and the learning styles of those with autism

could not easily be accommodated.” In recent literature, Goodall (2015), supports this view, indicating that the issue persists and can result in challenging behaviour and dropout, where there is a disproportionate number of mainstream school exclusions for autistic students as it is identified that they are twenty times (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008a) more likely to be permanently excluded than students with no Special Educational Needs (SEN). Such exclusion, can, in turn, have a negative impact on the future life opportunities of autistic young people (Rioux, 2014). Those who are struggling or unhappy in school, either because of negative perceptions of their abilities or because they have SEN that are unsupported, have been represented as a marginalised group within our education system (Gray, Hill and Pellicano, 2023). If autistic students are not being fully included in their learning environment and are not reaching their potential in a school that claims to have an inclusive ethos, then the effectiveness and appropriateness of the support provided for them must be questioned and justified (Goodall, 2019).

To address these challenges and explore the broader implications for inclusive education, this study aims to investigate how a Leadership for Inclusion Lfi team can support both the successes achieved and the persistent barriers that may exist in a particular PP school. By examining the role of the Lfi team, this research contributes to current knowledge on the implementation of inclusive practices, highlighting how collaborative leadership can foster a more inclusive school culture. The study also explores how the empowerment of teachers and students, particularly those with autism, can drive sustainable change, while identifying areas where systemic obstacles continue to impede progress towards fully inclusive education.

1.2 Terminology

Throughout this study, the term ‘autistic’ and/or ‘autistic learner’ will be adopted to emphasise an identity first approach to terminology, which resonates with the surveyed and stated views and wishes of the autistic learners who took part in the study and, thereafter individuals in the autism community who view their diagnosis

(or their child's diagnosis) as a fundamental aspect of their identity. This stance is supported in the literature (Davidson and Henderson, 2010; Kenny et al., 2016; Gormley, Feeney and McNally, 2023) by placing emphasis on belonging and inclusion in the community (Costley et al., 2021; Pellicano and Heyworth, 2023). These perspectives align with the concept of neurodiversity, which acknowledges autism as a distinct neurological variation among the diverse spectrum of human thinking (Goldberg, 2023) and recognising an individual's identity as an autistic person is central to affirming their value and worth.

1.3 Positionality

Positionality incorporates both the researchers' paradigm and the stance they take regarding a research task, including its social and political context (Darwin Holmes, 2020). As a researcher, my positionality is deeply informed by a commitment to promoting inclusive education, particularly for autistic students, within the mainstream school settings. My approach is grounded in the belief that inclusion must go beyond a mere place in a classroom to encompass meaningful participation in all aspects of school life. I view the inclusion of autistic students in leadership teams as a critical step towards fostering environments that truly reflect the diverse needs and voices of all students. Therefore, I adopt a critical worldview paradigm. This perspective aligns with the principles of neurodiversity, which recognise autism as a distinct and valuable variation of human cognition (Goldberg, 2023).

It is essential to clarify my stance as a researcher/facilitator in this research study from the very beginning of this thesis to ensure transparency from the outset. As the School-Self Evaluation (SSE) Coordinator and member of the Lfi team established in 2012 at St Aoibhinn's (pseudonym), I have been actively promoting inclusion at the school. Additionally, I play a key role in the AsIAM Autism Friendly Schools Project (AsIAM, 2020) initiative, which is currently being implemented at the school.

Acknowledging my dual role as both researcher and participant, I endeavour to minimise researcher bias through continuous reflexivity. According to Cohen,

Manion, and Morrison (2011), researchers must disclose their influence on the research to understand their impact. I am conscious of the ethical tensions and power dynamics that arise from researching within my own educational context. This necessitates careful navigation of relationships, roles, and responsibilities to ensure that participants feel safe, respected, and empowered throughout the process. In particular, my position as an insider researcher brings both advantages and limitations. While my longstanding involvement provides rich contextual knowledge and trust with participants, it also requires heightened reflexivity and transparency to mitigate potential biases and assumptions.

Given that all writing is inherently positioned, it is crucial to address the challenges of conducting research in my workplace, particularly regarding potential power imbalances, data integrity, and participant safety (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Additionally, it is worth noting my role as teacher facilitator and researcher in the context of the study was pivotal in shaping the CLI teams' dynamics and outcomes.

1.4 Rationale

There is growing research to support the position that there is a disconnect between autistic students and the normative mainstream school environments and practices in which they increasingly find themselves (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008a, 2008b; Humphrey and Symes, 2011). The “physical placement of children in inclusive educational settings alone is not sufficient” (Ochs et al. 2001, p. 400). They must also be meaningfully included in the processes that will lead to their increased inclusion. To this end, it was important to capture, privilege and represent authentically, the voice of these students. This research draws upon a substantial body of emerging research that highlights the social and academic advantages of facilitating active participation and engagement of autistic students with teachers and researchers through consultative and participative approaches (Lundy, 2007; Goodall, 2015; Flynn, 2017 Costley et al., 2021; O’Neill and Kenny, 2023; Pellicano and Heyworth, 2023). It has been suggested that investment in such work results in benefits that far outweigh the time, effort, and costs (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007; Mitra, 2006; Mitra and Gross, 2009).

Lastly, there is a gap in the current literature regarding leadership initiatives that actively and supportively engage diverse students, especially autistic students. This highlights the need for further exploration and investigation into inclusive leadership practices that actively involve and amplify such voices in decision-making processes, and school improvement efforts which support school self-evaluation and developing whole school inclusive practice . By addressing this gap, this research may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of effective leadership strategies that promote inclusive education and empower a range of marginalised students, including autistic students.

1.5 Research Aims

This study aims to provide a detailed description (Case Study) of an initiative in a PP school in Ireland, which supported and included the participation of a LfI team involved in reviewing and developing a range of policies and practices that affect young peoples' experience of belonging and inclusion at a mainstream PP school

In doing so it set out to explore in particular the impact of this participation on

- the groups' **processes and operation**, including the relationships between and among team members
- and **outcomes produced by the group**, including participant perceptions of belonging and inclusion, and the development of more policies, guidelines, structures, procedures and practices at the school concerned.
- And to investigate the **embedded power relations** among participants in the CLI by analysing qualitative data from focus groups and observations. This analysis will enable researchers to identify the underlying power dynamics and evaluate their impact on the rights and opportunities of marginalised groups, specifically autistic learners, within the educational context.

1.6 Research Questions.

The research comprises a qualitative single-site case study drawing on the

experiences of five teachers and three students involved in a collaborative LfI team. It addresses the following research questions.

1. How do different participant groups within a collaborative LfI team view the effects of involving autistic students in their efforts?
2. What are the group members' perspectives on how this inclusion affects team processes, relations and operational dynamics?
3. How do they perceive the influence of this inclusion on the outcomes produced by the team particularly in relation to power dynamics, issues of equity and social justice and the impact on perceptions of belonging, inclusion and the development of policies, guidelines, structures, procedures and practices at the school?

1.7 Significance of the Study

The case study school, St. Aoibhinn's is a large, co-educational Catholic secondary school under the trusteeship of CEIST, catering to approximately 800 pupils and employing over 70 teachers. St Aoibhinn's represents an emerging case of inclusive education in practice and therefore was considered a suitable site for the single-site case study design. With a deeply rooted commitment to equity, diversity, and student participation, the school reports it has consistently demonstrated a forward-thinking approach to inclusion, while maintaining strong links to the tradition of a collaborative school culture.

The school's inclusive ethos began to be formalised in 2012 with the establishment of a dedicated Inclusion Team. This team was created with the aim of advancing a more structured and reflective approach to inclusive practice across the school. The team's work served as a foundation for deeper cultural shifts and policy developments that would follow in subsequent years.

In 2012, the school also established an SSE team to lead internal reviews and guide the development of policy and practice through critical reflection. The Department of Education (DE) rolled out the SSE process at this time, with a three-year cycle initially, focused on literacy, numeracy, and teaching and learning, with schools

expected to engage in ongoing reflection, data analysis, and stakeholder consultation. St. Aoibhinn's reports that it harnessed this process to ensure that inclusion was not treated as a peripheral concern but rather was embedded at the heart of the school's ongoing development agenda. The SSE process was participatory in nature, drawing insights from a range of stakeholders and ensuring that inclusive goals were not only aspirational but also measurable and actionable.

A notable feature of St Aoibhinn's approach they report, has been its longstanding commitment to student voice. A student council has been active in the school for many years, and its role has gone far beyond symbolic participation. Initiatives developed by the council have been submitted for consultation with the Board of Management (BOM), and once approved, have been implemented and evaluated by students themselves. This iterative process of consultation, implementation, and review exemplifies a genuine model of student-led change and participatory leadership.

In alignment with this, the school's mission statement, policies, and website content have all undergone critical evaluation by the leadership team to ensure they reflect inclusive language and values. These evaluations were not surface-level exercises but reflective processes to assess the visibility and recognition of diverse identities and experiences across all aspects of school life.

A significant development in the school's inclusive trajectory has been the introduction of inclusive special classes for autistic students, opened in 2016, 2018, 2024 and one more to open in 2025. These classes have become a key part of the school's effort to support neurodiversity more holistically. More recently, St Aoibhinn's involvement with the AsIAM Autism Friendly Schools Programme (AsIAM, 2020) has marked a cultural turning point, enabling the school to lead in the development of neurodiversity-informed practices.

As a result of this engagement, the school has adopted inclusive adaptations to longstanding school traditions. For example, end-of-term celebrations now include low-sensory activities for all, to accommodate students with sensory sensitivities. These changes not only promote access but signify a cultural transformation in how difference is understood and celebrated.

Moreover, the school has implemented small-group activities and a negotiated curriculum for Transition Year (TY) students, recognising the importance of differentiated pathways and flexible pedagogies that align with students' needs and strengths.

These long-standing commitments and evolving practices create a rich and meaningful context for the present study. By examining inclusive education within St Aoibhinn's, this research is grounded not only in theory but in a living, breathing example of a school that has consistently placed inclusion, voice, and participation at the centre of its mission.

Having discussed the study with the LFI team and obtained ethical approval from Dublin City University (DCU) Research Ethics Committee (REC), we initially scheduled the initiative to start in January 2022. However, the date had to be rescheduled twice due to unforeseen circumstances, including participants contracting COVID-19. The study was subsequently conducted from April to September 2022.

1.8 Background to the Study

The discourse surrounding inclusive education has evolved significantly over the past number of years and are characterised by extensive debate and a lack of consensus. Despite substantial dialogue, a universally accepted definition of inclusion or inclusive education remains elusive (Slee, 2001; Winter and O'Raw, 2010). However, that said, the concept of rights has been fundamental in shaping the perspectives and policies within this domain in recent decades. Nevertheless, there has been a significant shift in the policy landscape surrounding inclusive education in Ireland, primarily driven by key legislative and international developments. The Education Act of 1998 and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act of 2004 laid the foundation for promoting inclusion within schools. More recently, the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) in 2018 has further emphasised the principles of rights, equity, and social justice. This

evolving policy context has placed increasing pressure on schools to not only accommodate students with SEN but also to foster a truly inclusive environment for all learners.

The chosen (case study) school in particular, has been working to translate these policy imperatives into practice. As part of this study, the school launched an initiative designed to enhance inclusion through a targeted strategy aimed at fostering the participation of autistic students in a team. This initiative provided an opportunity to closely examine how policies are being implemented on the ground, offering insights into the dynamics at play. By studying this initiative, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the school's approach to inclusion, the challenges encountered, and the potential for meaningful change. The study offered an in-depth exploration of the operational aspects of the initiative and its potential impact on improving inclusive practices, or, indeed revealing areas where outcomes have yet to shift.

1.9 The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

The research, initially planned for 2020-2021, was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and eventually conducted in spring 2022. Prior to the pandemic, significant educational leadership reforms were implemented in the ROI (Murphy, 2019; Murphy and Brennan, 2024) focusing on school evaluation, curriculum, assessment, digital strategy, well-being, and leadership structures. These reforms introduced a national framework for fostering collaborative and distributed leadership in primary and PP schools (Murphy and Brennan, 2024). The reforms enabled school leadership to manage educational changes effectively during the pandemic, providing essential tools and strategies to adapt to the evolving demands. Despite the pandemic's disruptions, such as school closures and challenges for students learning from home, the reforms helped leadership prepare for post-pandemic education. The crisis allowed educators to adapt, learn from uncertainties, and recognise their strengths and vulnerabilities. Schools developed more collaborative practices, distributed leadership, and professional networks, which fostered a readiness for new leadership approaches after the pandemic. It is within

this context that the study was conducted.

Global studies have demonstrated that the recent pandemic significantly impacted autistic students (Colizzi et al., 2020; Kawaoka et al., 2022). These effects were partially attributed to disruptions in educational and therapeutic services.

Qualitative research findings from Inclusion Ireland (2021) support these observations, revealing that autistic students faced heightened mental health and behavioural challenges during the lockdown period. These factors were carefully considered in carrying out this study.

1.10 Philosophical Underpinnings

This study is grounded in the critical paradigm and uses critical theory to inform selection and interpretation of data. Critical theory is built upon a predetermined understanding how social democracy, and its processes and outcomes should function and look (Fay, 1987; Morrison, 1995). It is underpinned by values such as social justice, equality and democracy for all. The central aim of critical theory is to comprehend situations to bring about positive change. By uncovering and interpreting the interests at play in specific conditions, critical theory questions the legitimacy of those interests and assesses how they contribute to or hinder equality and democracy (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011). It chooses to take a partisan view, siding with those it determines as marginalised or oppressed. The ultimate goal is to empower such groups, to address inequalities, and to promote individual freedoms within a democratic society (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011). Atkins, and Duckworth (2019), describe this as adhering to

“democratic values: concern for marginalised and minority rights and dignity, commitment to common good, conviction in the power if individuals are to have agency, belief in the importance of dialogic engagement and transparent stream of ideas, reflexivity and central premise of individual and collective responsibility for others” (p. 2108).

Within this work, autistic learners are seen as a group that have been marginalised and oppressed by virtue of their cognitive difference in society, a difference that is ascribed to the designation of disability.

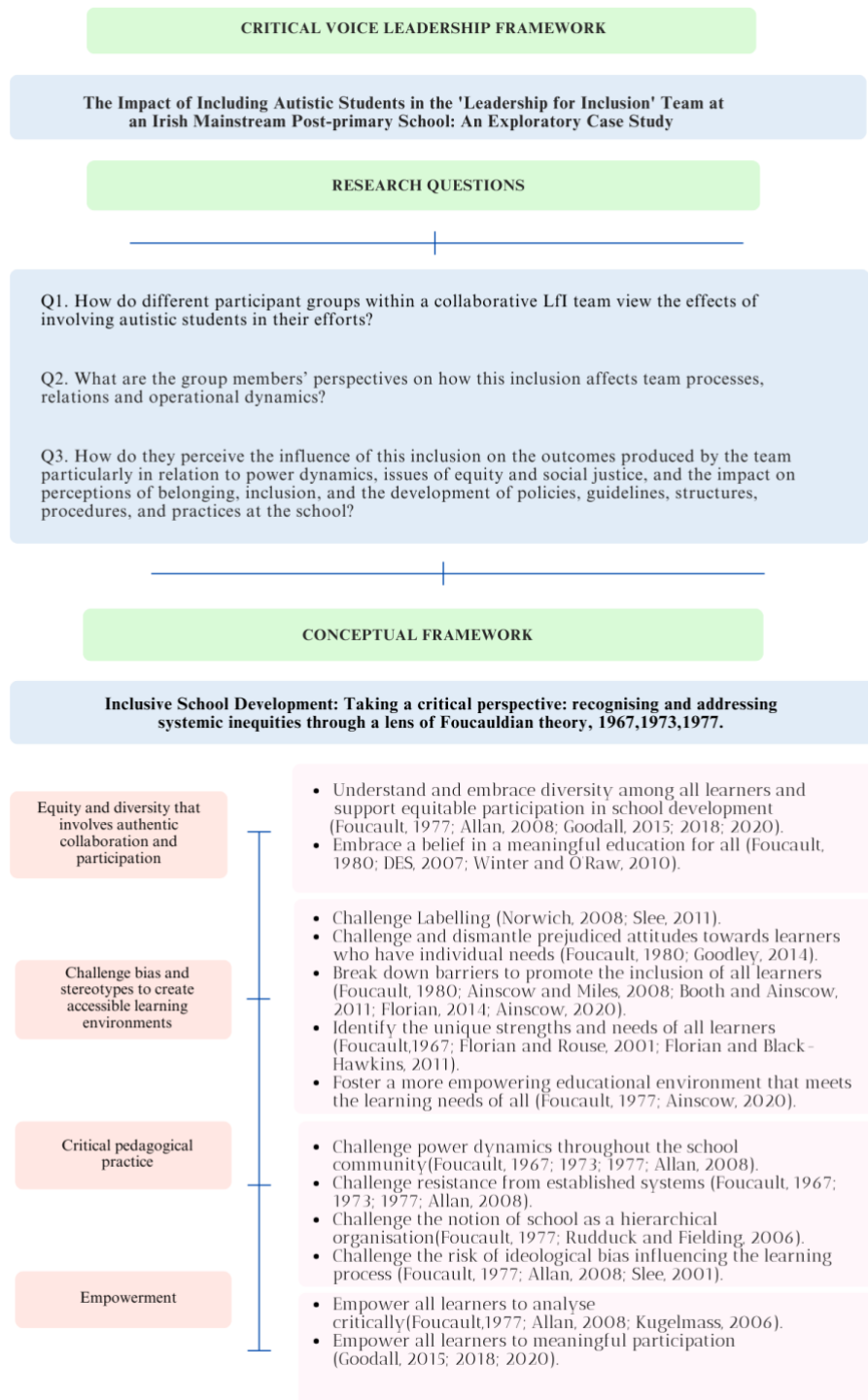
1.11 A Brief Overview of Methodology Employed

This research study employed an exploratory single-site, qualitative case study design. Multiple data collection methods were used to explore the following research questions, which emerged from the review of literature and theoretical principles employed.

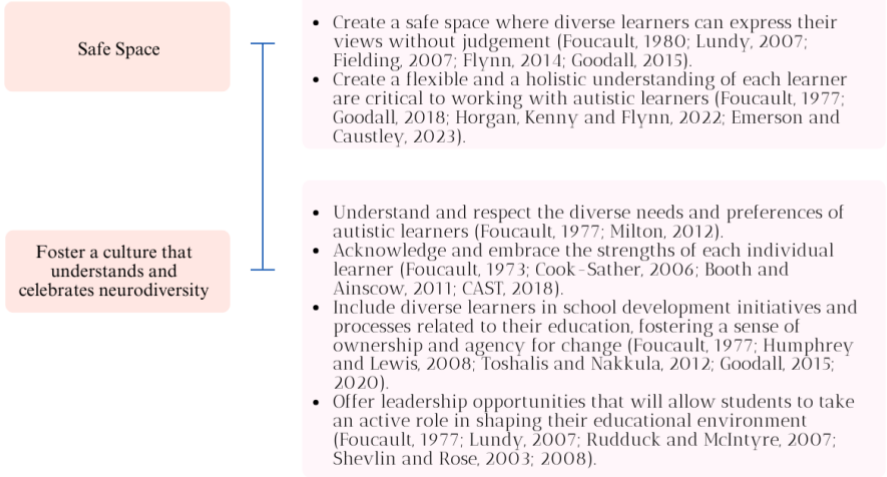
1. How do different participant groups within a collaborative LfI team view the effects of involving autistic students in their efforts?
2. What are the group members' perspectives on how this inclusion affects team processes, relations and operational dynamics?
3. How do they perceive the influence of this inclusion on the outcomes produced by the team particularly in relation to power dynamics, issues of equity and social justice, and the impact on perceptions of belonging, inclusion, and the development of policies, guidelines, structures, procedures, and practices at the school?

Data collection was organised into two distinct phases and was informed by a critical conceptual framework. In Phase 1, five student meetings and five CLI team meetings were conducted, with autistic students leading the agenda. Phase 2 involved three focus group discussions, engaging all CLI participants to explore Phase 1 findings in greater depth and address the study's research questions. The findings are analysed and interpreted in relation to the literature review, considering the study's implications and limitations (*see Figure 1 P.12*).

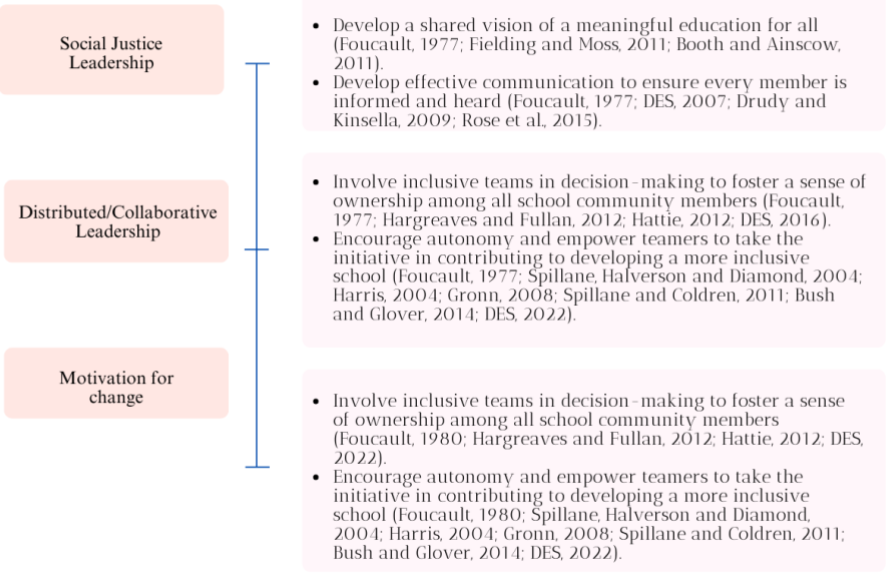
Figure 1 The Conceptual Framework

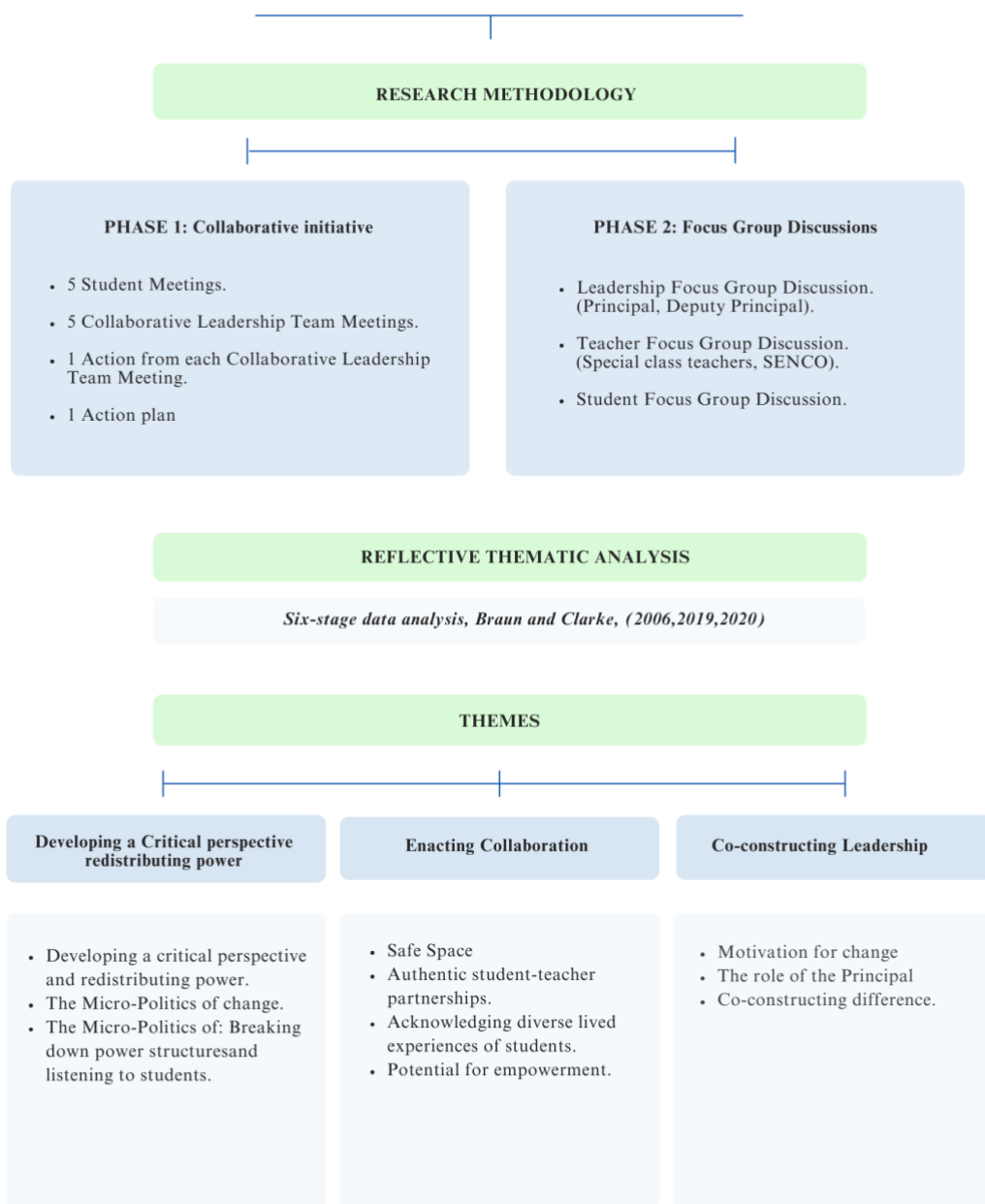


Autistic Learner Voice



Leadership for Inclusive School Development





1.12 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework employed for this study is informed by a critical paradigm, drawing on Foucauldian theory to interrogate how institutional power relations within schools may perpetuate exclusion. It incorporates the interrelated concepts of inclusion, student voice, and leadership to examine the potential of involving autistic students in a leadership team for inclusion. Inclusion is framed through a socio-political lens that challenges normative assumptions and recognises systemic barriers, drawing on critical disability studies and the evolving Irish policy landscape, including the UNCRPD (2006). The student voice element is underpinned by rights-based and participatory frameworks, with particular attention to the risk of tokenism and the ethical imperative to position autistic students as legitimate contributors to decision-making processes. Leadership is conceptualised through collaborative and distributed models that resist hierarchical norms, focusing instead on relational practices that enable shared agency. This framework not only reflects my professional values and lived experience but is also rooted in the extant literature that emphasises the intersection of power, participation, and inclusive practice. The conceptual framework guided the study's design, analysis and discussion ensuring a coherent and critically engaged exploration of inclusive leadership in practice.

1.13 Organisation of the Thesis

The thesis is organised into six chapters. The current Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the research study, setting the stage for the following chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research study, outlining the research topic, aims, questions, and significance, while also providing an overview of the researcher's philosophical stance and positionality. Chapter 2 presents a review of the relevant literature, identifying key themes that inform the research questions and informing the conceptual framework developed for the study. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, including the paradigm, strategy, and data collection methods, along

with a discussion of ethical considerations, validity, and limitations. Chapter 4 reports the findings from the research, interpreting the data gathered through qualitative analysis and summarising the results. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the literature review, identifying key themes and exploring their implications for inclusive practices within the school context. Chapter 6 provides a conclusion, summarising the study's contributions, offering recommendations, and discussing the practical, policy, and research implications of the findings. philosophical underpinnings and positionality within the study.

Chapter 2 follows and presents a review of the relevant literature and seeks to identify the current knowledge, highlighting gaps within the research field (Snyder, 2019), thereby clarifying “why the study is being undertaken and how it contributes to the body of knowledge” (Gray, 2014, p. 648). The findings from this review are presented thematically under three key areas: Inclusive School Development, Student Voice, Leadership for Inclusive School Development.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

An inclusive school system aligns with the aspirations of those advocating for equity, social justice, and transformative leadership in education. Similarly, leadership aligns strongly with the principles of an inclusive school system (Shields, 2013). Incorporating the concept of inclusion into our current education discourses introduces a fresh set of ideas and practices that can be used to critically examine and challenge the assumptions and entrenched barriers to learner participation prevalent in our current system. The focus shifts towards analysing the construct of inclusion itself (Graham and Slee, 2008), questioning the focus put on exceptional cases (Allan, 2008) and critiquing the barriers that prevent certain marginalised groups from fully benefiting from the liberating potential of education in its broadest sense. In doing this, we can effectively analyse and challenge prevailing inequalities and exclusionary practices that hinder realisation of education's emancipatory power. This literature review commences by exploring the literature that centres on the concept of inclusion, how we view and treat students deemed to have SEN, with a particular focus on autistic students, and the problematisation of dual systems for supporting these students. Subsequently, the review highlights relevant studies concerning student voice and its significance in building more inclusive systems, with a particular focus on the perspectives of autistic students. Lastly, it delves into the literature that addresses leadership concerning fostering inclusive practice in our schools.

2.2 Inclusion: A Working Definition

Given the wide range of definitions available, it becomes evident that achieving a single, all-encompassing definition of inclusion is challenging. As a result, it is critical to acknowledge the considerable debate concerning the differentiation between integration, inclusion, partial inclusion and full inclusion. Moreover, the malleable nature of the term makes it susceptible to colonisation by different (and

often competing) perspectives and interests (e.g. normative). Those who believe in full inclusion argue that having a mainstream educational system and a separate special education system is not compatible with inclusion, where parallel systems are not considered inclusive (NCSE, 2019). They support the belief that the presence of all students with and without disabilities in the mainstream classroom will force an end to entrenched cultural and pedagogical practices that privilege some students at the expense of others. Many inclusion theorists believe that knowledge of diagnostic categories of disabilities is not necessary for schools working with students with SEN, and that the practices that underpin these objectives work to actively ‘other’ and exclude such learners. Therefore, to meet the needs of all students, inclusive school development requires an ongoing process towards more nuanced inclusive cultures, policies and practices, that improve the likelihood of equitable access, participation and achievement for all students, while removing exclusionary practices that prevent this (Biklen, 1985; Florian and Rouse, 2001; Villa and Thousand, 2005; Ainscow and Miles, 2008; Booth and Ainscow 2011; Ainscow, 2020). For the scope of this study, we will define inclusive school development as a comprehensive process aimed at enhancing educational effectiveness for all students, fostering full participation of each student, and diminishing the exclusion of vulnerable students. (Rouse and Florian, 1996; Giangreco, 1997; Florian, 1998; Lipsky and Gartner, 1997; Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006).

2.2.1 The Inclusion of all Learners

Building upon the complexities surrounding the definition of inclusion, it becomes necessary to adopt a broader understanding of inclusive education. Such a perspective demands that inclusive education evolves beyond its traditional and historical focus on individuals with SEN. It must extend its concern to encompass all individuals who face the risk of marginalisation or exclusion within the wider society (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson, 2006). This expanded view challenges earlier, narrower models that concentrated predominantly on disability categories, urging educational systems to critically examine structural inequalities and systemic barriers. In doing so, inclusive education seeks not merely to integrate diverse

learners, but to transform mainstream environments to ensure meaningful participation, equity, and respect for all students, regardless of background or circumstance.

In the next section, advancements in policy development will be critically examined, considering both international and national contexts. The discussion will trace the evolution of policy over time and assess its influence on the creation of more inclusive schools. Particular attention will be given to how varying definitions of inclusive school development shape policy directions, and to the vital role policy plays in building educational environments that enable full participation and actively work to reduce exclusion for all students.

2.2.2 International Policy Context

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, education has been recognised as a fundamental human right. The 1990 United Nations Education for All (EFA) Declaration emphasised rights-based actions to ensure educational access for all. This momentum continued with the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, which called for structural policy changes to promote inclusive education.

The 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar reaffirmed the right to education, emphasising the needs of marginalised groups. Inclusive education thus became central to human rights and equal opportunities debates, challenging policies that excluded minority groups. Early legislation in the United States set a precedent for inclusive education, later influencing European countries. However, despite international policy advancements, local debates persist on the practicality and methods of achieving inclusion.

2.2.3 Irish Policy Context

Irish policy development in disability education has mirrored international shifts but has often lagged in making significant changes. The first major transition, from a

medical to a social model, took place in the 1980s. This was further advanced by the 1990 Needs and Abilities report, which emphasised the importance of education in the least restrictive environment. Building on this, the 1996 report, A Strategy for Equality, brought attention to the marginalisation of people with disabilities and advocated for inclusive education legislation.

Responding to these calls for change, The Education Act of 1998 recognised the right to education for children with disabilities, although it was limited by resource constraints. Despite these efforts, criticism arose from the United Nations Implementation Report (UNCRC) in 1998, which highlighted Ireland's inadequate response to the educational needs of children with disabilities and other marginalised groups.

A series of landmark court cases challenging the State's neglect of children with special needs eventually led to significant educational reforms. The culmination of these efforts was the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act of 2004, which marked a pivotal policy shift towards mainstream provision and emphasised inclusive education wherever possible.

EPSEN Act, 2004 marked a significant policy shift from segregated to mainstream educational provision. It mandated that children with SEN should be educated, whenever possible, in an inclusive environment alongside children without special educational needs. This Act radically transformed the landscape of educational provision in Ireland, enabling policy changes driven by the ratification of the UNCRC in 1989.

“from one in which the provision of inclusive education was an emerging feature of schooling to a system in which the provision of inclusive education is mandatory, except where this would not be in the best interests of the child or would be inconsistent with the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated” (Meaney, Kiernan, and Monahan 2005, p. 209).

Following the EPSEN Act 2004, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was established as part of the Act (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). Once

established, the NCSE produced a report (NCSE, 2006) and subsequent guidelines highlighting gaps in provision in the existing system and making recommendations for future investment. It outlined actions to be undertaken and emphasised putting the child and family first, ensuring that teachers receive professional development to equip them to participate in inclusive classrooms, where adequate resources would be provided, and the service model would be consistently evaluated. They claimed implementing the act would take five years (NCSE, 2006, p. 5). However, economic constraints introduced by the Financial Emergency Measures Act 2009 resulted in the deferment of the full implementation of the act (Moloney and McCarthy, 2010). The full enactment of the EPSEN Act 2004, has yet to be realised.

In the following years, Inclusion Ireland expressed the frustration of many, highlighting that “key sections of it that gave statutory rights to children, for assessment and individual education plans and appeals processes are currently not enacted” (2014, p. 2). This was addressed with more legislation where, EPSEN Act 2004 was followed by The Disability Act 2005, which legislated for a person’s legal right to access an assessment of need.

Although elements of the EPSEN Act 2004, have not been enacted, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) did take significant steps following the Act, where a series of resource allocation changes eventually culminated in removing the requirement for students to have a diagnosis to access support. To achieve this the DES introduced the General Allocation Model (GAM) in 2005, allowing resource allocation based on teacher and student numbers rather than diagnosis. In 2017, a revised model Special Education Teaching (SET) provided resources through a “frontloading” system based on individual school needs. SET allocation policy has again been updated for the 2024/25 school year to refine the process of determining each school’s educational profile, impacting SET resource distribution. Key updates include a revised calculation process that considers school size, complexity of student need, and socio-economic factors, ensuring more equitable resource distribution. The policy introduces greater flexibility for schools in deploying SET resources, particularly for students with complex needs and the changing demographics of a school. Enhanced data utilisation aims to improve allocation

accuracy and responsiveness. The DE commits to continuous monitoring and review, with regular assessments to adjust allocations based on emerging challenges.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2005) describes inclusion as a dynamic approach to positively responding to pupil diversity and viewing individual differences as opportunities for enriching learning. Historically, children with SEN in Ireland were educated in special schools, but recent policy developments aim for a more inclusive approach. Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018, commits Ireland to equitable, inclusive education for all children. Despite this commitment, challenges remain in implementing the necessary organisational changes for inclusion. Current systems have not fully realised the principles of the EPSEN Act 2004 or the UNCRPD, with evidence of continued segregation in special schools and classes. A description of frameworks to support inclusion follows.

2.2.4 Frameworks to Support Inclusion

The *Index for Inclusion* developed by (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) proposes a tool designed to support school development by promoting inclusive values and practices. Emerging in England after extensive collaboration and testing, it was published by the Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education (CSIE) in Bristol. This non-profit resource involves teachers, researchers, parents, disabled peoples' organisations, and others who contributed to its development.

The Index consists of three main components:

1. Key concepts: These provide the fundamental principles for fostering inclusivity in schools.
2. Review framework: A structured approach to assess and enhance inclusivity within a school setting.
3. Review materials: Resources and guidelines to assist in evaluating and improving. An inclusive process: Emphasises the involvement of all

stakeholders in the journey towards creating a more inclusive learning environment (Booth and Ainscow, 2002, p.2).

The revised version of the Index (Booth and Ainscow, 2002, p. 2-10) has been further refined to better address the needs of diverse students and promote inclusive education. It has been used in over 30 countries to lead inclusive practice in schools. In Norway, one study exploring the application of the Index revealed its efficacy in prompting reflections on inclusive education in many varied educational settings. Moreover, they suggest it has sparked discussion on broader issues of injustice, poverty, and the intricate connections between these challenges on a global scale and education in a local context (Nes, 2009).

The *Index for Inclusion* significantly impacted shaping the *Inclusion Education Framework* in Ireland (NCSE, 2011). The NCSE established ten themes in developing their framework, designed to serve as a self-assessment tool for schools to promote inclusivity. In its development, the NCSE emphasised that,

“we must never lose sight of the fact that these themes are only guidelines aiming to support the efforts of individuals in the field attempting to bring about an inclusive environment. What may be important to a particular school may not be well supported in the literature and may be unique to that school. It is therefore essential to recognise each school’s needs and build flexibility into any framework of inclusion” (Winter and O’ Raw, 2010, p. 51).

They also advise that although the ten themes align with existing literature, the true validity and usefulness of the framework can only be determined through testing in various school contexts. While the inclusion framework underwent validation during its pilot stage, there is limited research in the literature on its effective implementation across a diverse range of Irish schools. Further examination is needed to assess its success in promoting inclusiveness in different educational settings.

The Autism Good Practice Guidelines (AGPG) (NCSE, 2022) is a framework developed by the DE and NCSE in collaboration with Middletown Centre for Autism, Northern Ireland. It is aimed at improving the care and support of autistic

young people in education settings. The framework offers significant strengths by taking a person-centred approach. Recent research consistently supports this approach, as individuals with autism experience a broad spectrum of needs, abilities, and preferences (Pellicano and Heyworth., 2023). A person-centred framework enhances the quality of care by tailoring interventions and supports to each individual's specific needs, a critical aspect of ensuring positive educational outcomes (AGPG, 2022). The guidelines advocate for early identification and intervention with a strong evidence base. Studies suggest that early interventions in autism, such as Developmental, Individual-differences, and Relationship-based model (DIR), can significantly improve developmental trajectories, particularly in communication and social interaction (Rogers and Vismara, 2008). By recommending early screening and intervention, the guidelines are aligned with research that shows the positive impact of early, targeted support for young children with autism.

While Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) has been shown to have positive outcomes in certain areas (e.g., reducing challenging behaviours), it is also controversial. Many researchers and autistic advocates argue that ABA can be overly rigid, prioritising compliance over autonomy and well-being (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). A growing body of research calls for approaches that not only target behavioural change but also prioritise the individual's right to self-determination and mental health (Milton, 2012). Another strength lies in the encouragement of multi-disciplinary collaboration among the professionals involved. Lord et al. (2018) highlight the importance of coordinated, multi-disciplinary approaches that involve educators, healthcare professionals, and families working together.

This collaborative model fosters a more comprehensive understanding of the individual's needs and enhances the effectiveness of interventions by integrating expertise from various fields. A significant limitation of the guidelines is their tendency to focus predominantly on children, particularly in relation to early intervention strategies. While early intervention is crucial, autism is a lifelong condition, and research increasingly highlights the need for greater attention to the

experiences and support needs of autistic teenagers and adults (Shattuck et al., 2012).

Another critique is the insufficient involvement of autistic individuals in creating and evaluating these guidelines. Research emphasises the importance of participatory approaches that involve autistic people in shaping the policies and practices that affect them (Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman, 2014). The lack of such involvement can result in a top-down approach that may not fully reflect the lived experiences and preferences of autistic people themselves. This current study focuses on addressing this gap by emphasising the inclusion of autistic individuals in developing an LfI team, ensuring that the recommendations better align with the needs and perspectives of those directly affected. By centring the voices of autistic people, this study aims to create a more authentic, inclusive, and responsive approach to autistic participation in research.

2.3 Models of Disability Applied to Autism, Medical, Social and Critical Theory

The application of different models of disability to autism provides critical insights into how society understands and responds to autistic individuals. The medical model of disability views autism as a deficit or disorder that requires treatment or correction, focusing on the individual's impairments and aiming to 'normalise' them through interventions such as therapy and medication (Kapp, 2013). This model has historically dominated clinical and educational approaches to autism, leading to the widespread use of behavioural interventions which aim to reduce autistic traits. However, critics argue that the medical model pathologises autistic individuals, often ignoring their strengths and abilities (Milton, 2012).

In contrast, the social model of disability shifts the focus from the individual to the societal barriers that prevent full participation and inclusion. It argues that autism itself is not inherently disabling; instead, it is the lack of accessible environments and understanding from society that creates disability (Oliver, 1990). This model advocates for systemic changes, such as inclusive education practices and

workplace accommodations, to support autistic individuals without trying to ‘cure’ them. The social model has gained prominence within disability advocacy groups, including autistic-led organisations, emphasising neurodiversity and the right to self-determination (Singer, 1999).

Lastly, Critical Disability Theory (CDT) combines elements of both models while interrogating the broader power structures that shape societal attitudes toward autism. This approach examines how social, political, and economic forces construct disability and explores how intersections of identity, such as race, gender, and class, impact autistic individuals’ experiences (Goodley, 2014). CDT challenges both the medicalisation of autism and the limitations of the social model by emphasising the need for more inclusive frameworks that centre the voices and lived experiences of autistic individuals themselves (Woods, 2017). These models highlight how autism can be conceptualised, with significant implications for policy, practice, and advocacy.

2.3.1 Critical Disability Theory: A ‘Lens for Theorising Inclusion

CDT provides a robust framework for theorising inclusion by critiquing ablest structures and advocating for systemic change. Rooted in post-structuralism and post-modern thought, CDT challenges the medical model of disability, which views disability as an individual deficiency, and instead emphasises the social model, where disability is understood as a product of societal barriers (Goodley, 2014). Research by scholars like Thomas (2007) highlights that inclusion through the CDT lens requires a shift from integrating individuals into pre-existing norms toward transforming societal structures to accommodate diverse experiences. Furthermore, Gabel and Danforth (2008) argue that CDT helps deconstruct power relations that perpetuate exclusion, calling for policies and practices that address both material barriers and cultural assumptions about disability. This theoretical approach supports a more inclusive society by promoting not just access, but also the recognition of diverse identities and ways of being, challenging deeply ingrained ablest norms (Titchkosky, 2011). Therefore, CDT provides a critical tool for

rethinking inclusion beyond mere physical integration, aiming for deeper social justice.

Despite these efforts towards inclusion, a deeper theoretical examination is necessary to understand the persistent challenges within the education system. In the following section Foucauldian analysis provides a theoretical framework for interrogating the ongoing disparities between Ireland's commitment to inclusive education and the practical challenges faced in transforming school systems, revealing how power dynamics, discourses, and institutional practices may reinforce segregation and limit progress towards true inclusion.

Foucault's philosophy offers a valuable theoretical framework for interrogating inclusive education for autistic young people by challenging traditional power dynamics, normalisation processes, and discourses around 'disability.' His concepts of bio power and disciplinary practices help reveal how educational systems regulate and categorise students, often marginalising those who do not conform to neurotypical standards (Foucault, 1977). Through mechanisms of surveillance and discipline, schools can exert power that shapes student' behaviours, often leading to the exclusion of those who deviate from accepted norms (Slee, 2011). Foucault's critique of institutions and his emphasis on the social construction of knowledge enable a critical analysis of how 'inclusive education' is implemented, exposing the ways in which it might still perpetuate exclusionary practices through subtle forms of control, surveillance, and the pathologisation of difference (Ball, 2013). This research study urges a re-evaluation of inclusivity, not as mere integration into the existing system, but as a transformation of educational environments that genuinely accommodate neurodiverse individuals without imposing normative expectations (Goodley, 2014).

Foucault's (1982) conceptualisations of power, discourse, and ethics also offer valuable insights into the study of schools as organisations and leadership practices within those organisations. His philosophical theories provide a lens through which one can critically analyse the underlying structures of schools and how these structures influence the actions of leaders and other individuals involved. Here, Foucault's theories are employed to conduct a critical analysis of the organisational structure of our schools and the way individuals are perceived and treated within the

system. The primary goal of this section of the literature review is to employ a Foucauldian perspective to critically analyse the school system, with the intention of uncovering policies or practices that may act as obstacles to fostering greater inclusion.

Foucault's analytical phases, archaeology, genealogy and ethics help analyse special needs education. To undertake the analysis, Foucault offers many strategies within his 'box of tools' (Foucault, 1977, p. 208). In his works *Madness and Civilization* (1967) and *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973), Foucault explores shifts in the discourse used to discuss physical and mental illness and abnormality. He adopts a distinctive approach known as archaeology, aiming to trace the historical development of statements claiming to be true about these phenomena. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault delves into the power dynamics within institutions, which shape knowledge and establish specific forms of authority. This method, termed genealogy, investigates the political aspects influencing the production of truth (Allan, 1999).

Central to Foucault's philosophy is how society turns human beings into subjects for 'investigation', 'surveillance' and 'treatment', where understanding and supporting diversity involves various forms of medicalisation, objectification, confinement, and potential exclusion. A key mechanism here is the 'panoptic effect', a form of internalised surveillance where individuals regulate their own behaviour because they believe they are constantly being watched, mirroring the structure of Bentham's panopticon (1791). In addition, Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia' describes spaces that exist outside of normative societal structures, such as specialised educational settings, that simultaneously mirror and challenge mainstream expectations. The operations of power in these contexts are governed by 'dispositifs' (apparatuses), the strategic networks of institutions, practices, and discourses that manage and regulate populations. In education, a Foucauldian philosophy views the student through a medicalised lens, focusing on their perceived deficiencies, positioning them within such 'dispositifs'. This approach relies heavily on professional and clinical assessments (surveillance), diagnosis, and subsequent intervention (treatment), echoing the traditional yet problematic reliance on authority to define normalcy. Underpinning this is the notion of pastoral power, a form of guidance and control where institutions act as benevolent shepherds over

the flock of students, exercising a conduct of conduct, meaning the subtle and pervasive management of individuals' actions, attitudes, and aspirations. It often leads to the student's confinement in specialised settings (heterotopias) and potential exclusion from mainstream education if they are unable to conform to the system (Foucault, 1967, 1973, 1977), a troubling reminder that systems designed to care can also exclude. We can critically examine the literature as follows by grasping the concepts presented in Foucault's theories.

Slee (2001) rejects the idea that knowing about disabilities and techniques for dealing with students with particular disabilities through SET will make schools more inclusive. Lewis and Norwich (2004) claim that there is, in fact, no such thing as a special needs' pedagogy. They believe that teachers should have a broad knowledge of the principles of inclusive pedagogy and not specific knowledge of particular conditions such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, social emotional behavioural difficulty (SEBD), and autism. They claim that no specific pedagogies are attached to specific conditions and, therefore, specific knowledge of special needs categories could be more useful in meeting the needs of students in the context of planning for learning and teaching. They also propose that teacher knowledge of disabilities leads to and contributes to teacher dysconsciousness around ableist inequities, which can significantly impair the teachers' ability to abolish such inequities from schools. It has been suggested that special education was designed to help ordinary schools cope with challenging students and, in doing so, meet their needs (Tomlinson, 1982).

Tomlinson (1982) regards labelling as part of the spatialisation process of exclusion and proposes that labelling leads to discrepancy and the development of marginalisation. In this sense, inclusion is seen as a 'positive' and exclusion is seen as a 'negative' when assessed disabilities are identified as a 'negative'. However, it is critical to note that while there is much debate surrounding the 'who' and 'how' of inclusion, there is also a risk that the need for students with SEN to receive a high-quality education may get forgotten as educators jump onto the 'one size fits all' inclusion bandwagon (Farrell, 2000, p. 154). There is a theory that forcing students into the mould of inclusion is just as discriminatory as trying to force students into the mould of SEN (Kauffman, 1989). By contrast, there is also a belief

that the ‘rights’ perspective of inclusion refutes any argument that some students’ needs are best met in any kind of special setting and all students are best served by belonging to the regular classroom learning together (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006).

2.3.2 A Critical View of Irish School Policy Through a Foucauldian Lens

Critically examining advancements in Irish policy relating to students with SEN reveals a deliberate effort to eliminate barriers associated with a medicalised perspective on disabilities. The focus has shifted from a medicalised view towards fostering a more inclusive understanding of diversity, leading to implementing policies promoting inclusivity. EPSEN Act, 2004, when reviewed by the NCSE in 2006 (p. 135), revealed a need “for greater capacity-building in schools to empower teachers in creating inclusive learning environments.” However, the model of provision in operation, which included the General Allocation Model (GAM) and Circular 02/05 (DES, 2005), lacked school autonomy in organising teaching resources for students with SEN (DES, 2017). In Foucauldian terms, the GAM categorised teaching support based on the identification of SEN. It used ‘surveillance’ by offering learning support to students with high-incidence SEN and resource teaching to those with low-incidence SEN (DES, 2005), seen as a form of ‘treatment.’ The GAM was criticised for its medicalised perspective, as it required a formal diagnosis for students to access additional educational resources (DES, 2015).

In response to the call for increased school capacity, the DES Circular 0013 0014/2017 replaced the GAM and Circular 02/05, introducing a new SET allocation model (DES, 2017). One significant improvement was that children no longer needed an SEN diagnosis to access resources (Byrne and McCoy, 2017). The new model also acknowledged the ‘spectrum of disability’, recognising that students within the same SEN category can have diverse needs (DES, 2017).

The updated SET model, Circular 0002/2024 (DE, 2024-2025) comprises a baseline component and a school educational profile component, which allows schools to

cater to individual needs, considering factors like disadvantage, gender, standardised testing results, and the number of students with complex needs (DES, 2017). Additionally, the roles of learning support and resource teachers were merged into a single role described as the SET to offer more flexibility in supporting students, especially to accommodate students with complex needs and the evolving demographics of the school. Furthermore, following Ireland's ratification of the UNCRPD in 2018, an independent monitoring board now evaluates school's commitment to inclusive education, ensuring progress is being made (United Nations, 2006; Citizens Information Board, 2018). These changes indicate a positive shift towards a more inclusive education model.

However, while policy has moved towards legislating for greater inclusion, in the Irish PP context, a school's reputation is traditionally measured by the number of students progressing to higher education. This has led to apprehension and doubt regarding inclusive practices within this sector. As schools fear being compared to other PP schools, they sometimes prioritise academic results over other achievements, such as successful inclusive projects and policies (Mc Keon, 2020). The number of students advancing to higher education is reported annually in the national print media (Flynn, 2012), creating pressure on schools to maintain high academic standards and performance. This phenomenon is observed internationally also (Kearney and Kane, 2006), with reports indicating that some students are prevented from sitting examinations to avoid lowering a school's overall results (Searle, 2001).

The described situation above highlights the dilemma schools face between the obligation and desire to be inclusive while maintaining their traditional focus on preparing students for high-stakes exams and higher education. This conflict raises challenges for schools, as they struggle with how much they are willing and able to support the inclusion of students whose learning and behavioural needs might clash with the school's status, ethos, and identity. This issue stems from the challenge of integrating inclusive education into a system that demands everyone to "do better than everyone else" (McDermott, 1993, p. 274) and as a result, schools have been described as "intolerable" institutions because their main purpose is the normalisation of ability (Ball and Collet-Sabé, 2021, p. 1). Allan (2023, p. 32)

suggests that shifting towards more ethical practices is challenging for schools and requires adults to “let go” of some power. Veyne (1997, p. 231) proposes that this ethical work begins with the “self,” becoming the “new strategic possibility” that allows for both the care and transformation of all individuals within the organisation. This approach aims to create a more nurturing environment where all stakeholders’ voices are acknowledged, and children’s rights can thrive (Allan, 2023)

These considerations raise the fundamental question of power distribution within educational organisations (Ball, 2016, p. 1056). In this case the primary objective must be to explore the interplay between power dynamics and the creation of inclusive environments within these organisations. The following section adopts a critical perspective on the notion of ‘power’ in schools, using Foucault’s framework to analyse how ‘power’ influences the organisational structure of schools, connecting the discussion to the earlier concerns of how inclusivity versus traditional academic performance metrics.

2.3.3 Schools as Sites for the exercise of Discursive Power

Many studies centre their attention on the relationship between Foucault’s theories and the field of education (Mayo, 2000; McNichol, 2005; Fejes and Nicoll, 2008; Niesche, 2011) and Foucault’s application to educational leadership (Gilles, 2013; Anderson and Mungal, 2015; MacKinnon, 2024; Wilkinson et al., 2018; Shields et al. 2021). When applied, Foucault’s philosophical understanding of ‘power’ challenges schools to think differently about how schools are structured, particularly the hierarchical power exerted over students. Eddy (2013) highlights that “Power becomes manifested in the organisational structures and roles of institutions, as well as in communication and the value placed on expertise and products” (p. 122).

By identifying and critiquing power relations, as well as “by recognising the sources of power within their institutions, managers can adjust dysfunctional or deleterious operations, particularly those with imbalances in power, which typically are not addressed when power remains unquestioned” (Eddy, 2013, p. 122). Allan (2008)

suggests that the most promising aspect of Foucault's work lies in his often-overlooked writings on ethics. Foucault's ethical perspective empowers individuals to envision themselves as capable of surpassing limits, thus empowering them to confront obstacles and discover fresh identities and novel ways of existing in the world. From the perspective of Foucault, it could be suggested that the fundamental principle of inclusive schools lies with the people who populate them. Therefore, if we want inclusive schools, we need to find people who share a common philosophy and understanding of inclusion (Clark, Dyson and Millward, 1998), where inclusive education is placed centre stage and where the journey begins with winning the hearts, minds and purposes of teachers (Mac Ruairc, 2016).

In the Irish context, Kinsella (2018) explored the organisation of inclusive educational provision for students with disabilities and SEN in mainstream schools and argues for a shift from focusing on individual pathology to addressing organisational pathology (p. 15). Through action research conducted in four Irish mainstream schools, he identified five core processes essential for inclusion: communication, consultation, collaboration, coordination, and collaborative inquiry. These processes he suggests are vital for schools to develop as learning organisations that address organisational barriers to inclusion.

Additionally, Day and Prunty (2015) support these findings, documenting how Irish mainstream schools address inclusion challenges. Their study suggests that strong leadership and collaborative practices are crucial for effective inclusive education, echoing Kinsella's core processes and emphasis on structural support. They advocate for practical, common-sense solutions, reinforcing the idea that credible, ordinary, and honest efforts are key to moving inclusive education from positive attitudes and high ideals to actual implementation in schools (p. 250).

Goodall (2018), in a study of Northern Ireland schools, argues that inclusion in mainstream schools may appear "for the best" but fails many. He suggests that when mainstream inclusion is pursued at all costs, it can fail those students diagnosed with autism, especially those with the intellectual ability to access the mainstream, but where there are currently too many uncontrollable factors, such as social, environmental, organisational and pedagogical challenges, "which impact on how autistic young people access, experience and succeed in education" (Goodall,

2018, p. 1164). Slee (2019), on the contrary, presents a view that inclusion is “an operational value and organising practice that must be placed as a key indicator of educational accountability and success” (p. 9). Slee places the principle of belonging central to the inclusion of all students, which demands a school’s consideration of ethos, culture and organisation in promoting meaningful inclusion.

2.4 Applying Critical Models and Foucauldian Thinking Autism and Policy Developments for Supporting Autistic Students in Education in Ireland.

Throughout the literature, students’ voices are noted as central to the development of inclusive schools, where there is a common concern for the emotional well-being, autonomy, and social relationships of students who need support. In the research to date, students’ self-concept of friendships and their perceived support needs, future aspirations and a sense of belonging are noted, in particular in regard to students with diverse needs (Carrington, Templeton, and Papinczak, 2003; Goodall, 2015; Flynn, 2017). In the next section of this literature review I will critically examine the literature on student voice, connecting research on voice to the creation of more inclusive schools by focusing on the development of collaborative partnerships between leaders, teachers, and students in fostering inclusive educational environments.

2.5 Autism and Student Voice

Defining voice depends on the context between voice and agency or action (Holdsworth, 2005). In the early 1960s and 1970s, the ‘student voice’ research concept was “driven by the desire to build a fuller understanding of life in classrooms and schools” (Rudduck and McIntyre 2007, p.3). However, although this research evidenced student voice as an essential contributor to the field of education research, “there was no general expectation, as there is now, that the data would be fed back to teachers and students as a basis for informed action” (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007, p.21). New definitions of student voice are intended to improve students’ engagement and learning outcomes, where voice positively

impacts school reform and where students actively work for school improvement (Mitra, 2004). It is identified in the research by Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) that when educators give their students choice, control, challenge and opportunities for collaboration and partnership, they become more engaged and motivated to improve their learning and learning environment, supporting them to become advocates for change. Successively, it has been found that it can have an immense impact on academic achievement by helping students to recognise that they have a stake in their learning (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012).

Student voice is viewed as a central component of democratic education (Dewey, 1916; Fielding and Moss, 2011) and has a long educational history, described by a variety of practices such as student consultation, participation, collaboration, leadership and intergenerational learning (Fielding, 2011; Mitra and Gross, 2009; Mayes, 2013). There are many definitions of student voice. Lundy (2007) defines voice as not just being about the opportunity to state an opinion but is, in fact, more about having the power to influence change. Cook-Sather (2006) argue that student voice means having a say when asked but without any guarantee of a necessary response, which demands people open their minds to the sound and the presence and power of students. Three levels of voice among young people are outlined by Mitra (2006), “being heard, collaborating with adults and building capacity for leadership” (p. 7). Being heard is the most common form of voice. However, simply being heard does not create opportunities for deeper student participation, which involves young people and adults working together collaboratively to engage in problem-solving and decision-making related to issues important to those young people (Mitra, 2006). Nagle (2001) states that voice permits students to be known, to name their experiences, and to actively participate in the decisions that impact their lives. Who gets listened to is critical (Rudduck, Demetriou and Pedder, 2003), and speaking to whom is equally important, where social justice is recognised for all students, even for traditionally marginalised groups (Fielding, 2004).

Student voice can allow students to make informed decisions regarding their learning environments and contribute to policy issues and practices that will affect them as individuals in their education and within society. It is acknowledged that students will be better equipped for their future roles as active citizens if they

experience a democratic environment throughout their education (Mitra, 2006; Mitra and Gross, 2009; Mockler and Groundwater-Smith, 2015). Lundy (2018, p. 340) highlights acknowledging and interpreting voice while simultaneously avoiding tokenistic listening, which is a fundamental challenge to Student Voice Research (SVR). This exploration of student voice highlights its critical role in shaping educational practices, which directly informs policy developments aimed at promoting more inclusive and democratic learning environments, ensuring that student perspectives are not only heard but also influence decision-making processes and reforms.

2.5.1 Autistic Students: The Voice of Those Seldom Heard

It has become evident that including student perspectives, particularly those of autistic students, is crucial in understanding and addressing the complexities of education. While traditional research often overlooks students' voices, the emergence of SVR emphasises the importance of incorporating their perspectives into educational discourse. Moreover, as the understanding of autism evolves from a narrow medical model to a more inclusive neurodiversity perspective, it becomes critical to hear directly from autistic students to ensure that educational practices respond to their unique needs and experiences. It is noted in the literature that by integrating the voices of autistic students into educational research and practice, we can move towards a more inclusive and equitable educational culture that supports the development of all students (Goodall, 2018, Costley et al., 2021; O'Neill and Kenny, 2023; Pellicano and Heyworth, 2023).

2.5.2 The Value of Student Voice in Affecting Inclusive Change... a fair and ethical approach...a rights based approach... a vehicle for emancipatory power

This policy momentum has spurred interest in incorporating young people's voices in educational research. Traditionally, research has explored education from an adult perspective. However, in recent years, there has been an increased interest in

bringing forward students' perspectives, mainly through a body of research known as SVR (Mitra, 2004). SVR acknowledges students value and ability to research matters that affect them. In education, students' opportunities to participate in research processes are also part of the concept, and from this perspective, student voice and school activities can be used in research (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) gave growing importance to children's rights (Mayall, 1995; Roche, 1999; Lundy, 2007; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007; Flynn, 2017), and it is recognised that the result has extended beyond an individual child's rights, where it has impacted legislative developments (Lundy and Stalford, 2013). It is widely considered that supporting children's perspectives is one dimension that can be developed in the quest for successful inclusive education (Goodall, 2015), where inclusive education is acknowledged in the preparation of children as role models in a democratic society (DES, 2017), combating discrimination (United Nations, 1994; Ainscow and Miles, 2008; Norwich, 2008), and where developing 'truly inclusive' schools will result in greater inclusion in society. It is also acknowledged in the literature that children develop their capacity to build confidence, competence, autonomy and agency (Lansdown, 2011) through having their voices heard and that successful inclusion allows children to realise other rights also (Lundy and Stalford, 2013).

2.5.3 Policy Development to Support the Voices of Children and Young People

The UNCRC (1989) enshrined significant rights for children, particularly in education: Article 12 grants the right to express their views; Article 13 ensures freedom of expression; Article 23 guarantees special care and education for children with disabilities; and Article 29 emphasises the development of each child's personality, talents, and abilities. Despite these rights, Article 29, states that children's education should develop each child's personality, talents and abilities to the fullest (UNCRC, 1989, p. 15). Lundy (2018) highlights that children's rights have rarely been exercised. Ireland signed the convention in September 1990 and ratified it in September 1992. This led to the publication of a ten-year National Children's Strategy (2000); the establishment of 34 Comhairle na nÓg throughout the country who elect representatives to Dáil na nÓg; the creation of the Office of

the Ombudsman for Children and the appointment of a Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, which became a senior ministry post, March 2011, Minister for Children. With such policy developments Ireland has committed to the rights of children and acknowledged that commitment in the vision of the National Children's Strategy (2000):

“An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential” (Government of Ireland, 2000, p.5).

2.5.4 A Framework for Student Voice

The Participation Framework: National Framework for Children and Young Peoples' Participation in Decision-making (2024), developed by Hub na nÓg in collaboration with Laura Lundy in 2021, aims to enhance the involvement of children and young people in decision-making processes. It offers guidance to Government Departments, State agencies, and other entities to enhance their practices in listening to and engaging with children and young people in decision-making, whether in person, online, or both. Achieving meaningful and ongoing participation of children and young people in decision-making necessitates a strong commitment from organisations. They suggest the implementation of the framework relies on four key enabling factors: “organisational endorsement, training and skill development for decision-makers, adequate resources financial, human, and time), and effective monitoring and feedback mechanisms” (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2024, p. 29). The following section of this literature review turns to the critical role of leadership in shaping inclusive educational environments, with particular attention to how policy and practice are conceptualised and addressed in current research.

2.6 Leadership for Inclusion

It is recognised in the literature that the impact of leadership is pivotal in how successful a school will be at addressing school-wide improvement, where education leadership is acknowledged as a crucial factor in creating inclusive schools (Riehl, 2000; Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004). The role of leadership in the organisational change process is widely acknowledged, where it can significantly impact promoting and sustaining change (Fullan et al. 2005) and increase the quality of learning and teaching in classrooms (Day et al. 2009; Kevin, 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising that leadership has been described as a “relationship of social influence” (Spillane and Coldren, 2011, p. 76) where the style of leadership may influence the teacher’s willingness for change (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2010). However, change is also personal, and therefore the principal’s understanding of the connection may be central to the success of new initiatives enacted within the organisation (NCCA, 2010). McMaster (2014) describes the essence of leadership as relationships formed with people, how those relationships are utilised to lead and how they are reflected in practice to improve school-wide outcomes eventually.

2.6.1 Policy Context in the Irish Post-Primary Educational Setting

In Irish legislation, primary and post-primary (PP) education has been provided within a legislative framework that clearly defines the school’s functions and the principal’s role. One of the most significant reforms affecting school leadership is the Looking at Our School (*LAOS*) *Quality Framework Document* (2016), which outlines the role of leadership as one of four domains in which schools can formally, consistently, and systematically identify and achieve excellence within their organisation. The framework provides school leaders with a comprehensive overview of teaching and school leadership quality standards. Statements of what would be considered both “effective practice” and “highly effective practice” are identified where they aim to support schools in making critical organisational and cultural decisions to improve learner outcomes (LAOS, 2016). Circular 0003/2018 highlights school leadership’s role in determining a school’s improvement trajectory

and ensuring its achievement. Lynch, Grummell and Devine (2012) highlight that school principals traditionally play a central role in school and community life in Ireland.

An important feature of the LAOS framework is its integration with the SSE process, which has become a cornerstone of school improvement in Irish post-primary education. SSE allows schools to critically review their own practice in a structured and evidence-informed way, fostering a culture of reflective inquiry and continuous improvement (McNamara *et al.*, 2011). The SSE process encourages school leaders and staff to evaluate teaching, learning, and leadership across key areas, and to identify both strengths and priorities for development. According to O'Brien *et al.* (2021), effective SSE practices are collaborative and inclusive, involving a range of stakeholders including students, parents, and teachers. This participatory approach ensures that the school's development planning is not only data-driven but also informed by the lived experiences of the school community. Furthermore, McNamara *et al.* (2011) argue that SSE empowers schools to take ownership of their improvement agendas, enabling leadership to tailor interventions that align with both local needs and national priorities.

Research in the areas of school leadership and improvement (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Hattie, 2012; Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017) recommend that all stakeholders collaborate in policy formation and the organisational structuring of schools, where school principals are the key influential agents in providing the space and resources for such collaborative practice. However, it is identified that difficulties may arise where there is a conflict between the needs of the school, standardisation and performativity, and where principals often make changes in line with performance management (Bolam *et al.*, 2005).

2.6.2 Developing and Leading Inclusion

However, given the context of evolving leadership frameworks and expectations, it is identified that leadership is central to encouraging and fostering learning for all students (Government of Ireland, 1998, Section 22), where the school principal

holds the “greatest influence in the development of an inclusive educational environment where they have ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the needs, both learning and welfare of all students, including those with diverse needs are met” (DES, 2017, p. 67). Hogan and Coote (2014) highlight the influence of those in leadership roles in embedding inclusive values and expectations into an organisations’ culture, which, in turn, shapes the behaviours of all its members.

2.6.3 Generating Change from Below

It is acknowledged that there is a requirement to understand the need for change to engage with change. Acknowledging teachers as being at the centre of decision-making around change is one of the underlying principles of understanding and engaging with leadership (Harris and DeFlaminis, 2016). Where there is a focus on teachers having agency, a social constructivist perspective is necessary to increase autonomy and collaborative engagement among teachers (Spillane and Coldren, 2011). It is essential, however, that this collaboration is not established in the form of “contrived collegiality” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 196), which may reflect a more permissible, contained form of collaboration devised by principals. Therefore, school leaders’ actions must significantly impact teachers’ engagement with school improvement changes. It must also be acknowledged that it can be very burdensome for leaders to allow for the constraints of external pressures, which can pose difficulties in a climate of accountability, control and performativity (Preedy, 2016). The literature suggests that it is possible to support teachers in meaningful ways for lasting change and improvement by engaging a democratic leadership structure in schools (Preedy, 2016), where all teachers’ strengths are valued and supported regardless of formal leadership positions. Distributed leadership theory presents a practical and democratic form of leadership structure in schools (Preedy, 2016) where all teachers’ strengths are valued and supported regardless of their formal leadership position.

2.6.4 The Value of Distributed in Affecting Inclusive Change to Include ‘Distributed Leadership, Power and the Micro Politics of Inclusive Educational Change’

In recent years, implementing a distributed leadership model in Irish schools reflects a global policy turn in the structuring of school leadership. Distributed leadership has received much attention, and recent studies have yielded growing empirical support for its effectiveness (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2004; Harris, 2004; Gronn, 2008; Bush and Glover, 2014). Distributed leadership seeks to find leadership through the expertise of all organisation members rather than just through position or role. Although no “universally accepted definition of distributed leadership” has become apparent (Tian et al., 2016, p. 156), Gronn (2002) defines it as a conjoint agency. Spillane and Harris (2008) highlight that it is not about flattening the hierarchy or delegation of leadership, as this will not necessarily improve performance. Instead, it is the nature and the quality of the leadership practice that matters. They warn that it is not a panacea, a blueprint, or a recipe. Many studies acknowledge this, and there have been attempts to conceptualise the practical blending of senior leadership relations and distributed leadership in the notion of ‘hybrid’ leadership.

Woods and Roberts (2018, p.6) warn that “more needs to be done to integrate an understanding of asymmetrical relationships into a conceptualisation of leadership as distributed and emergent.” Other researchers question the wisdom of the search for definitions arguing that “providing a definitive definition would inevitably fail to capture the complexity and inherent paradoxes of the field and would potentially foreclose a series of ongoing debates and discussions” (Bolden, 2011, p. 256). There is a belief that inadequate hybridisation serves as a convenient excuse for those seeking to rationalise their commitment to distributed leadership (Lumby, 2016). However, Harris and Spillane (2008) propose three interrelated reasons to support the effectiveness of distributed leadership. Firstly, it reflects that school leadership roles are expanding to include a leadership style shared across the school community. This new reality has brought a beginning to the end of the principal being viewed as being at the top of a hierarchical chain, focussing attention instead on the “shifting coalitions of decision-makers” in schools in which “preferences and

coalition membership is neither stable nor unified” (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2004, p. 6). Harris (2013) describes this as a conceptualisation of leadership necessitated by the expanding demand for the current leadership role, where leadership is increasingly understood as a “continuum of possibilities” worked out through negotiation among fellow leaders (Gronn, 2003, p. 427).

2.6.5 Collaborative Initiatives for Promoting Inclusive Change: the case of a leadership group in one PP Irish School

Additionally, it is the expectation at the policy level in the Irish system, where the DE envisions the principal as a leader who “empowers teachers to take on leadership roles and to lead learning, through the effective use of distributed leadership models” (DES, 2017, p. 28). Secondly, distributed leadership also has recognisable power (Harris and Spillane, 2008). So, it has gained popularity as it can restructure conventional theories of leadership (Spillane, 2005) or at least blend with existing frameworks. Consequently, it is frequently used to describe a leadership style involving multiple leaders. Still, it maintains distinguishable features to similar constructs such as shared, team, or democratic leadership. Distributed leadership is about more than simply acknowledging the role of many leaders. Although it embraces diverse leadership styles, it does not imply equal or complete harmony. Distributed leadership is “an emerging set of ideas that frequently diverge from one another” and deals with leadership practice rather than the individuals involved (Spillane, 2005, p. 144). It is about how people collaborate and, in doing so, remake their “roles, functions, routines and structures” (p. 144). Leadership results from this cooperation and collaboration within their shared situation. It is focused on the result of this activity, the interplay between the organisations’ members and the result. Furthermore, a leadership style cannot depend on these elements individually (Spillane et al., 2004). Instead, each is a requirement for successful leadership.

Thirdly, distributed leadership is gaining empirical power (Harris and Spillane, 2008). Empirical evidence supports the “powerful relationship between distributed forms of leadership and organisational change” (p. 32). Such an understanding of

leadership is helping to generate knowledge about how leadership and management operate mutually alongside the practice of leading and managing. Research using this distributed lens also contributes to rethinking the traditional understanding of leaders and followers and how the context in which they work is a central aspect of leadership and management.

Finally, it questions the formal and informal organisational structures and how these connect to school improvement. It is, therefore, sometimes viewed as more useful in the critical examination of conventional, prevailing conceptions of leadership, conceptions that are sometimes built on “biased” and “discredited” understandings of leadership (Gronn, 2002, p. 425).

Constructs of distributed leadership also mark an attempt to maximise the existing, often under-utilised, internal structures, practices and policies of the school by broadening the distribution of leadership in the school (Maxcy and Nguyen, 2006). Leadership is reviewed in a way that seemingly, allows it to be restructured and redistributed. This can happen in two ways, first, where the collective leadership of an organisation is distributed to some, or possibly all, members (Gronn, 2002). This is the most common understanding of distributed leadership and is consistent with problematisation regarding its over-simplification. Significantly, it does not favour the role or activity of any one leader or group of leaders in the school. Instead, any member of staff can lead at some point. The second form of distributed leadership can be described as planned action (Gronn, 2002). This fashioning sees the action of leaders in the school as collaborative rather than as a collective, where leadership is developed through “spontaneous collaboration”, “intuitive working relations”, and “institutionalised practices” (Gronn, 2002, p. 430).

Woods and Roberts (2018) suggest that we learn and work best collaboratively from a philosophical perspective, bringing together different experiences, expertise and ideas as diverse people in a group or organisation. They suggest this collaborative environment thrives on a shared commitment to social justice, a profound understanding of democratic values, and a strong foundation of mutual support. These stages are acknowledged as successive phases on a continuum of practice, where the synergy of the conjoint agency is experienced, and the capacity and talent of staff members are recognised through their shared participation in leadership.

There is also the collaboration of plans and action, which leads to the development of a sense of belonging and membership, which can be accomplished through the formal role structures of the organisation or the informal, personal relationships amongst the members of staff.

The Inclusive Education Framework (NCSE, 2011) emphasises the pivotal role of leadership in fostering inclusive education for pupils with SEN in Irish schools. It advocates for distributed leadership among all school stakeholders, aligning with research that highlights shared responsibility in educational settings (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020). However, the framework's significant emphasis on the principal's role may inadvertently centralise power, potentially limiting authentic distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005).

A critical gap identified is the limited focus on student voice. While the framework acknowledges pupils' roles, it lacks specific strategies to empower students with SEN in decision-making processes. This omission is significant, as it is emphasised that including students enhances motivation and learning outcomes (Fielding, 2011; Mitra, 2006).

The framework promotes equitable resource allocation and professional collaboration, resonating with inclusive pedagogy principles (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). Nevertheless, it offers limited guidance on addressing systemic inequities that affect SEN students. Inclusive education requires confronting social and structural barriers, not just technical adjustments (Slee, 2011). While monitoring and feedback are encouraged, the framework could better engage a broader range of stakeholders in these processes. Involving students, parents, and teachers in reflective practices leads to more meaningful assessments of inclusion practices (Kinsella, 2018). While the framework aligns with inclusive education principles it could be strengthened by critically addressing leadership distribution, amplifying student voice, and confronting systemic barriers.

2.7 Leadership and Power

To facilitate the possibility of distributing leadership, professional trust and a shift

in power from formal leaders to teachers in the classroom is required. Linksy and Lawrence (2011) describe leadership as a shared responsibility, “leadership is an activity, not a person” (2011, p.6) and suggest that “leadership can come from any of the interested factions: teachers, students, administrators, parents, government officials, businesspeople or electeds.” Winter and O’Raw (2010) make the point that, “Effective leadership from the top should be accompanied by bottom-up support, and a partnership approach, to ensure the successful implementation of necessary reforms or changes. This means that the teachers and other staff who must implement the changes must support the reforms themselves and be supported as they strive to make the changes” (Winter and O’Raw 2010, p. 28).

However, the reality is that teachers may experience little freedom due to external accountability pressures, which promote hierarchical and centralised approaches to leadership. Leadership is distributed only when subordinate members work within the boundaries of the superordinate power. Burns and Darling-Hammond (2014), based on their analysis of Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), 2013 data, highlight the gap in perception between principals and teachers about the extent to which each saw leadership as shared. Hence, while applying leadership practices to all teachers is supported in theory and policy rhetoric, distributed leadership may not reflect the central principles (Torrance, 2012). Criticism suggests that it can sometimes be perceived as being “the panacea to aid all that ail[s] education” (Torrance, 2012, p. 3), with very few empirical studies on distributed leadership in existence (Harris, 2008; Harris and DeFlaminis, 2016). Findings from Torrance’s small-scale empirical research project undertaken in Scotland highlight that the practice of distributed leadership is “context-specific, socially constructed, negotiated, hierarchical” and dependent on the principal’s backing and support (Torrance, 2012, p. 3), illustrating that the reality often resembles a form of authorised leadership. Historically principals in religious-run Voluntary Secondary Schools (VSS) did not embrace a collaborative practice culture, as the centre of power and authority rested with the principal, where teachers and students were denied agency (Coolahan 1981; Lynch, Grummell and Devine 2012). The literature, at present, notes that research in the VSS sector is limited and, that there is a need for empirical evidence regarding the style of leadership and the nature of collaborative practice in these schools.

Researchers contend that social justice has become a significant concern for educators in the 21st century. This has been driven by many factors, including increased performance standards, the marketisation of all students by neo-liberal governments, greater economic gaps for marginalised groups within the population, the need for the development of inclusive policies for those with disabilities and or diverse needs, accountability pressures, and high-stakes testing (Shoho, Merchang, and Lugg, 2005; Marshall and Olivia, 2006; Bogotch, Miron and Biesta, 2008; Gaetane, Normore and Brooks, 2009). Lynch and Baker (2005, p. 148) stress that “democratising education in schools involves the participation of all stakeholders, where their voices are heard at every level of educational planning and decision-making.”

Unless educationally disadvantaged groups are involved in the planning and development process in education, other inequalities cannot be meaningfully challenged. They are the people with the “day-to-day experiential knowledge of injustice necessary for informed decision-making” (Lynch and Baker 2005, p.150). They insist that stakeholders should have more than a consultative role and be listened to, engaged, and held accountable in a participatory democratic context. One of the greatest criticisms of distributed leadership is in fact that neoliberal governments have harnessed it for increasing performativity and the marketisation of students, which may ultimately lead to a narrow educational purpose (Ball, 2006; Scott, 2010; Jeffrey and Troman, 2012; Martin and Larmouth, 2012; Hall, Gunter and Bragg, 2013; Harris and DeFlaminis, 2016).

It is suggested in the literature that collaborative leadership advances the qualities of distributed leadership while at the Same time addressing the difficulties. Woods and Roberts (2018) argue for collaborative leadership, suggesting that it advances distributed leadership in that it holds a clear vision of the purpose and values of leadership as a distributed or shared process but also integrates both “peoples’ agency and emergent social change, as well as explicit critical values” (p. 58). Collaborative leadership is closely related to a democratic leadership style, where all members of the community actively contribute their unique skills and knowledge to reach shared decisions. Over recent years, the concept has gained popularity within educational communities (Fielding and Moss, 2011). In response to this

trend, educators and school communities have shown interest in transforming schools into a democratic structure by implementing advisory councils and focus group committees. The aim is to create a community-based school that aligns with local values and customs (Fleming, 2015).

This movement believes that parents and community members should be integral parts of the school community, and their involvement in school management affairs will be more effective when power is decentralised from the state to local school bodies (Woods, 2011). Studies have shown that the site-based management system alone may not adequately challenge existing power structures or alter decision-making processes in schools. Hence, community engagement becomes essential to drive the necessary change (Woods, 2017).

Establishing a new management system is not enough to bring about shared power and decision-making. Active participation of teachers, students and community members, based on their skills and experiences, is critical for successful implementation (Woods and Roberts, 2018). This approach fosters a competitive environment by bringing together diverse groups to develop a collaborative structure for school development and shared decision-making (Dallmayr, 2007).

According to Woods and Roberts (2018), collaborative work is most effective when there is a strong commitment to social justice and a motivation for change. Working collaboratively involves bringing together people from diverse backgrounds with different experiences, expertise, and ideas within a group or organisation. The basis for participation in such collaborations should be “rooted in principles of mutual respect, critical dialogue, independent thinking, and a sense of belonging and connectedness” (p. 11). They propose contrasting leadership practice philosophies to clarify collaborative efforts: dependence and co-development. The dependence philosophy views individuals as relying on receiving instructions and authoritative direction to know what to do. They caution against excessive dependence, which can stifle creativity, imagination, and critical thinking. They emphasise the importance of challenging this ingrained dependence to empower individuals to see themselves as “creative agents capable of shaping their desired futures” (Gidley, 2016, p. 116).

The co-development philosophy supports individuals and their collaborators in continuously expanding their understanding of the present reality and what should be. By working collaboratively under this philosophy, individuals flourish, and freedom is nurtured, both one's own freedom and that of others, thus contributing to the overall relational freedom within the organisation (Woods, 2017). In summary, Woods and Roberts advocate for collaborative work grounded in co-development rather than dependence, as it fosters creativity, empowerment, and the advancement of relational freedom in organisations.

2.8 Conclusion

The literature in this review highlights that it is critical that schools focus on their students and invest in seeking out their needs and interests, using and valuing students' voices to drive whole school improvement, one which reflects the society in which we live, where there is an emphasis on a culture of inclusion, which values differences, believes in collaboration and is committed to offering educational opportunities to all students (Ainscow, Chapman, and Hadfield, 2020).

This research is guided by the conceptual framework displayed in (*see Figure 1 P.12*). This framework illustrates the primary areas of concern in this research project, namely Strand 1: Inclusion, Strand 2: Student Voice (focused on autistic students), and Strand 3: Leadership, which align with the study's three research questions. Overall, these research strands are being utilised to explore how a student voice initiative for autistic students could support a school working to become more inclusive.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The conceptual framework (*see Figure 1 P.12*) directly informed the study's methodological design and selection of methods. It shaped each stage of the research process, from the development of research questions to the choice of data collection tools, ensuring alignment with the study's critical and constructionist underpinnings. This framework maintained a focus on the core concepts of inclusion, voice and leadership guiding the research and the interpretation of data. The inclusion strand draws upon Foucauldian analyses of institutional power (Foucault, 1977, 1982) and critical disability theory (Goodley, 2014; Slee, 2011), framing inclusion not as mere access, but as the dismantling of systemic and discursive barriers that marginalise certain learners. This critical positioning aligns with the evolving Irish policy context, including the partial enactment of the EPSEN Act (2004) and the ratification of the UNCRPD (2018), and informs the study's interrogation of how inclusive practice is constructed, resisted, and negotiated at the school level. In this, student voice is underpinned by literature that centres the ethical, democratic, and rights-based imperatives for listening to all students, particularly those seldom heard, such as autistic students (Mitra, 2004; Cook-Sather, 2006; Lundy, 2007). The literature highlights the tension between tokenistic participation and genuine partnership, a tension that directly informs the analysis of how student agency is operationalised within the CLI. The leadership strand is shaped by distributed and collaborative leadership theories (Spillane, 2005; Woods and Roberts, 2018), and critiques of performativity and hierarchical power structures (Ball, 2013; Torrance, 2012).

These perspectives inform how leadership is conceptualised and enacted within the study, focusing on power dynamics and relational practices. Collectively, these strands provide an integrated framework that not only shaped the structure of the literature review but also guided the critical interpretation of data during analysis and discussion. They enable a nuanced understanding of how inclusion, voice, and leadership intersect to either sustain or disrupt dominant discourses in PP schools,

particularly in relation to the inclusion of autistic students in decision-making structures.

This conceptual framework played a central role in informing both the methodological design of the study and the selection of research methods. The adoption of a qualitative case study approach was purposefully aligned with the critical orientation of the framework, enabling an in-depth exploration of the nuanced and contextually situated dynamics of power, participation, and leadership within the school setting. Drawing on the inclusion strand, the case study method facilitated a critical interrogation of how institutional practices and cultural norms either marginalised or enabled the inclusion of autistic learners. The emphasis on student voice within the framework underpinned the participatory design of the study, where autistic students led the agenda-setting in the CLI and were positioned as active contributors to the inquiry. This approach moved beyond tokenism, creating conditions for authentic student agency and lived experience to shape the research. Similarly, the leadership strand informed the study's focus on relational and distributed leadership, which was examined through naturally occurring interactions and collaborative processes within the CLI. The bounded case, St Aoibhinn's School, provided a real-world context through which the interconnections between inclusion, voice, and leadership could be observed, analysed, and theorised. The methods of data collection, student-led meetings, collaborative leadership meetings, and focus groups, were chosen to capture diverse perspectives and complex power relations, and were interpreted through the critical, theory-driven lens provided by the framework. As such, the conceptual framework did not operate as a static background but as an active analytical tool that shaped the entire research process, from design to data production and interpretation, ensuring alignment between epistemology, methodology, and method.

The following chapter outlines the philosophical paradigm which underpinned and determined the research design of this study. Epistemological and ontological views and their influence on the methodology are explained. An exploration of the research methodology is presented, which outlines how the framework was operationalised. Methods of data analysis employed are further outlined and

explained. Finally, there will be a treatment of ethical issues and methodological elements such as validity and reliability in the qualitative space.

3.2 Problem Statement

In the case study school, as a special class lead teacher, I brought issues relating to including autistic students in the mainstream setting to the LFI team. The issues that the LFI team sought to address centred on access to mainstream classes, involvement in curricular and extra-curricular school activities, and addressing student reports of feelings of being ‘othered’ within the school community. The principal, a group member, suggested inviting some students to an LFI team meeting, to hear their voices, to work through the issues raised, and to work towards creating increased opportunities for inclusion. This setting provided a wonderful opportunity to study inclusive school development, student voice and leadership for inclusive school development.

3.3 The Purpose of the Study

Given the unique nature and setting of the above initiative, I was keen to capture all the study’s contextual features and offer a detailed ‘thick’ description of changes to the school’s workings and outcomes. Therefore, an exploratory single-site case study was deemed the best way to achieve this.

3.4 Philosophical Assumptions Underpinning this Study

To establish the philosophical stance underpinning this research study, and in the spirit of reflexivity that should underpin all qualitative and/or critical studies, it was necessary that I examined the epistemological and ontological assumptions that inform my worldview or paradigm. Epistemological assumptions are concerned with “the very bases of knowledge, its nature and forms, how it can be acquired, and how communicated to human beings” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

Ontology considers assumptions that are “concerned with the very nature or essence of the social phenomena under investigation” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p. 6). In simpler terms epistemological assumptions deal with understanding what knowledge is and how it can be acquired and communicated to people. Ontology is about understanding the nature of reality and the world we live in.

The philosophical paradigm which underpins this study is based in critical theory. Critical theory assumes a pre-set view of what behaviour in a social democracy should entail (Fay, 1987; Morrison, 1995). The intention of critical theory is not only to give an account of how society behaves but to explain that behaviour in the light of concepts such as social justice, equity (different to equality), belonging and democracy for all its members. It seeks to understand situations with the purpose of changing them. “Critical theory seeks to uncover and interpret the interests at work in particular situations and to interrogate the legitimacy of those interests, identifying the extent to which they are legitimate in their service of equality and democracy” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p. 31). The primary focus of critical theory “is to emancipate the disempowered, to redress inequality and to promote individual freedoms within a democratic society” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p. 31). Eagleton (1991) suggests critical theory identifies the ‘false’ or ‘fragmented’ consciousness, which has brought a particular group to powerlessness, or to power and he questions the justice of this. Therefore, the purpose of critical education research is to be practical and political with the intention of bringing about a more just society where both individual and collective freedoms are practiced.

There are many criticisms of critical theory as a paradigm. Habermas (1990), who proposes the theory, acknowledges that his views only have “hypothetical status” (p. 32), he argues that there is a need for “critical testing” (p.7) and “empirical verification” (p. 117). There is a question as to the effectiveness of critical theory and the need for it to be examined by chronicling the extent to which equality, freedom, democracy, empowerment and emancipation have been achieved through its application. Yet the propensity of critical theory to focus on issues of human rights and power is particularly applicable to learners with autism.

Marshall and Goodall (2015) argue that a rights-based approach affirms that children and young people with autism should not be denied the opportunity of a meaningful education experience on the grounds of disability or other conditions and propose that such a stance can be strongly supported through International and European legal frameworks. They point out (p. 3160), that “Discrimination against children with autism in not being provided with a meaningful education experience is an abuse which denies such children their basic human rights and undermines the very concept of a universal right”. The research design for this study aligns with what Atkins and Duckworth (2019), describe as adhering to “democratic values: concern for marginalised and minority rights and dignity, commitment to common good, conviction in the power if individuals are to have agency, belief in the importance of dialogic engagement and transparent stream of ideas, reflexivity and central premise of individual and collective responsibility for others” (p.2108). Therefore, as a researcher, I propose taking on the role of a ‘critical ethnographer’ where possible. Where the purpose of the study was not just to describe the world in which the research took place but to also attempt to change that world, a position which justifies the stance and approach the research takes.

To understand and address issues of rights and power, it is critical to investigate the embedded power relations within the discussions and interactions among the CLI participants. This investigation requires looking for evidence in various forms of qualitative data, such as interviews, focus groups, and observations, where stakeholders express their perspectives, experiences, and interactions. By analysing this qualitative data, researchers can uncover the underlying power dynamics and assess how these affect the rights and opportunities of marginalised groups, such as autistic learners. Collecting qualitative data is justified in this context because it provides rich, detailed insights into the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals. Unlike quantitative data, which often focuses on numerical measures and statistical analysis, qualitative data allows for a deeper exploration of complex social phenomena and the subtle nuances of power relations.

Qualitative research, or naturalistic inquiry as it is often referred to (Lincoln and Gruba, 1985), examines human behaviour closely in the context of its naturalistic setting (Lincoln and Gruba 1985; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). It provides a source

for thick description and authentic explanation, which is grounded in identifiable contexts (Miles and Huberman, 1994). My epistemological assumptions are associated with constructionism, which suggests that meaning does not exist in isolation but is constructed through interactions between individuals and the interpretations they make from those interactions (Robson, 2011). These partnerships are formed based on equality of power and esteem (Mertens, 2007).

Constructionism is similar to constructivism in that it presumes that individuals make sense of their world through knowledge construction. Therefore, qualitative research methods such as interviews and observations can be employed as viable research methods as they allow for the different perspectives constructed by those who are making sense of their world through the construction of knowledge about the world in which they live (Robson, 2011).

Additionally, a constructionist research approach is flexible and can facilitate the researcher to change direction as needs arise during the data collection process (Robson, 2011). Qualitative research also takes a relativist position that acknowledges that reality is subjective according to peoples' perceptions (Creswell, 2007). A relativist ontological positioning allowed me to capture the different realities of those I study. Qualitative research methods correlate with a relativist ontological stance, allowing for an analysis of what individuals both say and what they do not say, presenting different perspectives, meanings, and interpretations of the world and how individuals experience it (Creswell, 2007). By using a relativistic perspective, I seek to explain and understand the particular case under investigation rather than generalise the findings to other contexts (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). I seek a multiplicity of perspectives on how individual team participants see the concept of human agency, which is focused on an individuals' intentions and actions to bring about change.

Taking a relativist position allowed me to explore teachers' and students' intentions and how they may experience the phenomenology of change (Fullan, 2001).

Trowler, Fanghanel and Wareham (2005, p. 434), state that "Individuals thoughts and decisions are more significant than the structures they operate within", where participants "have powers to actively transform their social world whilst, in turn, being transformed by it (Crawford, 2009, p. 54). This aligns with my belief that

teachers' agency and students' agency can be powerful enough to bring about change by disrupting the traditional structures which often find their foundation in managerialism and accountability.

3.5 Research Design

Five fundamental qualitative research approaches were investigated in determining a suitable design for this research (Table 1).

Table 1 Choosing a Qualitative Research Approach (adapted from Creswell, 2013, p. 13)

Research approach	Description of this approach	Strengths	Limitations in the context of this study
Narrative	The researcher studies the lives of individuals and captures the stories of one or two individuals	Opportunity for participants to recount their personal stories in relation to their experience of the collaborative leadership initiative	It focuses on an in-depth account of an individual, e.g., a life story approach. In this study, there was an exclusive focus on the processes and outcomes of the Collaborative Leadership Initiative on inclusive practices

Phenomenology	The researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants	Focuses on the meanings and interpretations that emerge as participants engage in the Collaborative Leadership Initiative working for inclusive practice	There is an emphasis placed on a description of the experiences. The research question proposes that there is more to investigate than a description of experiences. E.g. understanding aspects of the initiative that worked or didn't work to further inclusive practice
Grounded Theory	The researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants	This is a flexible process where the researcher gathers data and generates a theory that is central to the phenomenon i.e. collaborative leadership initiatives for inclusive practice	This process involves using multiple stages of data collection and refining and interrelating categories of information informed by the literature review. This study draws on existing theoretical frameworks, which informed

			the intervention design and the research process
Ethnography	The researcher studies the shared patterns of behaviours, language and actions of an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period	Value is placed on the 'lived experience' where the researcher inhabits the natural setting in which the research takes place	Coming from anthropology and sociology. Predominately used for research emancipation for marginalised groups
Case Study	A design of inquiry, especially evaluation, in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case, programme, event, activity or process. Cases are bounded by time and activity. The researcher	The researcher is enabled to understand the processes and outcomes of the Collaborative Leadership Initiative by using multiple sources of evidence	The findings are context-bound and cannot be generalised to the wider population

	<p>collects detailed information using a variety of data collection methods over an extended period. (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018)</p>		
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3.6 Rationale for Using a Case Study Design

Case study as a research method, is a way to unravel the complexity of one demarcated entity (Abama and Stake, 2014). It can capture the “complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships, and other factors” (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011, p. 253). It is useful when studying “the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (Stake, 1995, p. xi). In this study the method was used to get a multi-faceted view of teachers’ and students’ involvement in a CLI, and of the power relations revealed by these interactions, through an investigation of participants’ perceptions of issues and interactions (Gray, 2004). For the study it was the school and its culture, policies, practices, structures and procedures that provided its “bounded context” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 25). The vehicle for gaining access to insights into the workings of power within this context was the CLI within this particular school, and in particular a focus on how the workings and outcomes of this entity were altered by the involvement of learners with autism. Adopting a case study design allowed for an in-depth description of specific phenomena in their natural settings (Denscombe, 2003; Robson, 2011) and highlights the importance of the relationships within the bounded context noted above (Yin, 2018). With minimum intervention it allowed the particularities of this specific and naturalistic case, in all its complexity, to be described and understood from multiple perspectives (Abama and Stake, 2014), allowing “the uniqueness of

events or actions, arising from their being shaped by the meanings of those who are the participants in the situation” (Pring, 2000, p. 40).

Case studies align with qualitative research (Stake, 1995), using mainly qualitative instruments and purposive sampling, where “the principle of selection of subjects is based on “researchers’ judgment as to typicality or interest” (Robson, 2011, p. 275). An example of how case study allowed the researcher to “understand a real-world case and assume that such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to the case” (Yin, 2018), can be found in the impact of extrinsic environmental variables such as choice of room or time of day for meetings . A case study allowed the researcher to study the impact of such seemingly inconsequential variables. (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

By choosing this approach, the study aims to capture the intricate and multifaceted interactions within the CLI, providing a comprehensive understanding of how these interactions contribute to or hinder the development of inclusive practices. Additionally, this approach critically examines existing power dynamics, seeking to disrupt current networks of power and influence within the school context, thus fostering a more equitable and inclusive environment that empowers marginalised voices, such as those of autistic students. This method allows for rich, contextualised descriptions that describe the specific ways in which the initiative affects both autistic and non-autistic members in the school setting. It has the potential to facilitate a deep exploration of the diverse viewpoints of both autistic and non-autistics members of the CLI and the emergence of new meaning, capturing the different perspectives of the different participants and focusing on how their different meanings illuminate further knowledge of a phenomenon (Yin, 2018), or confirm what is already known (Merriam, 1998). By delving into these varied perspectives, the research can uncover the nuanced ways in which the CLI influences inclusive practices, such as how autistic students experience inclusion and participation in the CLI, how non-autistic participants perceive their interactions and collaboration with autistic participants, and how educators and administrators view the effectiveness of the initiative. All these insights shed light on how autistic learners are constructed/construed in the school and how networks of power and control are developed around these constructions. This comprehensive

understanding can highlight successes, identify challenges, and suggest improvements, ultimately contributing to the development of more enlightened, equitable, and effective inclusive relations and practices.

Like all research methods, the case study is not without criticism, and many researchers express disdain for the case study as a research method (Yin, 2018). Criticisms usually centre on the fact that systematic procedures are not always followed or indeed where equivocal evidence is allowed to influence the findings. There may also be confusion between a technical systematic case study and the use of case study as a teaching tool which has been popularised and is correctly identified as teaching cases (Ellet, 2007), valuable in the realm of education, where they may be used to generate discussion and debate concerning some critical professional issue (Yin, 2018). In this case, the necessary criteria for employing a case study as a valuable teaching and training tool is very different from the criteria for developing a case study as a research tool (Yin, 2018).

Another limitation expressed with case study as a research tool relates to the limited generalisability of findings due to the unique context of the study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). However, it is important to highlight that for this study I am more concerned with providing a description of one case of participatory leadership from which others may draw conclusions in relation to elements that are applicable to their own situations and contexts. By examining this specific case, the study seeks to provide “An example that can, in time, contribute to the development of a grounded theory of how equitable leadership for inclusion might operate effectively” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 17). Grounded theory allows for the development of conceptual insights grounded in the data itself, offering the potential to generalise findings to broader theoretical frameworks that can inform inclusive leadership practices in other contexts. In moving to a higher conceptual level, the hope is to engage analytic generalisations as a claim, by providing a supportive argument. Yin (2018) claims this can lead to greater insights about the “how” and “why” questions that the study set out to answer (p. 38). Additionally, this case study may be a “step to action” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p. 256), where the findings may have meaning in the context from which they emerged, and where they may influence future planning or inform policymaking (Merriam, 1998). One

considerable criticism of case study design points towards researcher bias and subjectivity particularly when the researcher is a participant and an observer (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). As the facilitator of the collaborative leadership initiative, I participated in the group by engaging with the participants while also making observations as the researcher. However, while observer bias can influence the case being studied, I ensured that I addressed reflexivity throughout the research to avoid personal bias (Yin, 2018). The next section explores how the chosen paradigm and research strategy facilitated the collection of specific types of qualitative data, providing a rationale for these methodological choices.

3.7 Description of the Case Study: St Aoibhinn's Secondary School

This section provides a description of the case study school, including information about its environment, and curricula. This is followed by a review of its relevant policies and promoted practices, a narrative on the school's history of developing as an inclusive school, and a description of the context in which the CLI materialised. Finally, details of the leaders, teachers and students who participated in the study are presented along with its stated purpose.

St. Aoibhinn's is a PP catholic co-educational school operating under the trusteeship of CEIST. It is a large school with 800 pupils and over 70 teachers. The school is built on a large site and includes many sports facilities. The school is a single-story building with full accessibility. The school has three special classes that support autistic students. The school's promotional materials highlight its policy to accept all students residing in the catchment area who desire to enrol in the first year (St. Aoibhinn's Admissions Policy, 2022, p.1). These materials also refer to the school as promoting "a caring atmosphere, where good relationships are fostered between staff, students, parents and the community, to develop mutual trust and thus facilitate true partnership" (Mission Statement, St. Aoibhinn's, 2024). The school's curriculum includes traditional Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes, Level 1 Learning Programme (L1LP) and Level 2 Learning Programme (L2LP), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Transition Year Programme (TY). Regarding extra-curricular activities, promotional materials (St.

Aoibhinn’s 2024, page not specified) mention a significant range of extra-curricular activities in sports and various other clubs such as drama, a talent show, chess, games, debating, subject clubs, a reading club and an art club. St. Aoibhinn’s Admission Policy (2022, p. 3) notes that the school welcomes all students irrespective of “gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race or membership of the traveller community.” It also notes that the school provides an inclusive school and learning environment; “St. Aoibhinn’s will cooperate with the NCSE in the performance by the Council of its functions under the EPSEN Act, 2004 in relation to the provision of education to children with special educational needs, including in particular by the provision and operation of a special class or classes when requested to do so by the Council.” This policy asserts that the “application process for a pupil with special educational needs will be the same as that of any other applicant” (St. Aoibhinn’s, Admissions Policy, 2022, p. 3). The policy also states that St. Aoibhinn’s “is a school which has established special autism classes, with the approval of the Minister for Education and Skills, which provides an education exclusively for students with a category or categories of SEN specified by the Minister and may refuse to admit to the class a student who does not have the category of needs specified (St. Aoibhinn’s, Admissions Policy, 2022, p. 4) More explicitly, the school reports an involvement in leading inclusion through the AsIAM: Autism Friendly Schools Project, which, since its introduction in 2019, has aimed to offer support to schools in providing inclusive educational placements for autistic children and young people alongside specialist provision. The SEN Policy states that at St. Aoibhinn’s, “we strive to ensure that our system of special education needs adheres to the principles expressed in the EPSEN Act, 2004 and that St. Aoibhinn’s sets out to provide education for all its students, regarding legislation for students with SEN as listed below:

- The Education Act (1998)
- The Education Welfare Act (2000)
- The Equal Status Act (2000)
- The Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill (2003)

- The Equality Act (2004)
- The Data Protection Acts (1988, 1998 and 2003)
- The Freedom of Education Acts (1997 and 2003)
- The Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004)

The policy highlights that “the level of support provided to students with SEN is dependent on the resources allocated to the school from DE but that “one of our core values is that we respect the unique and intrinsic value of every person” (SEN Policy, page not specified). The school’s Anti-Bullying Policy refers to the aspiration to create a positive school culture “that is welcoming of difference and diversity and is based on inclusivity” (St. Aoibhinn’s Anti-Bullying Policy, p.1) and which addresses “identity based bullying” (St. Aoibhinn’s Anti-Bullying Policy, p.2) including that related to students “with disabilities or special educational needs” (St. Aoibhinn’s Anti-Bullying Policy, p. 2).

The initiative involved a team of teachers who participated voluntarily, selected based on their roles in leadership, special education, and general teaching. These educators were drawn from various subject areas and included both experienced and early-career teachers, providing a cross-section of perspectives and experiences. One of the teachers held a leadership position, as a year head, and also held a specialised role in supporting students with additional educational needs as an SEN co-ordinator, making them a key stakeholders in implementing inclusive practices. Their involvement was driven by their interest in improving inclusion in school leadership structures and their commitment to collaborative teaching practices (Table 3). The stated purpose of the CLI was to explore how including autistic students in the school’s leadership decision-making processes could impact team dynamics, inclusion strategies, and school culture. Specifically, it aimed to examine whether actively involving these students in leadership could reshape power structures, disrupt traditional teacher-student hierarchies, and create more equitable processes that prioritise student voice and agency. The CLI focused on a specific group of students: autistic learners, whose perspectives were historically underrepresented in school leadership and decision-making. By integrating these

students into the Lfi team, the initiative sought to promote authentic collaboration between teachers and students, foster mutual understanding, and develop more inclusive policies and practices (Table 3).

3.8 Data Collection

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) describe research carried out in the researchers' workplace as "backyard" research, and while it has many advantages, multiple strategies for validation of data must be employed to avoid researcher bias and demonstrate the accuracy of the information. "Participant observation, interviews and conversations, documents and field notes" are the main methods of data collection in naturalistic inquiry and were employed for this study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p. 223).

3.9 Research Instruments

Yin and Davis (2007), highlight that in carrying out case study research the intention is to understand a real-world case and undertake that such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to your case. Case study as a research method, is a way to unravel the complexity of one demarcated entity (Abama and Stake, 2014), The research adopted a qualitative single-site case-study design. For the study, an initiative consisting of five CLI team meetings was conducted, engaging the participation of autistic students who volunteered and were then selected through purpose sampling to take part. Throughout these meetings, the school's policies and practices were interrogated through the lens of the Autism Friendly School Audit (2020). This process identified challenging problematisations and generated solutions, which were compiled into an 'Action Plan' for change, (Appendix Q). The study explored the impact of including autistic students in the team, focusing on how their participation influenced the processes, group dynamics and products developed by the group. The study took place over a six-month period. It was proposed to begin January 2022 and end in May 2022, but had to be postponed on two occasions due to the COVID-

19 pandemic. The study eventually began in spring 2022 and was completed in September 2022. Phase one of the study proposed an ‘initiative’ composed of five fifteen-minute meetings with the students (Appendix I). Each meeting was followed by a meeting with the CLI team, each approximately forty minutes long and again, there were five in total, (Appendix L). In advance of each CLI meeting, an agenda was distributed to all participants. The first CLI meeting with the students proposed areas of policy and practice for discussion at the following meetings. Areas of focus were then proposed to the leadership team for each subsequent CLI team meetings. Each of the subsequent CLI team meetings was preceded by a meeting with the students, where the students took time to formulate their opinions and ideas. All meetings were audio recorded. Following the meetings initiative, participants from school leadership (Appendix F) and teacher leaders were interviewed through focus group discussions (Appendix G). The discussions lasted approximately forty minutes and were audio recorded. All discussions were transcribed from the audio recordings with the participants’ permission. Student participants were then invited to participate in a scaffolded thirty-minute focus group discussion (Appendix H).

Einarsdóttir (2007) proposes that using diverse methods has revealed that children are reliable sources and give valuable and useful information for research. Children, she suggests, hold their own views and perspectives and have a right to have their voices heard; where she suggests they can speak for themselves once the right methods are used. It was proposed that a range of differentiated participatory methods was chosen on an individualised approach based on the participants’ preferences, wishes or expectations. By offering multiple means of representation, students experienced reduced anxiety associated with expressing their thoughts verbally, and it supported participants “to access and represent different levels of experience” (Bagnoli, 2009, p.547). Drawing activities, visual prompt cards and recording voice notes on the iPad were offered to support the students’ ideas throughout the focus group discussion, (Appendix H). In phase two of the research, the audio recordings of the meetings were transcribed to analyse participant interactions (Appendix I). The ‘Action Plan’ was also reviewed and formed part of the analysis (Appendix Q). The focus group discussions were transcribed and analysed following each interview; each discussion was also annotated to capture contextual cues and nonverbal cues. A reflective journal was kept throughout the

study (Appendix M). The data was analysed, drawing on a framework for *Reflective Thematic Analysis* (RTA) by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2020), (Appendix, N).

A discussion of the framework for analysis follows.

3.10 Data Analysis and the Presentation of Findings

Thematic analysis it was decided would provide a structured yet flexible approach to analyse the qualitative data within a larger social analysis framework. It enabled the researcher to delve deeply into the perceptions, interactions, and outcomes of the CLI team, addressing the key research questions effectively. This method ensured that the findings are grounded in participants' lived experiences and the context of the research setting, thereby enhancing the validity and richness of the study's outcomes. The intention was to uncover patterns in the data while remaining close to the construction of the world as the research participants experience it (Lincoln and Gruba, 1985; Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). This approach aligned with the qualitative research methodology outlined by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011), and it adheres to the principles of naturalistic inquiry by closely reflecting the participants' construction of their social world (Lincoln and Gruba, 1985; Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). A large data set was generated from this study, including interview transcripts, field notes, and researcher reflections on the CLI. It was essential to reduce data overload throughout the research process by writing memos and summaries to keep track of the data collected and reduce unnecessary data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). RTA analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2020) was employed to carry out the analysis. The researcher must employ a rigorous, robust, transparent and systematic approach to data analysis (Robson, 2011; Bryman, 2004). RTA involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns that emerge in the data. "It minimally organises and describes your dataset in (rich) detail" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.6). A theme is identified when a critical aspect of the data emerges and relates to the research question and highlights a response that follows a pattern in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Robson, 2011). However, before themes from the data were identified, meanings from the data were explored. This essentially is a process of identifying interesting features of the data

(Braun and Clarke, 2006) or “core elements that explain what the thing is and how it works” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 247). It is essential to look for explanations, not just descriptions (Macintyre, 2000), a system that must be designed and planned before data collection (Gray, 2004). Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2020) outline a six-step framework (Table 2). This framework is arguably the most influential approach to RTA and has been embraced by the social science research world because it offers a clear and usable framework for TA (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

Table 2 Six-Step Approach to Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 35)

Familiarising yourself with the data:	Transcribing the data, reading and re-reading the data, noting initial ideas
Generate initial codes:	Organising the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set reduces the data into small chunks of meaning, collating data relevant to each code
Searching for themes:	Codes are fitted together into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
Reviewing themes:	Reviewing, modifying and developing preliminary themes to ensure they work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis
Define and name themes:	The final refinement of the themes, including the specifics of each one

	and how themes relate to each other, generated clear definitions and names for each theme.
Writing up the report:	This is the final opportunity for analysis. It involves selecting clear, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating the analysis to the research question and literature, and producing a well-written report on the analysis.

The process of analysing data is not linear, and as a researcher, it is necessary to move back and forth in analysing the data while weighing up the findings (Robson, 2011). Once the interviews were complete, they were transcribed to avoid losing any contextual cues and nonverbal cues (Silverman, 2000). Transcripts were then annotated where appropriate to support the authenticity of what was being said so that it was easily understood by the reader in the way that it was intended by the interviewee (Walford, 2000).

The data analysis process drew upon the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework was developed from the concepts drawn from the literature, and this, in turn, informed the analysis of data. Some criticise deductive analysis as they suggest it leads to researcher bias (Robson, 2011). It also may be the case that certain aspects of the data may attract the researchers' attention, which can mean other important aspects of the data are overlooked (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Deductive analysis generally means applying theory to the data to test the theory. It is a kind of "top-down approach to data analysis." Therefore, the researcher must take a coherent approach to analyse the data, not merely description (Bazeley, 2009). Bazeley (2009, p. 8) suggests that the researcher employs a formula for thematic data analysis; they favour the "describe, compare, relate" formula, where a description is an essential first step for identifying themes but not sufficient on its own. Divergent views are also fundamental when analysing data as they add to a

deeper understanding of the findings (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise the importance of carrying out a detailed analysis of the identified themes in the data to provide a coherent, transparent account of the story generated by the data. In phase 1 of the data analysis process employed in this study, the transcribed data, along with the field notes from the initiative, were read and re-read, and initial ideas that emerged were noted as the data was rigorously engaged with. Following this, phase 2 entailed identifying interesting features or initial codes that emerged across the data set (Appendix P). Subsequently, in phases 3 and 4, themes were developed and reviewed to assess their relevance concerning the research questions. The final round of coding, phase 5, involved the refinement of the themes, which were informed by the literature and resulted in the production of definitions and names for the final themes. The analysis led to the generation of three themes from which the Findings Chapter 4 and Discussion Chapter 5 were written. A narrative approach was adopted for the presentation of findings, chosen for its strong alignment with the study's constructionist epistemology (Mertens, 2007; Robson, 2011) and critical theoretical paradigm (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). This approach prioritises the lived experiences of participants, particularly autistic students, positioning them as central to knowledge production (Slee, 2011; Goodley, 2014). The narrative format supports the rich, contextualised, and humanised presentation of data, preserving the integrity of meaning-making as it unfolded within the complex dynamics of a real school setting (Fielding, 2004; Cook-Sather, 2006; Lundy, 2007).

This choice aligns with the study's use of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2020), which supports both thematic interpretation and the preservation of participant subjectivity. A narrative structure reflects the relational, iterative, and often unpredictable nature of participatory processes, consistent with the participatory ethos that underpins the study (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Bagnoli, 2009). It is particularly appropriate in resisting reductionism and centring the voices of those frequently marginalised in educational leadership discourse, especially autistic students (Goodall, 2019).

Crucially, the conceptual framework shaped how the findings were interpreted and presented. It enabled a layered reading of the data, connecting participants' micro-

level experiences to macro-level structures of policy, power, and discourse. For example, students' contributions to school decision-making were not framed solely as practical input but as instances of discursive subject formation (Foucault, 1982). Likewise, the collaborative practices examined were understood through both leadership and inclusion theories, highlighting how they reflected broader aspirations for inclusive school cultures (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006).

The conceptual framework also provided a critical lens for problematising tokenistic practices, surface-level inclusion, and the performative pressures shaping systemic change in schools. It enabled interrogation not only of what was said and done, but of how power was negotiated, how inclusion was enacted or resisted, and how leadership was reimagined. In this way, the findings are not merely descriptive but contribute to a theoretically informed critique of existing practices, offering a vision for more equitable, inclusive, and power-aware educational change

The themes generated are as follows.

- 1. Developing a Critical Perspective and Re-distributing Power**
- 2. Enacting Collaboration**
- 3. Co-constructing Leadership**

3.11 The Selection and Recruitment of Participants

In alignment with the aims of this small-scale qualitative case study, a non-probability sampling strategy was employed to facilitate an in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of a single bounded case (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011). As Stake (1995, p. 4) argues, in qualitative case study research, "our first obligation is to understand that one case," rather than to generalise findings to a broader population. Purposeful (or purposive) sampling was selected (Creswell, 2011), as it enables the researcher to identify and select individuals who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with the central phenomenon being explored. The goal was to ensure the inclusion of participants who could contribute rich, meaningful data pertinent to the research questions.

In theory, the sampling design was informed by the principle of information-rich cases, targeting individuals whose experiences aligned with the study's focus on inclusion, leadership, and educational decision-making. In practice, the recruitment of student participants was guided by formal psychological reports, which served to identify students whose educational profiles were relevant to the case under investigation. This preliminary screening ensured alignment between the research aims and participant characteristics.

The recruitment process was carefully structured to uphold ethical integrity and participant autonomy. The study was first introduced to parents, who were asked for initial permission to discuss the research with their child. Upon receiving this permission, students were approached and provided with a plain language explanation of the study. If interest was expressed, a Plain Language Statement (Appendix A), a Parental Consent Form (Appendix C), and a Student Assent Form (Appendix D) were issued. Parents and students were then invited to a meeting where the study was explained in detail to ensure informed decision-making. Students who wished to participate could do so by signing and returning the assent form to the principal researcher (Appendix D), while parental consent was similarly confirmed through the return of the signed form (Appendix C).

Of the students who provided assent, three were selected at random to participate in the study. This element of random selection within a purposively defined group helped to balance deliberate inclusion with a measure of impartiality, reducing potential selection bias. Importantly, all participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, and any decision to opt out would have been fully respected.

In total, eight participants took part in the study: five adult participants (all members of the Case Leadership Initiative [CLI]) and three student participants. Table 3 provides an overview of participant characteristics, including pseudonyms, gender, leadership role (for adults), and for students, gender, year group, and type of educational placement.

Table 3 Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Position on the leadership team
Grainne	Female	Principal
Micheal	Male	Deputy Principal
Roisin	Female	SEN Co-ordinator
Saoirse	Female	Special Class Teacher (Autism)
Ailish	Female	Special Class Teacher (Autism)

Pseudonym	Gender	Position on the leadership team
Ben	Male	Special Class (Autism)
Brona	Female	Mainstream placement
Aisling	Female	Special Class (Autism)

3.12 Piloting

In pursuit of maximising the veracity of the data collection instruments; a pilot study was undertaken involving multiple stakeholder groups. The collaborative meeting format was trialled with a group of SEN teachers who were not participating in the LfI team, alongside two students external to the main study cohort. This approach is consistent with recommended piloting practices, where external participants are believed to offer critical, unbiased feedback (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001).

Piloting of the discussion groups was conducted with a school leader from a different school, enabling an experienced educational professional to evaluate the facilitation process. Yet, it is recognised that institutional differences in policy,

practice, and culture may have limited the transferability of the feedback received. Furthermore, in recognition of the importance of authentic pupil voice, a separate piloting activity involved an autistic past pupil of St. Aoibhinn's who had experience across both special class and mainstream settings. While this inclusion aligns with the emphasis on capturing diverse learner perspectives in inclusive education research (Lodge, 2005; Graham, Powell and Taylor, 2015), it nonetheless introduces the possibility of bias inherent in retrospective accounts, particularly given the evolving nature of school contexts.

The insights gathered through the pilot process informed refinements to discussion prompts, the structure of student meetings, and environmental adjustments designed to promote accessibility and psychological safety (Rix et al., 2009). However, it is important to maintain a critical stance toward these adaptations, recognising the necessity for ongoing responsiveness during the main data collection phase to ensure that instruments remain contextually appropriate, and participant centred.

3.13 Ethical Issues

Marshall and Rossman (2016), highlight the importance of securing permission from the institutional board to study the participants and or situation. It was also important to gain access to research and archival sites by seeking the approval of gatekeepers, those who would provide access to the site and permit the research to be carried out (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). After obtaining ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) at Dublin City University (DCU) and securing access to the research site, the study commenced with a review of all relevant school policies and documents to inform the design of the CLI.

To ensure the highest ethical standards were met throughout the study, several strategies were employed to protect not only the autistic students, but also other individuals involved, including those in the LfI team and the school principal. These strategies focused on ethical recruitment, securing informed consent, and preventing any undue pressure on participants, particularly given the complex dynamics between various ethical considerations around recruitment were central to the

design of the study. Recruitment was carried out with transparency and respect for voluntary participation. Following the guidelines of Creswell and Creswell (2018), recruitment was conducted only after securing approval from gatekeepers, including the school and parents, ensuring that students and staff were not approached without the appropriate permissions. The multi-stage process started with seeking parental consent, ensuring that students were approached with full support and understanding from their families. After parental approval, students were provided with accessible information about the study and asked if they would be interested in participating. This two-tiered process respected both the rights of the parents as guardians and the autonomy of the students, ensuring a clear, voluntary choice to participate in the research.

Moreover, care was taken to separate the recruitment for the LfI team and participation in the research study. Participation in the LfI team did not automatically imply involvement in the research. To avoid any confusion or coercion, it was made explicitly clear that students and teachers could be part of the LfI team without being involved in the research, and vice versa. This ensured that students and teachers could join the team based on their interest in inclusion work without feeling obligated to participate in research activities. By maintaining this distinction, the research design prevented any perception of pressure that could arise from dual roles (Marshall and Rossman, 2016). Informed consent was a critical ethical component, in line with the recommendations of Marshall and Rossman (2016). Each member of the LfI team were given a plain language statement (Appendix B), and a consent form (Appendix C), and made an independent decision about whether to join the study by returning the completed signed form to the researcher. All members of the LfI team chose to join the study.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were fully briefed about the study's aims, methods, and potential risks and benefits. Both students and their parents were given plain language statements explaining the nature of the study in clear, understandable terms. Parents signed consent forms on behalf of the students (Appendix C), and the students themselves provided assent, ensuring that their voices were heard in the decision to participate (Appendix D).

To further uphold ethical standards, participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, for any reason, or none, without any negative consequences (Mertens, 2014). This was reiterated regularly throughout the study, empowering participants to exercise autonomy over their involvement. This was particularly important for autistic students, who may experience anxiety in unfamiliar situations or feel pressured to continue if they feel they have committed to something (Happé, 2011). Reiterating the option to withdraw helped mitigate any such concerns and ensured that participation was entirely voluntary and ongoing for participants in the Lfl team, special care was taken to ensure that being part of this team did not imply pressure to participate in the research. Given the potential overlap between the two roles, all members of the Lfl team were reassured that their role in the team was independent of the research study, and that opting out of the research would not affect their position on the team. This clear delineation reduced any potential for coercion or undue influence (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

In this study, there was only one school principal involved, which could have potentially led to feelings of pressure or responsibility to participate in or support the research, given the high-stakes role of a principal in overseeing school activities. Ethical considerations were particularly important in ensuring that the principal did not feel obliged to support the study out of professional duty or a sense of obligation to the researcher.

To ensure that the principal was not pressured, the study adhered to the principles of voluntary participation and autonomy. The principal was fully briefed about the scope and objectives of the study and was given the Same option to withdraw from any involvement at any stage, without consequence. Additionally, it was emphasised that the principal's role was purely supportive in granting access to the site and school policies but did not require active participation in the research unless voluntarily chosen.

Further, the principal was reassured that their involvement in granting access to school documents and spaces for research did not necessitate personal participation in data collection or other research activities. This clear separation of roles helped prevent any pressure from arising, ensuring that the principal could participate (or not) based on their own comfort and choice (Holland et al., 2010).

To further protect the interests of all involved, a range of strategies were implemented to minimise stress, anxiety, or discomfort during the research process. For instance, sensory and movement breaks were offered to all participants to reduce any feelings of discomfort or overstimulation, particularly for autistic students (Koegel, Ashbaugh, and Koegel, 2016). Visual supports, such as cue cards and prompt cards, were used to enhance communication and reduce potential misunderstandings or frustration during meetings (Odom et al., 2010).

Incidental teaching methods (Wagner, 2001) were employed by the researcher-facilitator to support conversation skills and collaborative group interactions, helping to scaffold communication for all participants. This method helped the researcher model appropriate social and communicative behaviours, which not only facilitated the research but also supported participants in feeling comfortable and competent in group settings.

Finally, the emphasis on creating a safe space for all participants, both students and adults, ensured that meetings and discussions were conducted in an environment where all voices were valued, and power imbalances were minimised (Holland et al., 2010). By establishing clear rules for participation and providing individualised agendas to each participant ahead of the meeting, the study promoted a structured and respectful space for collaboration (Robertson and Simonsen, 2012).

3.14 Validity and Reliability

Ensuring the trustworthiness and accuracy of research findings in qualitative studies involves a focus on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability rather than strictly adhering to the concepts of validity and reliability from quantitative research. These principles are fundamental for establishing rigor and transparency in qualitative inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). In the context of this case study, I addressed these concerns by mitigating bias and ensuring transparency, guided by the triangulation of data and evidence-based analysis (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011)

Credibility in this study was established through intensive, long-term involvement over six months, allowing for in-depth data collection via observations and reflexive practice. Reflexivity, as recommended by (Creswell, 2007, Braun and Clarke, 2020), was consistently employed to ensure self-awareness and careful consideration of biases throughout the research process. Additionally, rich data were gathered from a variety of sources, including school documents, focus group discussions, and participant observations. This richness in data helps to capture a full, nuanced understanding of the research context and supports the credibility of the findings (Merriam, 1998).

Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research setting, participants, and processes, allowing others to assess whether the findings are relevant and relatable to different contexts (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005). By offering such detailed context, the study ensures that other researchers and practitioners can determine how the insights might apply to their own settings, thus enhancing the transferability of the findings.

To ensure dependability, I maintained a clear chain of evidence, documenting each step of the research process meticulously. This includes specific timestamps for data collection events, comprehensive transcriptions of discussions, and detailed accounts of data analysis. Such documentation aligns with Yin's (2018) recommendation for transparency in research, enabling other researchers to follow the same methodological steps and supporting the replicability of the study. Confirmability was addressed by using triangulation across data sources and methods, including interviews, observations, and document analysis, which helped to validate findings and reduce the risk of researcher bias (Cohen et al., 2011). Moreover, respondent validation, or member checks, was incorporated, as participants were given the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of the data and the interpretations made from it (Robson, 2011). This process ensures that the findings accurately reflect the participants' experiences and perspectives.

I also engaged in searching for discrepant and negative cases, examining instances that did not align with emerging patterns in the data. By rigorously considering both supporting and discrepant data, I was able to refine and adjust the interpretations, as

advised by Denzin and Lincoln (2005). This thorough analysis helped to ensure the conclusions drawn were robust and grounded in the data.

Finally, comparison was used throughout the study, including a comparison of findings with existing literature and relevant theories, which provided an additional layer of rigor and external validation. Quasi-statistics were also used to quantify and reinforce qualitative insights, ensuring that implicit quantitative components were accounted for where necessary.

This study incorporated a range of strategies to enhance credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, including long-term involvement, rich data collection, respondent validation, triangulation, and rigorous consideration of discrepant cases. These approaches ensured the trustworthiness and accuracy of the findings while maintaining methodological rigor (Hammersley, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005)

3.15 Conclusion

A qualitative approach was deemed suitable for carrying out this research as it aligned with my philosophical assumptions and was also considered suitable for answering my research questions. A qualitative research approach facilitated the development of detailed descriptions of the participants' perspectives and experiences in a natural setting (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Since the research involved interaction between the researcher and other research participants in their school context it aligned with my constructive epistemological stance where a qualitative dialogue could be established (Mertens, 2007). It allowed me to record and observe the participants' views and experiences throughout the initiative while taking a participatory role by engaging in discussion and reflection with the participants. "In a qualitative study, you are interested not only in the physical events and behaviours that are taking place, but also in how the participants in your study make sense of these, and how their understandings influence their behaviours" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 22). Through my participatory role in the initiative, I was granted opportunities for rigorous observation of behaviours in a natural

setting (Merriam, 1998, Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, Robson 2011, Denscombe, 2017, Creswell, 2018).

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach used in this study. The philosophical assumptions based on critical theory and relativist constructionism positioning underpinning this study were explained. Following this, a qualitative case-study design was considered appropriate for this research. The strengths and shortcomings of the design were discussed, and details were provided on how these would be addressed. Finally, the approach to data analysis was explained, and ethical considerations were outlined. In the next chapter, the findings will be presented, offering a detailed analysis of the data collected and demonstrating how the research questions were addressed through the application of this methodological framework.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative, single-site case study exploring the experiences of five teachers and three students who participated in a Collaborative Leadership Initiative (CLI) team. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do different participant groups within a collaborative LFI team view the effects of involving autistic students in their efforts?
2. What are the group members' perspectives on how this inclusion affects team processes, relations and operational dynamics?
3. How do they perceive the influence of this inclusion on the outcomes produced by the team, particularly in relation to power dynamics, issues of equity and social justice, and the impact on perceptions of belonging, inclusion, and the development of policies, guidelines, structures, procedures, and practices at the school?

The findings are presented in a narrative style, which reflects the study's constructionist epistemology and critical theoretical paradigm (see 3.10). This format was chosen to centre participants' lived experiences, particularly those of autistic students, and to preserve the relational and contextual complexity of meaning-making as it occurred within a real-world school environment (Fielding, 2004; Slee, 2011; Goodley, 2014).

The use of narrative aligns with the participatory ethos of the study, allowing for a layered and non-reductive presentation of voices. Rather than abstracting or fragmenting the data, the narrative structure embeds participants' perspectives within broader discussions of policy, power, and inclusion, supporting the

commitment to equity and social justice that underpins the research (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Bagnoli, 2009; Ball, 2013).

This chapter also reflects the study's use of Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2020), which supports a thematic yet flexible approach to interpreting the data while remaining attentive to the subjective, affective, and dialogic elements of participant voice. The iterative nature of RTA is matched to the narrative approach and the participatory processes that shaped the research design and data collection (*see 3.10*).

Importantly, the narrative structure not only illustrates what participants said and did, but also how power, voice, and inclusion were negotiated throughout the CLI process. In doing so, it illuminates both micro-level interactions and macro-level discourses, offering a critical account of how inclusive leadership was enacted, challenged, and co-constructed in practice. This also allows the findings to move beyond description toward a theoretically informed critique of prevailing structures and assumptions within school leadership (Foucault, 1982; Ainscow et al., 2006; Goodall, 2019).

The findings are organised around three overarching themes generated through the analysis, each incorporating relevant subthemes. These are presented in alignment with the two-phase structure of data collection:

- **Phase 1:** Student Initiative Meetings (SIM) and Collaborative Leadership Initiative Meetings (CLI)
- **Phase 2:** Leadership Focus Group (LFG), Teacher Leader Focus Group (TLFG), and Student Leader Focus Group (SLFG)

Themes and subsections:

Theme 1: Developing a Critical Perspective and Re-distributing Power

- The Micro-Politics of Change
- Breaking Down Power Structures and Listening to Students

Theme 2: Enacting Collaboration

- Fostering Difference and Providing a ‘Safe Space’
- Authentic Student-Teacher Partnerships
- Acknowledging Diverse Lived Experiences
- The Value of Listening to the Authentic Experiences of the Students

Theme 3: Co-constructing Leadership

- Collaborative Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving
- Future Planning: The Role of the Principal
- Teacher Learning
- Barriers to Collaborative Partnerships
- Barriers to Listening: Who Can Speak, and What Can Be Said?
- Barriers to Student Voice Initiatives: Supports, Resources, and Positive Approaches

Together, these themes offer insight into how inclusive leadership was collaboratively constructed within a mainstream Irish post-primary school. The narrative presentation supports a critical interrogation of how inclusion, equity, and leadership intersected and evolved through participatory engagement—particularly in relation to the voices and agency of autistic students.

4.2 Theme 1: Developing a Critical Perspective and Re-distributing Power

4.2.1 The Micro-Politics of Change

Phase 1:

Collaborative Leadership Initiative Team Meeting 1

The meeting begins with introductions from all the CLI team. There are three students in attendance, Aisling and Ben from the autism special class setting, and Brona, from the mainstream setting. There are five teacher leaders in attendance. All participants introduce themselves, sharing their names, roles within the school, and their enthusiasm for participating in the project. Brona starts her introduction when the Research/Facilitator (RF) invites her. Brona: “My name is Brona. I am a fifth-year student. Grainne, as principal, follows, introducing herself to the group using her first name. Grainne: “Good woman, thanks, Brona. My name is Grainne. I am the principal of the school. This is my fifteenth year as principal. I am extremely proud of our two special classes, Leap and Rise, and I am delighted to have been invited to participate in this exciting project. I can’t wait to get started.” The other leaders introduce themselves, taking Grainne’s lead. Micheal states: “Short pass. My name is Micheal, and I’m the deputy principal here; it is my fifth year as deputy principal in the school, and again, like Grainne, I am delighted to be involved in the project. I think that looking at our two special classes from a distance at times, we’re very proud of how you interact in our school and how you perform at school every day, especially on days like today.”

Aisling, one of the students, introduces herself next: “Uh, my name is Aisling. I’m a sixth-year student here.” Then Ailish, a special class teacher, takes her turn. Ailish: “My name is Ailish, I am a newbie here. I only joined full-time here in September, as a lead teacher in Leap class, and yes, I’m excited to be part of the team. Long may the special class continue to prosper in our school; so well done, and it is just nice to be here.” Next is Roisin, the SEN co-ordinator, Roisin: “My name is Roisin, and I’m the SEN co-ordinator, a mainstream English teacher and Year Head to a fifth-year group. I am delighted to be part of SEN in the school because I think it teaches us a great understanding of diversity, and we learn a lot about our students on a one-to-one basis when we meet in smaller groups, and I’m delighted to be part of this initiative.” Saoirse is last to introduce herself and shows enthusiasm for the project. Saoirse: “Okay. Um, my name is Saoirse and I’m like Ailish. I’m a newbie here. So, I’ve only been here since September, but I love it so far. I’m between SEN and geography and kept busy, but I’m looking forward to getting into this project as well. I think it’s going to be very interesting working with you all.”

In this extract, Grainne, the principal, sets the tone for the introductions by expressing her enthusiasm for the project. Her position as the school principal grants her significant authority and influence over the team, evident in her confident and assertive introduction. She also introduces herself with her first name, which is unusual in the school setting when working with students. Saoirse and Ailish position themselves within the group by acknowledging their recent arrival and expressing excitement about being part of the team. Their status as ‘newbies’ may imply they must prove themselves or gain acceptance within the established group. Aisling, Ben, and Brona are included as members of the CLI team. This inclusion reflects an apparent commitment to student involvement in decision-making processes, signalling a shift towards more participatory approaches to leadership and education. The group initiated the project by navigating the power dynamics present in the room. All participants introduced themselves using their first names, creating an atmosphere of equality, where students, teachers, and leaders were all positioned on equal footing as members of the team. However, I remain cautiously optimistic. My scepticism comes from the understanding that symbolic gestures do not automatically dismantle entrenched hierarchies. “*One meeting does not make a culture.*” I wrote in my reflexive journal after the meeting (Appendix M), “*To what extent will this collaborative ethos persist when decisions become contentious? Will student voices continue to hold weight when leadership is challenged?*” (RRJ), Including students alongside educators reflects a shift towards more participatory and student-centred approaches to educational leadership and decision-making.

By fostering a space where hierarchical roles are less pronounced, the team is working to create a more collaborative and democratic approach to leadership, thus embodying the theme of Developing a Critical Perspective and Re-distributing Power. This approach invites all members to critically engage with traditional power structures and encourages shared decision-making, which is fundamental to the participatory ethos of the project.

4.2.2 The Micro-Politics of Change: Breaking Down Power Structures and Listening to Students

Phase 2

Leadership Focus Group Discussion

During the leadership focus group discussion [LFG; 1:23], Grainne, the principal, gave her perspective on the value of listening to students and harnessing their voices to develop an inclusive orientation and culture. Grainne told us about her background in teaching and her connection with student voice. Grainne stated: “Well, I’ve been principal for fifteen years. I’ve been in the school for thirty years; come this September, I’ve always been interested in student voice, back to my days in college as an undergraduate where I and another student were nominated to be part of a student leadership group.”

Grainne continued to emphasise how important it is as a leader to set the tone with the teachers daily, making her motivations and expectations clear when it comes to authentically listening to students. Grainne: “When I came to St. Aoibhinn’s, I was in Home Economics, and because of the practical nature, you are listening to students more as they go about their practical work.” In my journal reflections, I noted that, “*Grainne locates authority not in her title, but in experience and relational engagement with students, this suggests power reimagined, not relinquished.*” (RRJ).

As deputy principal, Micheal added to Grainne’s beliefs about the role of teachers, including autistic students, in the school. Interestingly, both senior leaders had a background in special education before taking up their leadership roles. Micheal: “I may have had a brief, you know, knowledge of SEN in my old school in Dublin. But for me looking after substitution here, if somebody was out from the special class, originally, you know, in year one, I would always be scrambling, well, we can’t put that teacher down there because they wouldn’t feel comfortable or they wouldn’t know what to do down there. I think we’ve grown in six years. And if a teacher is missing from the special class for extra-curricular, illness, meetings, or whatever, whoever is available on cover can go in there as staff. So, that’s why I think now, everyone should understand autism and how it impacts a student in their everyday

life.” My reflective journal notes a question: *“Is this sustained transformation, or adaptive compliance to an evolving policy context?”* (RRJ).

During the discussion, Grainne also highlighted that she had incorporated her beliefs about listening to student voices into her perceptions of the value of including these students. Grainne: “That’s so true now there is no shortage of teachers in the school who can work with our students who are autistic. I suppose that was one of the reasons why I was first approached by the Special Education Needs Officer (SENO) back in 2015 to open a class.”

Later in the discussion, Grainne emphasised the importance of professional development for teachers. Grainne: “So, we put on professional development at the whole staff level so that everyone, every member of staff, is very aware. It’s also part of our interview process, we’re conscious of this, that we’ve two special classes, where we are encouraging inclusion into the mainstream as much as possible, and reverse inclusion, that the whole staff are aware of inclusion and not just the teachers working in the special classes. Grainne’s reflections during the discussion provide a clear example of the Micro-Politics of Change in action, specifically in terms of Breaking Down Power Structures and Listening to Students. Her emphasis on incorporating student voices into decision-making processes, particularly when discussing the establishment of special classes for autistic learners, exemplifies this shift in power dynamics. By acknowledging the importance of listening to students and valuing their perspectives, Grainne demonstrates a commitment to redistributing authority and making leadership more inclusive.

Furthermore, her focus on professional development for all staff, not just those directly working with students in special classes, illustrates her strategic approach to enacting change through micro-political means. By embedding awareness of inclusive practices into staff training and even the recruitment process, she is fostering a culture of shared responsibility for inclusion. This process reflects a subtle but significant reconfiguration of power relations within the school, where the traditional top-down approach is replaced by a more collaborative and participatory model.

Grainne's leadership exemplifies how micro-political strategies, such as promoting collaboration, raising awareness, and ensuring everyone has a stake in the change process can dismantle hierarchical power structures and create an environment conducive to sustainable, inclusive change. In my reflective journal, I wrote: "*Grainne's account reveals the school as a site of power reconfiguration, not in a dramatic rupture, but through embedded, continuous discursive shifts.*" (RRJ). This is where Foucault's conception of power as productive and relational (Foucault, 1977) becomes useful. Power here is not imposed from above, nor is it simply resisted, it is re-articulated through new routines, shared vocabularies, and expectations. These actions underline the Micro-Politics of Change, where Grainne navigates and reshapes the complex web of relationships, roles, and power within the school to promote a shared vision of inclusive education. This explicit focus on breaking down traditional barriers and empowering both students and staff will be essential to revisit as the project progresses, as it directly ties into how leadership can drive meaningful and lasting transformation in educational settings. As I reflected in my journal, *I am reminded of the importance of staying alert to both the promises and the risks embedded in this process. If the school is becoming more inclusive, I ask: "For whom? How? And what new exclusions might be emerging, even as others are addressed?"* (RRJ).

Student Focus Group Discussion

Brona highlights the value she attributes to her experience of being listened to as an "insider" within the student focus group discussion. "Mmm, it was just, you know, from the experience of being in situations where you feel nobody can hear what you are saying, and like, we know what best suits us and what helps us. So, you know, it's great to be the one suggesting new ideas. We know what we need, and this was it." [SFG: Line 4:59] Brona's comment suggests that she feels her experiences hold valuable insights that could contribute to improving the educational environment, "But you would have never really stopped to talk to any of them about the difficulties that you have in school and how you can change things." Aisling concurred: "I don't know, it is difficult. We just believe school is going to be hard. School is hard for everyone, especially hard for autistic young people. It's just knowing that it's going

to be hard, like, you know, that there will be things that will be challenging, but you will get through, and there's a lot of support there; if you look for it, there is a lot of support from people who will help you." In this statement, Brona and Aisling appear to acknowledge a shift in power dynamics where traditionally marginalised voices now seek recognition and influence within the school. Brona's statement reflects a desire for agency and autonomy, indicating that autistic students can identify what suits them best and what helps them succeed. Brona suggests a power imbalance where students' perspectives are not adequately considered in decision-making processes by expressing frustration with feeling unheard. Aisling's response further develops the complexity of power dynamics within the educational system. While acknowledging the challenges faced by autistic young people, Aisling also highlights the presence of support systems. However, the emphasis on seeking out support implies a potential gap in accessibility or awareness, which can contribute to unequal power dynamics. There appears to be a tension in the above extracts between students' desire for agency and recognition of their experiences, and the existing power structures within the school that work to limit their ability to influence change. In my reflections, I noted: *"Brona names herself as both agent and object of schooling, she critiques the silence around her, while stepping into the space that silence once occupied. Her claim, "we know what best suits us," is more than a declaration; it's a reassertion of epistemic agency. This, I believe, is where Foucault's (1980) notion of subjugated knowledges becomes relevant. These are the 'naïve knowledges' buried within institutional systems, dismissed, rendered marginal, or excluded because they challenge dominant regimes of truth"* (RRJ).

Their conversation highlights the importance of fostering inclusive decision-making processes that genuinely value and incorporate the perspectives of all stakeholders in the school, including students. This exchange offers a clear example of how the Micro-Politics of Change operates within the school environment. It highlights the need for leadership to genuinely value and integrate students' perspectives into decision-making processes. By actively listening to and empowering marginalised voices like Brona's and Aisling's, the school can work towards Breaking Down Power Structures, promoting a more inclusive and participatory approach that ensures all students, especially those with autism, are given the opportunity to shape their educational experience.

4.3 Theme 2: Enacting Collaboration

4.3.1 Fostering Difference and Providing a ‘Safe Space’

Phase 1:

Student Initiative Meeting 1

The student participants, Aisling, Ben, and Brona, seem generally positive and engaged. They express excitement at having their voices heard by senior leadership. Aisling stated at the beginning of the meeting that she had waited six years to have her say. Aisling: “Six years, anyway.” This is not simply a throwaway comment; as I wrote in my reflexive journal, “*an indictment of systemic silence*” (RRJ) (Appendix K). Aisling had been waiting six years to be heard, and the meeting marked the first time she felt her voice might carry weight. Foucault speaks directly to the notion of power/knowledge regimes (Foucault, 1980), where only certain discourses are legitimised and others rendered invisible. Student voices, particularly those from autistic students or those expressing emotional distress, have historically occupied the margins. I reflected that “*today, they appeared to be at the centre*” (RRJ). Brona talks about normalising crying and acknowledging and accepting emotional expressions like crying in school. Brona: “I think that we should normalise crying.” She describes feeling overwhelmed at times and believes that crying is sometimes met with discomfort or confusion from others. “Because when you’re crying, if something overwhelms you, I feel like some mainstream students just stand there looking at you. Oh my God, some teachers don’t know what to do. Like they just don’t. They are so lost.” Ben adds to the discussion by advocating for a debate on more diverse sports options in schools, suggesting that non-traditional sports could appeal to students interested in something other than mainstream options like basketball or football. Ben: “Well, it would be nice to have diverse sports.” He highlights the importance of providing opportunities for people with different interests to connect through sports. “Well, I suppose more options for

people, maybe people will be into them, and they will help to connect people as well.”

At Student Meeting 1, the conversation introduces the concepts of inclusivity, emotional well-being, feeling safe and understood, and the importance of offering diverse experiences within the school setting. The students here seem to show an awareness of differences and difficulties that may arise when trying to fit in with the expectations of others. The value of supporting this collaboration lies in its potential to create a more inclusive, empathetic, and responsive educational environment. When students feel heard and understood, they are more likely to engage positively with their education and develop a stronger connection to their school. This collaborative dynamic also helps break down barriers between students and staff, fostering mutual respect and understanding.

In terms of Enacting Collaboration, this exchange exemplifies how actively listening to students and involving them in decision-making processes can lead to meaningful improvements in the school setting. It highlights the importance of supporting collaborative initiatives that empower students, address their needs, and value their contributions. From an ethnographic standpoint, however, I find myself grappling with the space between “*being heard* and *being transformed*.” While the meeting felt like a breakthrough for the students, I remain cautious. As I noted in my reflexive journal: “*The system can absorb voice without yielding change*” (RRJ). Foucault’s caution against mistaking recognition for liberation feels pertinent here. The very structures that now ‘listen’ to students are also the ones that previously silenced them. However, it is hoped that by embracing this collaborative approach, schools can enhance the well-being and success of their students, ultimately enriching the educational experience for everyone involved.

Student Initiative Meeting 3

At this meeting, the students prepare for the CLI, during which the team will discuss the school environment and how it impacts students. Aisling opens the conversation by talking about how she finds her classroom a safe, comfortable

space and the canteen overwhelming at times, “I think throwing everyone in from like the different years into the canteen, it would be quite overwhelming, I think it would anyway. I don’t mind any of the rest for the student-based classrooms. I want to be here anyway, where I’m most comfortable.” Brona, on the other hand, doesn’t mind moving around, “I don’t mind it, cause I try and keep everything kind of organised.” When asked about end-of-term celebrations, the students again have very individual opinions. Brona offers, “Well, we used to have a Christmas disco. I always found that to be quite overwhelming because everyone had their separate groups. I never really fit into them, you know, that sort of a way.” When asked what they would like for a school celebration, Brona replies, “Um, I like it when you are with people, you’re comfortable with, people from Leap class.” Ben’s experience is entirely different. “Well, I always enjoyed the crazy stuff that was done and that everyone enjoys. But I think some activities shouldn’t be forced on people.” Ben continues: “Okay, right, choices are important.” The RF probes the students on this, RF: “Would you see a difference between forcing a quiz on people as opposed to forcing going to a disco on people? Is there a difference, or is it the Same?” Brona responds quickly: “Quizzes are calmer.” Again, the RF asks the students to think about their choice and reason: “What do you think is better?” Here, Brona begins the conversation by expressing her feelings of comfort when in the classroom but feeling overwhelmed in the crowded canteen. Her preference for smaller, more familiar settings reflects her need for safety and belonging. She also emphasises the importance of being with people she’s comfortable with during school celebrations, highlighting the significance of social connections for her. In contrast, Ben enjoys the excitement of school events but states the importance of offering choices rather than imposing activities on students. His perspective highlights the value of autonomy and individual preferences in shaping student experiences. In contrast, Ben enjoys the excitement of school events but states the importance of offering choices rather than imposing activities on students. His perspective highlights the value of autonomy and individual preferences in shaping student experiences.

RF: “Which would you prefer, having only the choice of a disco or having the option of disco or disco or quiz”? Ben responds, “quiz”, Brona agrees, “Yeah, quizzes.” The RF attempts to clarify, “Yeah. So that’s probably what you’re saying: you prefer an option, not just a quiz or a disco, but to be given an option. Ben

explains, “If someone finds it overwhelming, they should be given an option.” The RF comments: “That’s interesting.” This discussion cements the students’ thinking about ‘choice’ in preparation for the CLI meeting, during which there will be further discussion. The RFs’ probing questions encourage deeper reflection from the students. By comparing different types of activities and exploring the concept of choice, the RF attempts to help the students articulate their preferences and the reasons behind them. I noted in my reflexive journal: “*Is offering a quiz instead of a disco a gesture of empowerment, or a form of behavioural soft management?*” (RRJ). Brona and Ben’s agreement on preferred options for school celebrations, particularly quizzes over discos, suggests a shared desire for flexibility. It appears that understanding and accommodating students’ diverse needs and preferences is important to creating a positive and inclusive school environment. However, Foucault (1980) reminds us that transformation is not only about naming power, but tracing how it operates in the mundane, even in how ‘listening’ is performed. The task now is to stay with the complexity: to recognise the students’ voices as both resistant and situated within a discursive field that both enables and limits their agency

Collaborative Leadership Initiative Team Meeting 3

The CLI followed the student meeting a couple of days later, and the group was divided into three groups for this meeting. Feedback from the three groups gave an overview of the teams’ reactions to the questions posed by the students about how the school environment impacts students and how a ‘safe space’ can be created for all students. The dialogue reflects a productive and collaborative discussion among the team members about various aspects of school management and culture. In this meeting, the team’s dialogue exemplifies a productive and collaborative discussion focused on critical aspects of school management and culture. By dividing into smaller groups, they ensured that multiple perspectives were considered, reflecting an inclusive approach to problem-solving. Ben’s feedback on student zones highlights the group’s willingness to critically assess existing practices, weighing both advantages and disadvantages. Saoirse contributes by articulating her group’s

thoughts on what constitutes a ‘safe space,’ demonstrating an understanding of the complexity involved in meeting diverse student needs.

The participants’ critical thinking and openness to different viewpoints appears to indicate a commitment to authentic collaboration aimed at increasing inclusion. Their discussion reveals that enacting such collaboration requires creating spaces where all team members feel comfortable sharing insights and where diverse opinions are valued. By effectively guiding the conversation to ensure all voices are heard and summarising key points, the team appears to actively negotiate the nuances of concepts like “safe space.” This collaborative effort is essential in developing strategies that accommodate individual needs within a school that supports diversity.

Overall, the dialogue appears to highlight the importance of engaging all stakeholders in meaningful discussions to foster inclusive practices. It suggests that for authentic collaboration to occur, teams must be willing to examine existing structures critically, embrace diverse perspectives, and work collectively towards solutions that support all members of the school community. However, as I reflected after the meeting, *“I felt a mix of admiration and apprehension. Admiration for the genuine effort by staff to listen and respond. Apprehension because the system is so adept at absorbing critique without changing its foundations. Foucault warns us not to mistake dialogue for emancipation. Indeed, dialogue can become a productive site of regulation, allowing the group to appear reflexive and inclusive while maintaining control over which discourses are permitted to shape practice, in such a way that the students may not be aware that they are contributing to these process ”* (RRJ).

4.3.2 Authentic Student-Teacher Partnerships

Collaborative Leadership Initiative Team Meeting 1

At this meeting, the group worked on topics to be discussed at the following four meetings. The students presented the topics, and the group placed them in an order for weekly discussion. Brona, one of the students, began by explaining one of her

suggestions: “I think the one that applies most to me is the one that has the break from class in it. I wouldn’t have much opinion on the Apple pens or anything like that.” Grainne suggests Brona’s topic fits under the topic “supporting students” mental health by getting time out, sensory walks, and brain calm.” Micheal looks for a little more on the subject from Brona: “How do you find that helps you, Brona? Just out of interest.” Brona replies: “Well, now, you know what? Now, I find it very hard to sit in a class for an hour because I don’t know, I just get very fizzy. I go to the bathroom every class because I don’t have ‘a break from my class’ card. So, I just have to go to the bathroom.” Micheal responds with: “right, ok, yeah.” Grainne questions further: “And if you had to have a break from class card, what would you do with it?” Brona replies: “I would probably just go to the bathroom and back because I’m like moving, and that’s what I need, and I’ve been doing that kind of all year.” Micheal replies: “That is your little routine so that when you return, it’s easier in the classroom.” Brona agrees: “Yeah, I find concentrating much easier.” Micheal then suggests: “OK, and even if you know you are going to get a little break, would it be easier beforehand as well as when you come back?” Brona agrees: “Probably.” Micheal ends the conversation with: “Yeah, Mmm, interesting.”

Micheal’s initial inquiry into Brona’s experience reflects his genuine curiosity, showing an interest in understanding how she manages her attention and concentration in the classroom. Brona’s response highlights a common challenge many students face, particularly those who need breaks to concentrate for extended periods. Her mention of feeling ‘fizzy’ suggests a restlessness or difficulty in remaining still and focused for prolonged durations. Grainne’s follow-up question delves deeper into Brona’s coping strategy, prompting her to consider what she would do if she had a designated break from class. Brona’s response indicates that even a small amount of movement, such as going to the bathroom and returning, helps her reset and maintain focus. Micheal’s acknowledgement of Brona’s routine suggests an understanding and acknowledgement of how establishing such habits can improve her concentration. The discussion concludes with Micheal probing further into the potential benefits of anticipating breaks, implying that even the expectation of a pause may aid concentration. The conversation illuminates the importance of recognising individual differences in learning styles and the

significance of implementing strategies, such as movement breaks, to support sustained attention and engagement in the learning environment.

Student Initiative Meeting 2

At the opening of the second student meeting 2 (Appendix J), the students shared their reactions to the first CLI meeting. Aisling responded to the RFs' question, asking how the students found their first CLI Meeting. Aisling: "Yes, very positive. You know, you can see that there will be changes, and it's very exciting." Aisling's initial response sets a positive tone, expressing excitement about anticipated changes and the openness of the school leaders to listen to student input. The next question posed by the RF, "What struck you most about meeting with the leaders of the school?" again provoked a positive response from all the students. Aisling: "Mm all, you know, their willingness to hear what we have to say and, you know, to take on board everything, and, you know, everyone's positivity was just, yeah. It was alive, the room. The room was alive with excitement." Aisling here highlights the leaders' willingness to listen and consider student perspectives, as well as the overall positive atmosphere in the room. Brona adds: "Mmmm, the fact that they said that it was interesting how mainstream affects some students and that they didn't know. I liked it, though." Brona adds to the discussion by noting the significance of the leaders acknowledging the impact of mainstream education on some students, indicating an appreciation for their awareness and openness to understanding diverse student experiences.

Ben also seemed very positive about his experience, "I enjoyed it. It's nice talking to them, like, person to person." The RF reflects on an observation from the meeting and asks for the students to respond: "Yes. I heard you saying something at the end of the meeting. Usually, people talk to you as if you are a child." Brona agrees, "yeah", and Ben, "Oh Yeah, Mmmm, like I was, like I was with them, like a team." Here, Ben seems to echo Aisling's and Brona's positive sentiments, emphasising the value of personally engaging in direct conversation with school leaders, suggesting a departure from more formal or hierarchical interactions. The RFs' acknowledgement of Ben's comment about being treated as a child in other contexts

suggests an awareness of the importance of respectful and genuine dialogue between students and adults in educational settings. Brona continues, “I thought it was very nice,” Aisling adds, “Yeah. I thought, yeah. Like, it just made, you know, you didn’t feel like less than them; were kind of everyone felt equal.” Ben appears to agree with this statement, “Yeah, exactly.” Brona adds to his comment, “Part of a team.” Aisling seems happy enough to go along with the other students’ comments, too, “Yeah.” Overall, the students’ reflections highlight the importance of inclusive and collaborative approaches to school leadership, where students feel heard, respected, and valued as active participants in shaping their educational experiences.

In conclusion, the improved student-teacher partnerships are actively transforming the micro-politics of change within the school by breaking down power structures that have traditionally marginalised learners. By fostering a culture of mutual respect and shared agency, these partnerships exemplify the enactment of collaboration and the co-construction of leadership. Students’ feelings of being valued as equals and integral members of the team reflect a significant positive shift in power dynamics, where their voices are not only heard but genuinely considered in shaping their educational environment. This collaborative approach not only enhances inclusion and participation but also promotes a more equitable school culture. By empowering students and involving them deeply in their learning experiences, the school is effectively redistributing power and fostering sustainable, positive change that benefits the entire community.

4.3.3 Acknowledging Diverse Lived Experiences

Collaborative Leadership Initiative Team Meeting 2

This interaction between Grainne and Ben during CLI Team Meeting 2 demonstrates diverse experiences of certain aspects of the school’s physical and psychological environment and highlights the need for schools that seek to explore and acknowledge these ... the value of acknowledging diverse lived experiences of the Students and Grainne, the principal, opened the discussion about building a

health-promoting school and how the environment impacts the promotion of good mental health.

Ben references the psychological environment in his dialogue with Grainne and this may highlight the importance of creating a welcoming and soothing space within the school's physical environment. Grainne works through the process of listening to Ben. Grainne demonstrates attentive listening skills and effective leadership by acknowledging Ben's concerns about the courtyard, considering potential improvements, and possible actions to address improvements. Her responsiveness appears to reflect her commitment to working closely with her students to enhance the school's psychological environment, fostering a positive and inclusive atmosphere for students and staff. My journal reflections from this meeting reads: "*Space becomes another term for inclusion; the right to occupy space is also the right to belong.*" (RRJ). This encounter revealed how everyday spaces, courtyards, benches, fountains, carry symbolic weight. They are not just places; they are markers of permission, of inclusion, of emotional regulation. Ben's identification of the courtyard as soothing shows how students make meaning through interaction with their environment, and how institutional decisions (like zoning) can unwittingly marginalise them. What stood out to me was the discursive shift that occurred when Ben introduced the courtyard into the conversation. Prior to this, the dialogue was focused on abstract notions of mental health and 'nice surroundings.' But Ben re-grounded the discussion in material reality. His naming of the courtyard reclaimed it from discursive invisibility. In Foucauldian terms, this was a moment of subjugated knowledge resurfacing, student knowledge about everyday spatial experience that is often dismissed or overlooked in policy-level conversations (Foucault, 1980).

Phase 2

4.3.4 The Value of Listening to the Authentic Experiences of the Students

Leadership Focus Group

Micheal, as deputy principal, gave us his insight into what the experience of the CLI was like for him. Micheal: “I enjoyed seeing the students blossoming in our company. The fact that one particular student that I was working with closely in the group was smiling. She, you know, giggled and got great confidence giving answers. I believe she came to great strength from the initiative.” This is also reflected by Grainne, the principal, when she says, “I think it’s strengthening the link between the teachers and students in listening to the students’ voice. It’s a template for meetings with staff, a mixture of staff and students. They are more genuine meetings with staff and students coming together to tease out issues.” Micheal’s reflection on Grainne’s comment may tell us that he believes teachers can profoundly impact students’ lives. He gives us a personalised view of how he understands the need to support students and foster their self-confidence and active engagement in learning. He affirms Grainne’s emphasis on listening to student voices and her collaborative approach to problem-solving, further highlighting the importance of open, genuine, and inclusive communication within the school. He appears to believe this approach benefits individual students and contributes to a more enriching and effective educational experience for all involved.

Teacher Leadership Focus Group

Discussion with the teachers backed up Grainne and Micheal’s beliefs about the value of involving these students, which is congruent with a broader view about the importance of relating and listening to these students more generally. Ailish stated: “And when it comes to a classroom environment like in Leap class and Strive class, it definitely is, and we’ve spoken about this before, it’s a vocation of sorts. So, we would have something in us already that allows us to relate very well to the students, read social situations, and really understand the students without any great, you know, prior knowledge. Like the day I came down here, I hadn’t seen any pupil profiles, or documentation. And you can just by sitting, yeah, you meet them as people, and that was great; you do spend a lot more time with the kids that are in a special class.” Ailish went on to talk about how mainstream teachers at St. Aoibhinn’s place emphasis on getting to know these students and how a school’s culture encourages them to work actively to build relationships with them. Ailish stated: “More

mainstream teachers are popping into Leap class. It is like a conveyor belt. Yeah, that just shows that there is no hesitation, and it's not that they're coming down teaching; they're just coming down for the chats. They might come down for a cup of tea, and it's really like we have been building an inclusive setting for years; we have been known as an inclusive school at this point and quite the champion of holistic learning. Ideally, for me, that's a sure sign." When discussing the value of including students in the leadership focus group, Ailish again had a solid and definite opinion, "I feel that it's quite a natural part of education to have a few student representatives who engage with staff members and management, which is so valuable." Saoirse the special class teacher, backed this up and stated: "I was so amazed by how the students had confidence talking to management, and they weren't just saying what they thought management wanted to hear. They were very open." Roisin, the special education coordinator, again agreed with the views of her co-teachers. She gave her perspective on the importance of listening to students as a special education coordinator over the last eight years. Roisin:

"I do think the school is unique. From the moment I stepped in the door eight years ago, teachers and students had a different relationship. It was really about the holistic development of students. Learning wasn't just focused on academics. It was everything. Where the students were well and felt good about themselves, that is the goal of the teachers and the management here. So, to think that we were scheduling something more formalised, I supposed standardising what we were doing, and because I had some of the students, I just knew they would rise to the challenge. I knew this initiative would be incredible as it is."

Roisin's reflection appears to highlight the power of an educational environment to transform students when it prioritises a holistic development of the student, values teacher-student solid relationships, recognises the importance of a hidden curriculum, and empowers students to take an active role in their learning. Her experience serves as a reminder that education is about acquiring knowledge and nurturing emotionally and socially adept individuals ready to face life's challenges beyond the classroom. Roisin's reflections bring to light the critical role of education in challenging and countering ableism within the school environment. Ableism, as a systemic bias that privileges able-bodied and neurotypical individuals while marginalising or

discriminating against those with disabilities, can manifest in both explicit and subtle ways within educational settings. Roisin's emphasis on inclusive practices, the holistic development of students, and the recognition of a "hidden curriculum" points directly to the need for dismantling ableist assumptions that can often be embedded in traditional school structures. One key aspect of Roisin's insight is her recognition of the power of strong teacher-student relationships. In an ableist framework, students with disabilities or learning differences might be viewed primarily through a deficit lens, where their abilities are overlooked in favour of focusing on what they cannot do. Roisin suggests that by cultivating meaningful, supportive relationships with students, teachers can see beyond these biases, recognising the full humanity and potential of every student. This helps foster a culture of respect and empathy, where students of all abilities are empowered to actively engage in their learning, and where their individual strengths are celebrated rather than ignored.

Additionally, Roisin highlights the significance of the hidden curriculum, the implicit lessons students learn in school beyond academic content, such as norms, values, and social expectations. In an ableist system, this hidden curriculum might inadvertently reinforce exclusion by failing to accommodate diverse learning needs or by promoting narrow definitions of success and achievement. By prioritising holistic development and acknowledging the diverse ways in which students can contribute and thrive, Roisin points to the importance of reshaping this hidden curriculum to promote equity and inclusion. This involves not only providing equal access to learning but also ensuring that all students are valued and supported in ways that align with their unique abilities and experiences. . My reflective journal captures a tension here: "*What is gained when voice is formalised, and what is lost?*" (RRJ). Foucault's notion of normalisation is key here, the process by which diverse behaviours or expressions are rendered acceptable through frameworks that simultaneously discipline and include (Foucault, 1977). While student inclusion in leadership is a progressive step, the very act of structuring it into routines can transform radical engagement into manageable input.

Student Focus Group Discussion

When asked what he thought when he first heard about the initiative, Ben, one of the students, said: “I thought it was great. I was heard, it was a great opportunity for us,” Aisling had a similar opinion. “I was excited. Genuinely, at the start, I wasn’t sure it was going to work or anything because I was like, you know, these are the principal, like this is the principal of our school listening to students, but like that, well it obviously very quickly changed when you started. Still, yeah, I was excited, but I didn’t know if this is going to work.” Brona agreed with Aisling’s opinion, “I thought it was so good because you would have never really stopped to talk to any of them about your difficulties in school and how you can change things. Whereas, when it’s an open conversation, I feel it works much better.” These comments appear to emphasise that creating spaces for genuine dialogue and collaboration between students and educational leaders is important to the students themselves. Aisling, Ben and Brona ended their group discussion with the idea that they felt a sense of belonging when they worked with the team, where they could be part of something that could affect a fundamental change in the way things “are done”, at St. Aoibhinn’s. Aisling spoke about learning how to be critical in the process of creating change. Aisling: “M... I feel the advantages and disadvantages were that, we could very clearly see, okay, well, we are doing this right, and everything that we needed to improve on, with stuff that wasn’t even that big, but like we could really impact, and just even like sharing that with the teachers who we were working with, and then also hearing everybody else’s opinions, it was just, I just enjoyed the layout of that.”

Ben talked about enjoying the experience of contributing to ideas that could effect change. Ben stated: “I liked suggesting improvements and things, because you got to feel like you were part of the school and not just a student. That you felt like you were a part of it, part of the changes” He continued, stating: “Yeah, influencing can have a long-term effect in making changes.” Ben’s assertion that “you got to feel like you were part of the school and not just a student” resonated deeply. This small distinction, “not just a student,” reveals the normative assumptions embedded within schooling. Foucault (1980) highlights that the student is a governed subject: someone to be instructed, managed, evaluated. Yet here, the initiative is allowing students to become actors within the institutional field, to speak back, to shape, to critique. I

noted in my reflective journal, *“This is not just about participation, it is about the reconstitution of the student as a knowing subject.”* (RRJ).

Ben, Aisling, and Brona’s reflections on their involvement in the initiative highlight the transformative potential of creating spaces for genuine dialogue and collaboration between students and school leaders. Their comments emphasise how critical it is for schools to acknowledge and use diverse student experiences to inform change. Ben expressed his excitement about feeling heard, calling it “a great opportunity for us.”

Similarly, Aisling admitted initial scepticism but quickly found that the experience of engaging with school leaders, including the principal, shifted her perspective: “It obviously very quickly changed when you started.” Brona reinforced this by pointing out how open conversations allowed students to discuss difficulties and explore solutions, which had previously been uncommon. These reflections reveal the importance of incorporating students’ voices into the decision-making process. The students appreciated the opportunity to actively contribute to discussions, offering their unique perspectives on the challenges and improvements needed within the school environment. As they worked alongside educators, they felt their insights were valued, fostering a sense of belonging and collective responsibility. This sense of ownership is crucial in enacting change, as it empowers students to feel not only part of the conversation but also part of the school’s evolution. In many ways, this moment feels like the early articulation of what Foucault might call counter-conduct, a refusal of the passive subjectivity assigned to students, and a practice of speaking back, proposing, and unsettling established norms (Foucault, 2007). But again, the task for me, as a critical ethnographer, is not to romanticise this, but to interrogate how these newly opened spaces are structured, whose voices are elevated, and how enduring the shift might be.

Aisling reflected on the importance of learning to be critical in assessing both what was working well and what needed improvement, noting how collaborative discussions helped refine those ideas. Ben also emphasised the satisfaction of suggesting improvements, stating that the process made him feel like “part of the school and not just a student,” highlighting the power of inclusivity in these collaborative practices. Brona’s recognition that “real helpful changes” could be made through their contributions further underlines the significance of valuing

diverse experiences. The students' engagement with teachers and leaders provided them with the platform to influence meaningful, long-term change. Their statements reflect the broader learning from the data, which demonstrates that when schools actively engage with diverse student perspectives, it fosters empowerment, ownership, and a commitment to improving the educational environment. These insights align with the broader theme of **Enacting Collaboration**, which plays a vital role in leading to more impactful and sustainable changes within the school. This process of inclusion and dialogue sets the stage for further exploration into **Co-constructing Leadership**, where shared responsibility and partnership are at the heart of creating a truly collaborative school culture.

4.4 Theme 3: Co-constructing Leadership

4.4.1 Collaborative Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving

Phase 1:

Student Initiative Meeting 4

The discussion at the fourth student meeting focuses on transitioning from PP school to third level, and the conversation highlights several important points relating to wellbeing. The RF introduces the topic to the student group, "We mentioned about the transition from PP to third level. Do you think anything is missing in helping students at that level in our wellbeing programme?" Aisling responds: "Oh, you're very much on your own once you leave school, and you're very much thrown into the deep end." Aisling's feelings of unpreparedness for the transition to third-level education show that students are often thrown into the deep end once they leave school. She seems to acknowledge and wants to highlight the lack of adequate preparation and support during school for future life after school. The RF follows this up by opening the conversation around resilience, "And even that word, resilient. What does resilience mean? Can you tell me what resilience means to you? Has anyone ever explained resilience to you?" Brona responds: "Is it like, how, how much pushback you have, bounce back ability." Aisling adds:

“We’ve been told about it, but, you know, we’ve never really been. It’s never been, you know, never been a full few weeks of classes just explaining.” The repetition of “you know” here felt significant, like she was inviting us to notice the gap between rhetoric and reality. Foucault’s (1980) notion of regimes of truth becomes especially relevant: resilience has become a kind of policy buzzword, a truth that circulates with institutional authority. And yet, when probed, it lacks definition, substance, or lived relevance for these students. In my reflections I recorded, *“Is resilience being taught as a discourse or embodied as a practice?”* (RRJ). The distinction matters. The former disciplines: the latter supports.

The RF continues to probe, “Ehm, Let’s say you get your dream course. You need to be able to answer some questions for yourself, such as, “What do I need to know for my first year in college? Can you give me any of the things you need to know for your first year in college?” Brona suggests, “You need to know how to pay bills and how to like mould in with other people.” The RF probes this point: “How do you mould in with other people? What do you need to know?” Brona responds with, “No idea?” RF responds: “Has anyone told you where you might learn this information?” Aisling responds, “No.” Here, the RF appears to encourage student input, using probing questions to encourage the students to think critically about their needs and experiences, and empowers them to articulate their concerns and expectations at the CLI meeting which will follow. This is the paradox of the neoliberal educational subject: they are told they must be autonomous, flexible, and resilient, yet given little structural support to become so. I found myself asking here on reflection: *“What does it mean to be ‘resilient’ in a system that fragments support, obscures social complexity, and then valorises individual perseverance?”* (RRJ). Hopefully the discussion, this will prepare the students to engage constructively with school leaders during their next meeting, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs addressed.

Collaborative Leadership Initiative Team Meeting 5

The use of Google Classroom has dramatically increased in schools, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In meeting 5, ‘Google Classroom’ was

explored as a Framework for developing how work is presented and was viewed by the group as an essential step in ensuring consistency and clarity in the online learning environment. A well-defined framework was discussed, and the group agreed that it could streamline the learning process, potentially making it easier for students to access and engage with educational materials. The adoption of Google Classroom as a framework for presenting educational content reflects a commitment to Universal Design for Learning principles by promoting accessibility, flexibility, and inclusivity in online learning environments.

This discussion demonstrates a collaborative effort among the leaders, teacher leaders and students to discuss and improve the organisation and delivery of classroom materials, mainly using Google Classroom. Aisling introduces the topic for discussion: “Just maybe make it more consistent with the teachers, you know, you know, how they work and organise their Google Classrooms.” There is evidence of shared responsibility and an understanding among the participants that improving the organisation of Google Classroom is essential. Saoirse, one of the class teachers, agrees, and her suggestion of consistency with how teachers work and organise their classrooms implies a collective responsibility to create a standardised framework. Saoirse: “It would be straightforward to do.” The participants continued the conversation by engaging in problem-solving and exploring the development of a framework or model for organising Google Classroom materials. The RF reflects on how strategies were embedded in the past. The RF suggests: “You know, a framework, I suppose, a framework for organising your Google Classroom. Well, it is a bit like how we developed the learning outcomes and learning intentions.” Saoirse agrees: “You would nearly have to do that with all teachers.” Here, the team parallels previous collaborative efforts, such as developing learning outcomes and intentions, indicating a willingness to leverage past experiences to address current challenges.

The discussion began with Aisling’s suggestion to “make it more consistent with the teachers,” which signalled a collective frustration with the inconsistency in digital learning environments. My reflections recorded, “*that her comment was not merely about clarity. it was about epistemic access. Who gets to know where things are, how learning happens, and on what terms?*” (RRJ). In Foucauldian terms, this

speaks to the micro-politics of access and control (Foucault, 1980). Classrooms, even virtual ones, are not neutral containers for knowledge, they are governed spaces that privilege certain learners and practices unless thoughtfully curated. The group's move toward a shared digital framework echoes the notion of governmentality (Foucault, 1980), the idea that institutions govern not only through laws and commands but through the structuring of the everyday. By developing a standard for Google Classroom use, the school is producing a digital field of conduct, one that promotes autonomy while simultaneously reinforcing norms of behaviour, organisation, and engagement.

The group discussed introducing and embedding all actions across the whole student population, as the actions could benefit not only the autistic students but all other students. Grainne, the principal, then introduces advice from a recent inspection: "The inspector already spoke about that. If a teacher puts notes up, students should make their own notes, or students should be jotting down the notes from the notes or about the notes in a discussion class. But the day of copying notes from the screen is gone." Saoirse, one of the special class teachers, challenges Grainne on this. Saoirse: "Oh, absolutely. I do not think many people do that," Grainne reverts to her comment, "but I think maybe they do." Saoirse appears to show surprise. Saoirse: "Oh, really." Ben, one of the students, shares his observations from personal experience. Ben says, "I think it's more common than you think, to be honest, in my experience." This active participation appears to foster a sense of ownership and investment in the collaborative process, and Grainne backs him up when she says: "Ben has said it." Here, Grainne appears to validate Ben's input by acknowledging it and encouraging further participation from others on the team. Saoirse's comment that "it would be straightforward to do" reflects a confidence in institutional action, but also perhaps underestimates the disciplinary function of such frameworks. As I wrote in my reflective journal: "*Standardisation makes the system legible, but for whom? And at what cost to pedagogical flexibility?*" (RRJ). In this, I see both the potential and the danger of digital uniformity, it supports accessibility and clarity (key tenets of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)), but it also risks reducing pedagogical nuance to procedural compliance.

Grainne's reference to the inspector's advice, "the day of copying notes from the screen is gone," brought in a layer of external surveillance, the state gaze that monitors schools' pedagogical integrity. Her repetition of the directive, and Saoirse's moment of surprise, signalled a tension between policy and practice. Foucault (1980) would remind us here that norms are not only enforced, but they are also internalised. The conversation shows how schools become sites where competing discourses, inspection, inclusion, digital learning, are navigated, contested, and absorbed.

Her approach at this juncture seems to encourage ownership and investment in the collaborative process. She promotes a culture where everyone feels responsible for creating the learning environment by involving teachers and students in the discussion. Ben's intervention was one of the most critical moments in the dialogue. His reflection that copying from the screen "is more common than you think" subtly destabilised Grainne's authority, and yet Grainne did not suppress or redirect. Instead, she said simply: "Ben has said it." This moment of validation reveals an important shift, one that I think speaks to a redistribution of discursive legitimacy. Students, typically positioned as the objects of policy, are now beginning to shape its language and application.

Roisin, the special education coordinator, adds to the development of the conversation by explaining how she creates notes and helps students develop notes in her class. Roisin's adaptation of materials for EAL students demonstrates a commitment to making learning accessible to all students. Roisin: "I'm quite conscious of what Ben has said there because English at the minute is a novel and it's all key points. I have a lot of students with learning difficulties, but I would still expect them to write down the keyword because its embedding what they're learning, hearing it, seeing it and then writing it, but also because it's on a Google Doc. It also means that it can be translated into Portuguese or Arabic for the EAL student, while they're in the class. Yeah. So, for me, that will be a reason for it." Roisin's point suggests efforts to empower students and promote inclusivity. Roisin's contribution was equally revealing. Her deliberate adaptation of notes for EAL students, and her use of Google Docs as a translatable, multimodal tool, illustrates how digital practices can serve as inclusive technologies, not just for

autistic students but for a range of diverse learners. Her emphasis on “embedding what they’re learning, hearing it, seeing it and then writing it” was not just a pedagogy, it was a politics of inclusion, framed through the lens of multi-sensory engagement and access.

All team members actively contribute to the conversation, sharing their perspectives and experiences. For example, Micheal, deputy principal, emphasises the importance of active learning and meaningful engagement, Micheal: “Yeah that is it, that is very active there, and because they are listening and they are not taking down just anything, very different from Just putting up notes and telling them to get it down.” Micheal’s closing comments on active learning—moving beyond passive transcription—reflected an alignment with contemporary learning theory, but also underlined how easily engagement can be reduced to performance if the deeper power relations within the classroom go unexamined.

I note in my reflective journal (RRJ); *“that from a Foucauldian (1980) standpoint, today’s meeting was a site of strategic power negotiation. The institutional actors, leaders, teachers, students, were not simply implementing digital tools. They were actively producing new subject positions, new norms of practice, and new standards for participation. The move toward a shared Google Classroom framework might enhance equity, but it also creates new fields of regulation and standardisation.”*

As a researcher, I am encouraged by the depth of collaboration but remain alert to the subtle ways in which digital tools, framed as empowering, can also function as apparatuses of control, shaping what counts as good practice, productive behaviour, and legitimate voice (Foucault, 1980).

The conversation exemplifies how co-constructing leadership involves collaboration, shared responsibility, problem-solving, consideration of student needs, active participation, and empowerment. It would suggest that teachers, leaders, and students work together to create an inclusive and effective learning environment by engaging in honest dialogue and collectively addressing challenges.

Phase 2:

4.4.2 Future Planning: The Role of the Principal

Leadership Focus Group Discussion

At the focus group discussion, Grainne and Micheal discussed the value of the initiative in co-constructing leadership and the impact of the initiative on future planning. Micheal felt that fear of failure should not get in the way of developing new leadership methods. Micheal stated: “this was good because it was successful, and this was enjoyable, and everybody you know felt valued being part of it. There may be times when the chemistry may not be right. But it’s just giving it time and encouraging staff to participate in these initiatives.” Grainne spoke about her role as a leader in creating new initiative opportunities. Grainne: “I think having your aims and objectives set out as well, that you’re not bringing people into the room and saying, talk about this or that. But I think the way you (to the RF) laid it out, as Micheal said there, is important. The outlook was positive from the beginning. It was a genuine discussion.” Micheal agreed with Grainne and discussed the importance of structuring the meetings so that participants know what is expected of them: “I suppose if you know what, the structure is important. It’s essential to put the guidelines in place, too. Then, we always focus now on what we can positively change.” Grainne felt that the initiative would help her establish new groups in the school where she could develop more collaborative partnerships for leading, especially with the SSE process. Micheal added to Grainne’s views: “I think for that to be successful; you need to bring student voice into it.” Micheal also added that the voice of the autistic students involved was critical in co-constructing new models of school leadership, Micheal “And to get the advice from the special class students there, is gold, probably because they’ll see things in a different light, in a way that we need to see them.” Micheal’s comment that “getting advice from the special class students is gold” was both heartening and troubling. It reflects a genuine valuing of autistic student voice yet also hints at a potential commodification of that voice, a resource to be mined for institutional improvement. Here, I return to Foucault’s (1980) notion of subjugated knowledges, those voices marginalised or dismissed within dominant discourses, now recuperated, not necessarily to dismantle power, but to refine it. I wrote in my

journal notes: *“Is this the rise of a new inclusive normalisation? A reconfiguration of power that feels horizontal but is still tightly managed?”* (RRJ).

4.4.3 Teacher Learning.

Teacher Leadership Focus Group Discussion

The teachers again reiterated the value they and the students received by participating in the initiative. They recounted how they felt they could use the experience to co-construct opportunities for leading in their practice in the future; Roisin, special education needs co-ordinator, spoke about what she witnessed in the students and how she used the initiative to lead in her practice. Roisin stated, “I would say they grew in confidence. And they knew that genuinely their opinions were being sought so that change could be made.”

Roisin also spoke about the value of developing new practices in the school like those co-constructed at the initiative meetings. Roisin: “And a huge part of it as well, for me again, was my learning. I think now, they have given us a whole new insight, a whole new area to work on with staff in September, new practices we can act on.” Roisin went on to explain how she felt about co-constructing new ways of doing things. Roisin: “I can even recognise like what Aisling had said, and then the realities of the practicalities of me handing over my fifth-year class, to another teacher and stepping away from that. I’m very conscious now; I have to share my Google Classroom with her. And I’m quite conscious of how my notes are, and how much better they could have been, based on the viewpoint of an autistic student.” In my journal I reflected on this and wrote *“I witnessed what might be considered a re-authoring of teacher identity. Roisin’s vulnerability in acknowledging her own learning, as opposed to the traditional model of teacher as expert, speaks volumes about the cultural shift towards relational and participatory professionalism”* (RRJ). Saoirse added to Roisin’s account of her learning. Saoirse: “Like, they had the evidence, it wasn’t just an opinion or a feeling. They based their thoughts and ideas on something rational and factual, that I couldn’t argue with, and it was therefore, easy to say yes, why can’t we do that. We can change that practice.” Bringing a

Foucauldian lens to the analysis, these moments can be read as disruptions to the historically embedded regimes of truth in education. Roisin's and Saoirse's experiences illustrate how power is not only exercised through institutional structures but also reproduced in ordinary everyday practices.

4.4.4 Barriers to Collaborative Partnerships

While everyone agreed on the value of the collaborative partnership, they also decided that there were difficulties in carrying out the initiative in a busy mainstream school. Grainne spoke about the challenges of getting 'buy-in' from everyone. Grainne: "It's getting that buy-in. Sometimes it's not just a meeting. I won't always be going to the student council to get the voice of students, that you're picking different students from each year group, and you are getting a range of voices and not just the people willing to put themselves forward for the student council. That you're actively looking." My reflective journal notes that; "*Grainne's challenge in securing 'buy-in' from all staff is also indicative of institutional resistance to distributed authority. The idea that decision-making could be co-constructed with students subtly threatens the established teacher-student hierarchy. There's a tacit fear that letting go of control means losing professional identity. Yet from a Foucauldian perspective, this is precisely where transformation becomes possible: in the moments when power relations are reconfigured, and new subjectivities, like the teacher as facilitator, or the student as knowledge producer, emerge*" (RRJ).

4.4.5 Barriers to Listening: Who can speak?, and what can be said?

Student Focus Group Discussion

At the student focus group discussion, Aisling seemed to express her surprise at the principal's interest in the initiative. Before her involvement, she stated, Aisling: "No student would ever be like, oh, I'm going to go to the principal, and I'm going to tell her my opinion. Like, you know it was just kind of unheard of", Aisling also

expressed her anxieties about talking to the principal. Aisling: “What if the principal gets very cross with us for our opinion”? She added: “Yeah, we kind of felt like, this is going to be sound. You saw them as just ordinary people.” Ben appeared to agree with this view of how the adults presented at the meeting. Benn: “You strip away the formality and it just left you, we felt like it was just a group of people talking to a group of people.” Brona backed up both other students with her view of the group, “Yeah, I feel like it went really well. It was very smooth going. There was no kind of, start and stops. And it made it feel like you were on the one level with the teachers because you just got along with them all really well.” My reflections record that: *“It’s not just that hierarchical boundaries exist, it’s that they are felt. These feelings shape how students perceive their right to speak, their agency, and their value within the learning environment.”* The students’ surprise at being treated ‘like ordinary people’ speaks volumes about how rare those democratic moments are (RRJ).

Potentially, an outcome of the group was increased honest insights into the perspectives of autistic students on their daily personal and emotional experiences and how they perceived the initiative. If there were any barriers, they appeared to centre around teachers’ reactions to some of the students’ views on things. Brona was surprised at how readily everyone accepted her explanation of crying and how she would like everyone to respond when she cries, Brona: “I’d say like they were a bit taken aback.” Another reasonable outcome was an increased insight by the students into the barriers they experienced.

Aisling and Brona also talked about the barriers they experienced daily to be ‘heard’. They spoke about the environment, where the meeting took place and the time of day. Aisling: “We had a few interruptions, you know, people not knowing what was going on and just walking in, into the room and stuff. But I think you did a pretty good job (laughing, addressed to the RF) at organising it.” When talking about how they felt having the meetings in their special class, Brona described their classroom as ‘a very safe space’, and Aisling elaborated on this and stated, “I liked that it was here because we all just feel so comfortable in here that, like, we felt like that we could say whatever we needed to. If it was, like, if it was up in the office or something, it would be very, like, it would feel very official for us.” Later, she

added: “I feel like if you went to the principal’s office, it would kind of take the meaning of it away, I wouldn’t be as comfortable there in sharing my ideas as I would be down here.” Ben agreed and added insight when he said, “you would like, subconsciously at least, feel like you’re in a place where you’re a bit lower, and there’s people of a higher power, do you know what I mean?”

Aisling also expressed her satisfaction with the time of day for scheduling the meetings. Aisling: “I quite enjoyed it because it was, you know, the afternoon, so we were just finishing school, and we were just getting close to the weekend, so everyone was kind of in a good mood.” Brona also felt that the experience could have been even better if there had been refreshments at the meetings; she stated: “I think it could be just me, but if we all had cups of tea or something to make it more homely.” Ben agreed that refreshments would have enhanced the experience. “Like on the last one we did.” It was interesting how, at this point, Brona spoke about the principal and deputy principal with a greater understanding of how busy their lives can be, “And it would have been nice for Mr Kennedy (deputy principal) and Ms Mahon (principal) because I think that they’ve pretty stressful days and just to be able to sit down and have tea and be able to talk to students all about our plans.” Here, Ben observed the potential impact of simple gestures in fostering a more welcoming and personable atmosphere. Sharing cups of tea, which inherently signifies comfort and familiarity, is suggested to create a care setting. This highlights that minor considerations could enhance the overall experience, invoking a sense of shared care. My journal notes record that, *through a Foucauldian lens, space is more than a backdrop; it is a technology of power. The principal’s office, as the students noted, would have signified surveillance, judgment, and hierarchy. The special class, by contrast, was a space of comfort, equality, and openness. Foucault would say that power is inscribed in space, and the students’ narratives make visible how deeply spatial arrangements shape what can be said, who can say it, and with what consequences* (RRJ). As with the TLFG, the SLFG concluded with a discussion about all the possible changes that could be made to support autistic learners in the mainstream classroom.

The students’ ideas and problem-solving abilities seemed to take on a new energy here. Aisling gave her opinion on changes that could be made to support students

with seating arrangements in the mainstream classroom. Aisling: “I know a lot of students don’t like it, but I like to have seating arrangements, I like to know what’s happening and just to have that little bit of communication at the start of the year, like, you know, this is what’s happening, and this is where we’re going to sit.” In reflection, I noted in my journal that, *“this aligns to Foucault’s ‘technologies of the self’, that are processes through which individuals shape their identities within (and sometimes against) institutional structures. They are negotiating their subjectivities in the face of surveillance, control, and normalising expectations. Their success in asserting voice, claiming space, and expressing emotion is not incidental. It’s a small act of resistance against the disciplinary modalities of schooling that too often seek to silence, standardise, and sort”* (RRJ).

The students also expressed frustration with COVID-19 and discussed it as a barrier to carrying out the initiative. For example, they had to wait long time before it began (since six of the participants contracted the virus). When the initiative did start, the remaining group members contracted the virus two weeks into the initiative, and the process had to stop for two weeks. This situation highlights the importance of flexibility and adaptability in navigating the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic. It’s commendable that the students persevered despite these obstacles. Acknowledging, that organisations and individuals alike needed to continue prioritising safety measures and contingency plans to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on their endeavours.

4.4.6 Barriers to Student Voice Initiatives, Supports, Resources and Positive Approaches

Despite the potential benefits of incorporating student voices into educational research, several barriers can hinder the effective execution of a student voice study. A significant obstacle is the lack of adequate supports, such as insufficient Leadership support or limited professional development opportunities for staff to facilitate meaningful student engagement. Grainne and Micheal have prioritised these at a leadership level, Grainne: “So, we put on professional development at the whole staff level so that everyone, every member of staff, is very aware. It’s also

part of our interview process, we're conscious of this, that we've two special classes, where we are encouraging inclusion into the mainstream as much as possible, and reverse inclusion, that the whole staff are aware of inclusion and not just the teachers working in the special classes.”

Resource constraints, including limited funding, time, and access to necessary materials or technologies, can further impede the ability to conduct comprehensive studies that genuinely capture student perspectives. Additionally, the absence of positive approaches that prioritise and value student contributions can discourage students from participating fully. Micheal: “this was good because it was successful, and this was enjoyable, and everybody you know felt valued being part of it. There may be times when the chemistry may not be right. But it's just giving it time and then encouraging staff to be part of these initiatives.” Without a school culture that fosters trust, openness, and respect for student input, learners may feel their voices are not genuinely welcomed or might fear negative repercussions for speaking candidly. There may be a perceived risk in challenging the views of those in authority. Brona, one student, spoke about the rarity of students approaching the teachers with her opinions or concerns, Brona: “I thought it was so good because you would have never really stopped to talk to any of them about your difficulties in school and how you can change things. Whereas, when it's an open conversation, I feel it works much better.” These barriers highlight the importance of ensuring that supports, resources, and positive approaches are in place to create an environment where student voices can be effectively heard and integrated into educational practices.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter presents the findings from the analyses undertaken regarding this qualitative research study, which sought to investigate the impact of including autistic students on the processes and operational dynamics of a CLI Team operating in a mainstream Irish PP school. Phase I of the study gathered data from an initiative that was comprised of five fifteen-minute meetings with the students. Each meeting was followed by a meeting with the CLI, lasting approximately forty

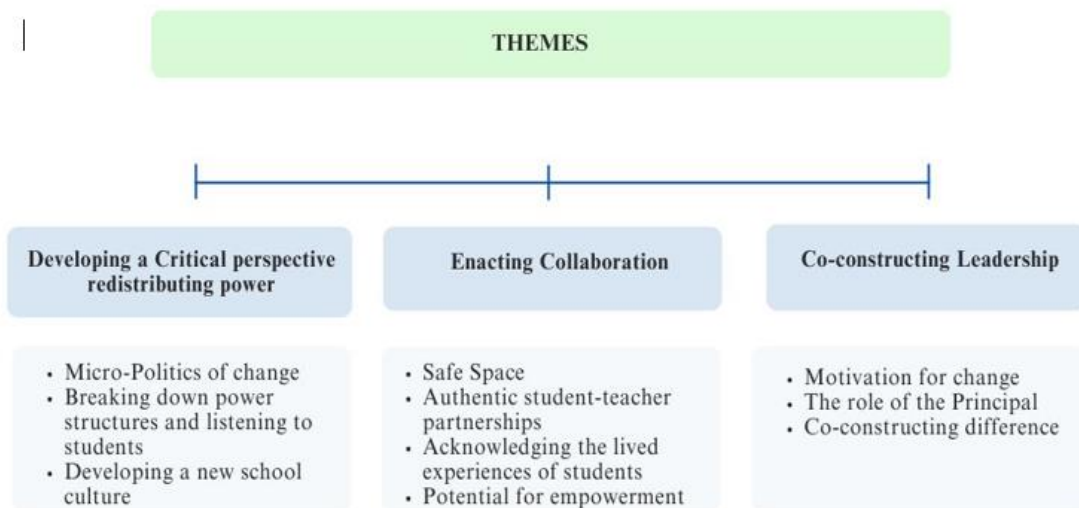
minutes. Phase 2 of the study involved semi-structured focus group discussions with all members of the CLI. The next chapter will discuss the research findings, linking them to the extant literature in answering the research questions.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, data collected during both phases of the study were subjected to reflective thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s framework (2006, 2019, 2020) (Appendix O). The data analysis process for this project involved several structured phases aimed at systematically exploring the relationship between inclusive policy and practice, the voice of autistic students, and leadership in schools, as set out in Chapter 4. In Phase 5 of data analysis, themes were defined and named as following (*see Figure 1 P. 12*).

Figure 2 Developing a Critical Perspective and Re-distributing Power, Enacting Collaboration and Co-constructing Leadership



The following discussion will be divided into three sections, each of which uses the themes developed in Chapter 4 (*see Figure 2 P.118*), to answer the study’s three research questions as set out in Chapter 1.

Foucault (1977) argues that in modern society and institutions, the exercise of power does not operate in a top-down way, but is instead dispersed through networks of relationships, embedded in discourse, and exercised through knowledge systems. Re-distributing power in education concurs with Foucault's (1977) argument that power is not simply repressive but also productive, it creates possibilities for action. For him, the key to disrupting and reconstructing more equitable networks of power, lies in the micro-politics of change. Consequently, this work focuses on these dynamics and processes operating at this level. This chapter will look at how the themes developed from analysis of data collected by this work, regarding the micro-political processes and dynamics of change, can be used to redistribute power into more equitable and inclusive configurations, where every voice holds weight and where co-constructing leadership emphasises shared decision-making, collective responsibility and inclusive principles.

This chapter explores one case or instance of how these micro-politics were deliberately configured to support the breaking down of power structures, the prioritisation of student voice and insights, and the development of a new school culture that recognises the embracing of diversity as its cornerstone.

It is suggested that the creation of safe spaces and authentic student-teacher partnerships are at the heart of this 'politics'; spaces and relationships that prioritises growth and learning for all, and which privilege students' lived experiences. Finally, the potential for designing and using change processes in a way that contributes to a broader inclusive school culture that empowers all members of the school community is explored, where it is considered that the role of principal is pivotal in shaping this process. By decentralising leadership functions, schools foster environments where knowledge flows in multiple directions, rather than being dictated from the top down.

The chapter will conclude with a discussion of how creating change processes that promote deeper and more nuanced understandings of diversity amongst school partners, can illuminate and open pathways towards a more inclusive and empowering educational landscape.

5.2 Research Question 1:

How participants perceive the value of including autistic students in their work?

The literature emphasises the need to alter traditional structures, practices, beliefs, and values to allow student voices in change and leadership processes, (McQuillan, 2005). It is critical that students' voices are faithfully recorded, interpreted and used. (Fielding, 2007); where there is a difficulty in listening respectfully (Flynn, 2014), as opposed to achieving 'surface compliance', with schools feeling obliged to be seen to be 'doing it'. In such cases they may not, consider why they want to do it; how it fits with other initiatives, the institution's development plan and scheme of values; and what comprise the personal and institutional risks for participating learners (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006).

5.2.1 The Perceptions of Those in Formal Leadership Positions

In this case study, a key positive resource, was the supportive and insightful perspectives of formal school leaders around including autistic students in a collaborative leadership team for developing inclusive policy and practice. Even prior to the initiative they were committed to the inclusion of student voice in promoting positive change, and optimistic about its transformative potential in enhancing overall school culture and educational practices.

During the initiative, Grainne and Micheal observed that participation in leadership initiatives significantly boosted the students' confidence, sense of belonging, and capacity to engage with the wider school community. Micheal reflected on witnessing a student "blossom" during leadership activities, gaining strength and assurance in interactions with staff [Micheal, 07:02]. This aligns with current research, which indicates that leadership roles can be empowering for autistic students, enhancing their self-esteem and communication skills (Emerson and Costley, 2023).

Both leaders recognised that strategies developed to support autistic students, such as the restructuring of Google Classrooms to improve clarity, had wider benefits for the entire school community. This reflects the core tenets of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocates for flexible, anticipatory educational design to accommodate diverse learners from the outset (CAST, 2018). UDL's principles of multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression not only support accessibility but foster inclusive environments that enhance learning for all (Meyer, Rose, and Gordon, 2014). In this work, formal leaders seemed to recognise that embedding UDL across school systems models inclusive and distributive leadership practices, where diverse voices and particularly those of neurodivergent students, influence systemic change (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011; Ainscow, 2020). In this way, UDL is not merely a pedagogical approach but serves as a catalyst for inclusive practice, a dynamic of which leadership seemed to be aware.

Both leaders also emphasised the importance of authentically listening to student voices and avoiding superficial or tokenistic engagement. Grainne noted that St. Aoibhinn's had a longstanding tradition of prioritising student voice, but the initiative provided a more structured and intentional avenue for incorporating student perspectives [Grainne, 18:43]. This reflects broader research positioning student voice as central to inclusive leadership and democratic school governance (Fielding, 2004). Critically, this aligns with Foucault's (1980) analysis of power and discourse, in which power is exercised not only through authority but through the legitimisation of knowledge. By creating spaces where student voices are genuinely heard and legitimised, the school worked to disrupt traditional top-down power structures and redistribute influence through collaborative discourse.

Grainne further described the initiative as a template for future staff-student collaboration, highlighting its potential to recalibrate leadership as a shared endeavour. She recounted her belief, reinforced by the current initiative, that offering opportunities for authentic and equitable sharing of lived experiences, strengthened relationships and offered a replicable model of practice [Grainne, 19:04]. This echoed Harris's (2008) vision of distributed leadership in which all stakeholders, including students, can contribute productively to school improvement.

Not only was their commitment to including a wide variety of voices in the development of inclusive policy and practice a trite or time-bound one. Despite recognising some logistical challenges, particularly around time management and staff engagement, leaders remained committed to the long-term value. Micheal acknowledged the complexities of capturing and paying attention to multiple voices on developing inclusive change but highlighted the importance of giving credibility to student-led initiatives, even when outcomes were not always predictable [Micheal, 26:13]. His reflections demonstrate an acute awareness of how traditional authority structures can marginalise student input. As Foucault (1972) argues, discourse shapes who is allowed to speak and be heard. By legitimising students as co-leaders, Micheal challenges established norms that historically privileged adult decision-makers and invites a more equitable redistribution of voice within school governance.

Overall, the leaders in this study demonstrated a strong commitment to involving autistic students in leadership teams, and a belief that this benefited the students and school community alike, by providing a range of perspectives on questions of policy and practice and allowing this to be interrogated through a multiplicity of lived experiences that made evident (in safe and empathetic ways) the range of power balances and imbalances that operated in the school and beyond. By fostering empowerment, authentic participation, and distributed leadership practices, the change initiative adopted contributed to a more inclusive and equitable school culture. These findings align with broader scholarship on inclusive education, student voice, and collaborative leadership models that emphasise diversity as a source of strength and transformation.

5.2.2 The Perceptions of the Teachers of Being Part of the Collaborative Leadership for Inclusion Team

The teachers at the [TLFG] felt that including autistic students in leadership roles fosters their confidence and self-esteem. Roisin, a special education needs coordinator, observed that the students “grew in confidence” knowing that “their opinions were being sought so that change could be made.” This empowerment aligns with Emerson and Costley’s (2023) assertion that autistic students thrive in

environments where they feel safe, respected, and valued.

By actively involving them in leadership teams, schools validate their experiences and contributions, which can reduce anxiety and promote a sense of belonging (Emerson and Costley, 2023, p. 5). Secondly, the practice provides educators with valuable insights that can inform and improve teaching practices. Roisin highlighted that the initiative gave staff “a whole new insight, a whole new area to work on... new practices we can act on.” By listening to the students’ perspectives, teachers like Roisin and Saoirse recognised areas for professional growth and adaptation in their teaching methods. This collaborative approach facilitates the co-construction of knowledge and strategies that are more attuned to the students’ needs (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). Foucault (1980) argues that knowledge and power are inseparable, those who control knowledge also control power. Traditionally, educators have been seen as the primary holders of knowledge, while students are seen as passive learners. The findings of this study challenge this assumption by redistributing epistemic authority, teachers learn from students, and knowledge is co-constructed rather than imposed. This shift aligns with Foucault’s claim that power is not top-down but rather circulates within relationships, making the educational space more dynamic.

Moreover, involving autistic students in leadership challenges hegemonic ableist assumptions and normative thinking (Byrne, 2020) that exist within the educational system exercising real effects in the world. (Hehir, 2002). Roisin’s reflections highlight the importance of viewing students through a holistic lens, appreciating their full humanity and potential. She suggested that by cultivating meaningful, supportive relationships with students, teachers can see beyond these biases, fostering an inclusive culture where individual strengths are celebrated.

By involving autistic students in leadership, schools can reshape the hidden curriculum to promote equity and inclusion, ensuring that all students are valued and supported in ways that align with their unique abilities and experiences. By actively centring neurodivergent voices, schools challenge what Foucault (1973) would call the ‘regime of truth’, the set of assumptions that define what is considered legitimate knowledge and who is deemed an authoritative knower.

In this study, the students' ability to provide rational and evidence-based input demonstrates their capacity to contribute meaningfully to school improvement. Saoirse noted that the students "based their thoughts and ideas on something rational and factual", making it easier for teachers to embrace suggested changes. Rather than requiring autistic students to conform to neurotypical norms, the school environment itself is reorganised to accommodate diverse ways of learning and leading. This shift challenges how power is exercised in the school and allows for new forms of agency among students who were previously marginalised. This collaboration reflects the principles of student voice initiatives, which emphasise the importance of students as active participants in their education (Fielding, 2004).

5.2.3 The Perceptions of the Students of Being Part of a Leadership for Inclusion Team: A meeting of Minds

Emerson and Costley (2023) suggest that autistic students often struggle with predicting others' behaviour and understanding what is required of them, contributing to high levels of anxiety and an IU. In this context, creating inclusive environments where all individuals feel safe, respected, and empowered to participate in collaborative efforts is paramount. Achieving this can be challenging, for non-autistic individuals, who are rarely required to view the world from an autistic perspective. The findings from the study echo these challenges, Foucault (1977) helps explain how power operates not just through individuals, but through institutional structures and social norms. The difficulty in mutual understanding between autistic and non-autistic individuals reflects how power defines what is deemed 'normal' behaviour and cognition. Schools, shaped by 'neurotypical norms', often expect autistic individuals to conform. This aligns with Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, subtle mechanisms that promote self-regulation and conformity.

Micheal, as deputy principal, stressed the importance of including all voices, especially autistic students, in shaping inclusive school leadership. He noted that autistic students often see things "in a different light," offering valuable insights

into how schools can become more inclusive. Their involvement can challenge dominant norms, foster equity, and generate new understandings of inclusion.

Benefits to Students and Staff

Moreover, the teachers in the study also recognised the benefits to students of including them in leadership initiatives. congruent with Emerson and Costley (2023) Roisin, a special education needs coordinator, observed how autistic students gained confidence through the initiative, knowing their opinions were genuinely sought for driving change.

Additionally, some students, like Aisling, initially felt anxious about sharing their opinions with the principal, fearing negative consequences. This barrier reflects the difficulty in overcoming the hierarchical power dynamics that exist in schools, where students may feel uncomfortable or unsafe in expressing their true perspectives [SFG]. Foucault (1977) highlights that power/knowledge structures dictate whose perspectives are most valued. Co-constructing leadership with autistic students challenges this imbalance.

Roisin also highlighted that the initiative provided valuable learning opportunities for staff, giving them new insights into how to support autistic students effectively in their teaching practices. The challenge of gaining ‘buy-in’ from all staff members and ensuring the active participation of a wide range of students was also highlighted.

Schools, like broader society, are structured as disciplinary power, around ‘neurotypical norms,’ which means autistic individuals are often expected to adapt to dominant ways of thinking and interacting. However, neurotypical students also experience the constraints of power dynamics, especially in hierarchical school settings where authority figures dictate which student voices are heard and which are sidelined. By extending co-constructed leadership models to both neurodivergent and neurotypical students, schools challenge the traditional student-teacher power dynamic, allowing a broader range of student voices to co-create school policies and learning environments.

This study demonstrated how fostering a safe, supportive environment can disrupt traditional and unquestioned networks of power. For example, Aisling and her peers expressed that they felt “comfortable” and “on the same level” with teachers, an experience that significantly increased their willingness to participate. “We felt like it was just a group of people talking to a group of people,” [SFG, 12:34]. This aligns with Emerson and Costley’s (2023) emphasis on the need for environments where autistic students feel safe and valued. Such findings support Emerson and Costley’s (2023) assertion of the need for mutual understanding and safe spaces in fostering inclusive practices. The success of these initiatives hinges ultimately on the commitment, active participation and genuine engagement of all members of the school community, especially those whose voices are often marginalised.

5.3 Research Question 2:

How do they perceive the impact of involving autistic students in the team on its processes and operational dynamics?

5.3.1 Changes to the Dynamics of Leadership

This section will examine how formal school leaders worked to create a shared vision and the necessary conditions to critically interrogate hegemonic power structures. By adopting a distributed /collaborative model of leadership, they fostered an environment where student voice was prioritised, genuine dialogue was encouraged, and inclusive critique was made possible.

5.3.2 Distributed Leadership

In addressing the research question, two key themes emerged: developing a critical perspective and redistributing power which shed light how learner participation in leadership can help to disrupt existing networks of power and redistribute this more

equitably withing schools.

Foucault's concept of governmentality (1977) explains how institutions shape behaviour, expectations, and norms through subtle forms of control rather than direct force. The leadership role is not in commanding but in shaping conditions for active participation and the articulation of all voices, including those traditionally marginalised. While distributed leadership suggests greater inclusion in decision-making, Foucault would prompt us to ask, if a shift in power genuinely redistributes power, or does it subtly reinforce existing institutional norms while appearing progressive? By adopting a critical approach to power dynamics, the current work aimed to uncover underlying tensions, negotiations, and resistances within the CLI team regarding the inclusion of autistic students. Understanding how perceptions and interactions are shaped, and decisions are made within the team sheds light on how power circulated within it.

Harris and Spillane (2008) identify the distribution of leadership as a de facto expression of the distribution of power. Gronn (2003) informs us that, increasingly, leadership is an evolving continuum that is worked out equally among fellow leaders. In this study, those in formal leadership positions expressed willingness to share leadership responsibilities, and lead the process (Winter and O Raw, 2010) and encourage collaboration (Woods and Roberts, 2018; NCCA, 2010)). Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) in Klinger et al. (2003, p. 411) identify the principals' leadership style as "top-down support for bottom-up reform." Lumby (2013) informs us that the principal must share power to implement distributed leadership successfully.

5.3.3 The Role of the Principal

Data collected during this study suggest that Grainne, is highly aware of the change process and open to, establishing new ways of leading by developing collaborative teams as part of a distributed leadership style (Woods and Roberts, 2018). There was evidence that Grainne's holistic approach to fostering student development through listening to students' voices, especially autistic students, was permeating

the entire school staff (Costley et al. 2021), as follows: “They are more genuine meetings where you have staff and students coming together to tease out issues.”

Grainne’s approach highlights the need for critical engagement with student voices and a commitment to challenging systemic inequities. Aligning with Foucault’s (1977) view of institutions as sites of implicit power, she questions the hidden structures and norms that sustain exclusion. By fostering critical reflection on existing policies and practices (Riehl, 2000; Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004; Hogan and Coote, 2014; Kinsella, 2018), Grainne works to dismantle barriers to inclusion. Echoing Mitra, Serriere, and Stoicovy’s (2012), vision of inclusive leadership as embedded in everyday practice, she actively resists institutional governmentality and the subtle regulation of behaviour that limits participation.

5.3.4. Power Sharing

The literature highlights several barriers to student voice, including limited time, insufficient administrative support, concerns over teachers losing authority, and questions around authenticity and full inclusion (Rudduck, 2007; Flynn, 2014). Schools are often not structured to genuinely promote student voice, instead focusing on adolescent needs in ways that sideline broader participation (Mitra, 2003). From the outset, the team adopted a non-hierarchical model, involving students as co-leaders in significant school decision-making. This aligns with Foucault’s (1977) view that power is not solely hierarchical but diffused through social relations, raising questions about institutional authority and emergent agency.

This approach promoted active engagement, collaboration, and shared ownership of the educational process (Hogan and Coote, 2014). When students feel respected and valued, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging, agency, and connection to the institution (Mitra, 2009; Goodall, 2018). By reinforcing that every voice matters, the team fostered a collective effort towards school improvement. Prioritising student involvement and cultivating a culture of respect and inclusion strengthened relationships across the school community and shifted leadership toward a model of distributed power (Mitra, 2006).

Rather than being passive recipients of policies, students gained opportunities to shape their educational experiences. This empowerment generated greater investment and commitment to school reform. Importantly, a non-hierarchical approach communicated that student perspectives were genuinely valued, establishing an environment where diversity was celebrated rather than merely tolerated. Traditionally, schools rely on disciplinary mechanisms to regulate behaviour (Foucault, 1977). However, student leadership promotes alternative governance based on self-regulation and collective responsibility. Involving students in decision-making enriches the process and increases belonging through broader participation (Levin, 2000).

Inclusive practice must also address structural and systemic barriers (Kinsella, 2018), ensuring all students can thrive. Goodall (2018, p. 1306) notes that for autistic students, “Inclusion is a feeling (a sense of belonging), not a place (mainstream or otherwise).” This emotional aspect is vital to promoting positive experiences. True inclusion involves individualised support that fosters social, emotional, and academic development, as outlined in Article 24 of the UNCRPD (2006).

Yet fears persist. Aisling expressed anxiety about voicing her opinion, concerned about the principal’s reaction, reflecting common apprehensions around authority and the hierarchy embedded in schools. Brona also noted how rare it was for students to approach the principal, suggesting limited avenues for student input. This indicates the need for more open and authentic communication channels. Leadership plays a crucial role in setting this tone. As Graydon (2006) argues, school ethos flows from leadership and can transform practice. Still, Allan (2023, p. 32) acknowledges that shifting power relations requires adults to “let go,” beginning with listening and showing genuine surprise at student insights.

When leaders model inclusive values, it influences the entire school culture, breaking down power barriers and encouraging inclusive practice. One student remarked, “we just believe school is going to be hard,” particularly for autistic students. While this acknowledges available support, it also reflects Foucault’s (1977) concept of discursive formations, where dominant narratives define

experience. Framing school as inherently difficult normalises struggle and marginalises neurodiverse learners.

Crosland and Dunlap (2012) advocate for a school culture grounded in equality, democracy, and diversity. From a Foucauldian perspective, shifting discourse reshapes how students are understood, though Foucault reminds us this does not erase power but reconfigures it (Foucault, 1977). Leadership that embeds inclusive culture can challenge stereotypes and dismantle stigma (Wedell, 2003), raising expectations for all students, including those with autism (Humphrey, 2008). Leadership also empowers teachers to adopt inclusive practices (Ainscow, 2014), provided there is a shared vision of inclusion (Kinsella, 2018).

Still, a Foucauldian lens urges caution: empowerment may also function as subtle discipline, guiding students to conform to new norms of inclusion. Schools continue to shape subjectivities and experiences, demonstrating that power is not only repressive but also productive, structuring identities and possibilities for agency within institutional limits (Foucault, 1977).

5.3.5 Creating the Conditions for Genuine Dialogue and Inclusive Critique.

The role of the principal was highlighted as pivotal in answering the primary research question of how the team participants perceive the value of including autistic students in their work. This aligned closely with the data from Theme 3: Co-constructing Leadership. Once again, the literature reviewed supported the findings of the study, where the principal is considered central to the process. As the school's principal, Grainne was instrumental in shaping the school's culture and laying the foundation for the potential establishment of CLI team, "Well, I've been principal now for fifteen years.....I've always been interested in student voice." Grainne's personal experiences and beliefs have shaped her leadership approach, demonstrating Foucault's concept of subject formation, where individuals are shaped by dominant discourses. Her comments frame her as a progressive leader promoting inclusivity, but this framing itself is part of a discourse that legitimises certain forms of knowledge and power while marginalising others. The knowledge

systems within which she operates (education, leadership, inclusion) define what is seen as ‘valid’ educational practice and what is not. Leaders who prioritise student input embed this ethos into the school environment (Gentilucci and Muto, 2007).

5.3.6 Facilitating Meaningful Participation

Throughout this initiative, the leadership teams’ approach extended beyond tokenistic listening to authentically listening to students’ perspectives on school culture, policies and practices. They actively and intentionally sought out these student perspectives (Lundy, 2006), recognising the immense value students could bring to identifying and resolving issues within their school community and achieving this level of collaboration required all participants to have a deep understanding of the power dynamics between teachers and students (Mitra, 2006; Mitra and Gross, 2009; Mockler and Groundwater-Smith, 2015).

Cook-Sather (2006) draws attention to challenging the foundational principles of prediction, control, and management that traditionally underpin formal educational institutions. As the principal, Grainne moved away from tradition during the opening meeting. Instead of asserting the usual hierarchical position of authority and introducing herself using her formal title, Ms/Mrs, she introduced herself by her first name. When all the teachers followed suit, this created a joint sense of equality and laid the groundwork for the development of even more collaborative partnerships (Spillane and Coldren, 2011). A sense of equality was crucial in supporting the shared collaboration goal (McMaster, 2014). “Mmm, I was excited, genuinely, at the start, I wasn’t sure it was going to work or anything, because this is the principal of our school listening to students.” This comment by Aisling, one of the students, is an example of how the students in the study reflect the complexities of power dynamics in educational settings and the importance of creating an inclusive environment where students’ voices are heard and valued. Breaking the power dynamic within the team could significantly influence how involving autistic students is perceived in terms of its impact on the processes and operational dynamics of the group. In *Governmentality* (1980), Foucault describes how power functions through governance rather than direct control, encouraging

individuals to regulate themselves within accepted norms. Here, the principal's approach, encouraging equality through informal introductions, functions as a form of governmentality, shaping teachers' and students' self-perceptions and behaviours within the framework of inclusive leadership.

The students' surprise at being heard, as expressed in Aisling's comment, demonstrates how deeply entrenched traditional power relations are in educational institutions. This moment reconfigures expectations of leadership and participation, prompting students to internalise new norms of engagement. Yet, Foucault would argue that this does not necessarily eliminate power asymmetries, rather it repositions authority within a different discourse of student empowerment. Breaking down these power relations requires fostering an atmosphere of open communication. Students should feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, concerns, and suggestions without fear of negative consequences (Allan, 2004). This process highlights the importance of taking inspiration from teachers, school leaders, and researchers, as they find creative ways to work on diversity and use it to achieve inclusion within their practices (Allan, 2023, p. 10). It is about recognising that students, teachers and school leaders are critical stakeholders in leading inclusive education and can provide valuable insights for positive change (Allan, 2023). This aligns with Theme 1: Developing a Critical Perspective and Re-distributing Power and focuses on the impact of the inclusion of autistic pupils within leadership structures in schools. However, it is acknowledged that it requires a reformulation of the power dynamics and roles within schools, how such structures work and how decisions, as a result, impact the running of schools. These impacts may be considered in terms of process and results. Foucault (1980) argues that power is not simply possessed and redistributed but is always circulating, embedded in discourse and institutional structures. If autistic students are incorporated into leadership roles in ways that do not fundamentally alter decision-making power, their inclusion risks becoming a performative exercise rather than a genuine shift in authority.

5.5.7 A Willingness to Co-Construct Leadership

In her every day running of the school, Grainne’s passion for including the voices of all students implies that she values their insights, opinions, and needs. It demonstrates her belief in the importance of empowering students and involving them in shaping the educational institutions they are a part of. This participatory ethos can be understood through a Foucauldian lens as a shift from traditional, hierarchical forms of power to more distributed and relational forms of governance. Grainne states, “I think educating the staff as well with professional development, that’s hugely important. We put on professional development at a whole staff level.” Here, she emphasises the significance of professional development within the educational context. Foucault (1977) highlights how institutions like schools operate through subtle forms of discipline and surveillance, often shaping behaviour and norms through professional expectations. By highlighting the importance of “educating the staff” and asserting that “professional development” is “hugely important,” Grainne is not only promoting continuous learning but also enacting a form of disciplinary power that encourages self-regulation and normative alignment among staff.

Staff members engage in relevant professional learning to develop the capacity of schools to meet the diverse needs of students” (AGPG, 2022, p. 211). This suggests a transformation in the mechanisms of governance, moving from external enforcement to internalised responsibility, a concept Foucault describes as ‘governmentality.’ By making professional development for understanding autistic students and neuro-differences a priority at a ‘whole staff level,’ she is facilitating a system in which inclusive practices are cultivated through collective awareness rather than top-down mandates. Such an approach has the potential to foster critical perspectives, enabling staff to question dominant discourses and broaden their understanding of student diversity. In doing so, power becomes productive rather than repressive, a Foucauldian notion that acknowledges how power circulates and can enable change. As members of the school community become more attuned to the needs of their students, opportunities for collaboration and shared vision emerge. This contributes to the holistic improvement of student experiences and outcomes, potentially leading to higher-quality education, enriched learning

environments, and a more inclusive school culture (Winter and O Raw, 2010).

5.3.8 Fostering Authentic Student-Teacher Partnerships

Fostering authentic student-teacher partnerships was pivotal within the collaborative teams' processes. Trust and mutual respect flourished among leaders, teacher leaders, and students by emphasising shared responsibility, communication, collaboration, and reflection. Foucault (1978, p. 94) highlights that power is not acquired, seized or shared; instead, "power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations." During the initiative meetings, the teachers and leaders observed the growth of these partnerships, recognising their central role in developing a cohesive team focused on solution-oriented strategies. This approach resonates with Cefai and Coopers' (2010) assertion that students are willing to engage with educators when treated fairly, respectfully, and with dignity. Micheal, the deputy principal, shared how his partnership with a student, Brona, blossomed during the initiative, noting her increased confidence and engagement.

Micheal, as deputy principal communicated his experience of hearing the voices of autistic students as "gold", "and to get the advice that we got from the special class students, there, is gold, probably because they'll see things in a different light, in a way that we need to see them." Here, Micheal highlights the importance of actively seeking out the insights of all students, and he suggests that by fostering their voices, the school can create a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment. "I think for it to be successful, you need to bring student voice into it, and the structure is important, and I think you've shown us the way." Ultimately, this approach can potentially enhance the educational experience for everyone involved. The students developed a sense of identity and belonging from their group affiliations. Motivated team members aligned themselves with the group's values and objectives, deepening their commitment to shared goals (Woods and Roberts, 2018).

Consequently, everyone was more inclined to actively engage in group activities,

support fellow members, and contribute to achieving mutual aims related to refining the processes and operational dynamics of the group. Ailish, one of the special class teachers, spoke about how mainstream teachers at St. Aoibhinn's place an emphasis on getting to know the students and how the culture of the school encourages them to work actively to build relationships with them, "I have found there are more mainstream teachers popping into Leap class. Like, it is a conveyor belt of sorts. Yeah, and that just shows that there is no hesitation, and it's not that they're coming down teaching, they're just coming down for chats."

5.3.9 The Role of Relational Care in Student-Teacher Partnerships

In this study, students expressed comfort in how the adults related to them and enabled them to engage authentically in discussions and decision-making processes, emphasising the transformative potential of involving autistic students in such initiatives (Goodall, 2018). Brona supports Aisling's view of their classroom as 'a very safe space', highlighting how relational care nurtured a sense of security and trust. This supportive environment not only facilitated equitable participation but also fostered personal and cognitive development. Through participation, autistic students can develop various skills and abilities, including critical thinking, problem-solving, and social connections (Goodall, 2018; Flynn, 2014; Kenny, McCoy and O'Higgins, 2023). These outcomes highlight the value of co-constructed, inclusive practices in transforming traditional educational spaces into empowering, developmental arenas. This highlights the importance of relational care in developing both the individual and school development (Kinsella, 2018). It introduces new dynamics that dismantle existing power reels and soften hegemonic and institutional forms of regulation (Foucault, 1981).

Saoirse, a special class teacher, observed, "I found, I was so amazed by the students having the confidence talking to management, and they weren't just saying what they thought management wanted to hear." (TLFG). This highlights the power of an educational environment to transform students when it prioritises the students' holistic development, values strong teacher-student relationships, recognises the importance of a hidden curriculum, and empowers students to take an active role in

their learning. Ailish and Saoirse’s experiences serve as a reminder that education is about empowering individuals and countering ableism. By prioritising fostering strong teacher-student relationships, the school can challenge ableist attitudes and marginalising practices, thus enhancing all students’ sense of belonging and well-being (Flynn, 2014; Costley et al. 2021; Pellicano and Heyworth, 2023). The current study highlights the role of teacher leadership in fostering inclusive, collaborative environments where all voices are valued (Flynn, 2014; Pellicano and Heyworth, 2023). However, drawing on Foucault (1972), it also questions whether such initiatives genuinely disrupt exclusionary structures or simply repackage inclusion within existing power hierarchies, maintaining teacher authority rather than truly redistributing it.

5.3.10 Enacting Collaboration in a Safe Space

Theme 2: Enacting Collaboration, became central to answering research question 2, relating to the impact of including autistic students in a collaborative leadership team. Students felt more comfortable having the initiative meetings in their classroom, which reduced the hierarchical nature of meetings and promoted equity and solidarity from the outset. Aisling, one of the students, explained, “Yeah, I liked that it was here because we all just felt so comfortable... If it were up in the office or somewhere else, it would feel very official... you are in the principal’s office, that kind of way.” She added, “So, I kind of feel a bit outside there, and I would not be as comfortable in sharing my ideas as I would be down here.”

The preference for informal, student-centred spaces over institutional offices reflects a subtle resistance to hierarchical surveillance and disciplinary norms which Foucault suggests are embedded within traditional educational structures. The principal’s office represents not just authority, but a site of institutional power, where behaviour is more likely to be monitored and regulated, a classic example of what Foucault (1977) describes in *Discipline and Punish* as the ‘panoptic effect,’ where surveillance becomes internalised, shaping behaviour even without direct supervision. By contrast, the classroom reimagined as a ‘safe space’ operates as a kind of ‘heterotopia’ (Foucault, 1984), or counter-site, where the usual ordering of

institutional space is temporarily suspended, enabling new forms of relationality and agency. The extant literature supports these findings (Goodall, 2015).

In Foucauldian terms, this could be viewed as countering a broader ‘process of subjectivation,’ (Foucault, 1982). a mode through which individuals become subjects shaped by the discourses and practices of power , in which Adults are not neutral but serve as ‘technicians of power’ (Foucault, 1980), subtly guiding student participation in ways that reproduce institutional values under a banner of empowerment.

Inclusive practices aim to create environments where all individuals feel respected and valued (Lundy and Stalford, 2013). They require that policy frameworks and structured participation genuinely enable access, participation and benefit (Ainscow, 2006), and work actively to dismantle any ‘technology of governance’ that manages difference within sanctioned boundaries. Such approaches force participants to ask, are students truly co-constructing policy, or merely adapting to pre-defined institutional roles masked as collaborative choice? Are they being co-opted into a ‘normalising strategy,’ that disciplines diversity by regulating how, where, and under what conditions participation is allowed. Alternatively, are they being invited into processes that radically disrupt power hierarchies, and liberates them from oppressive regimes of ‘truth’

5.3.11 Motivation for Change

Motivation for change played a critical role in the CLI teams’ dynamics throughout the initiative. Moving beyond passive listening, the leadership teams intentionally sought student perspectives, recognising the immense value students could bring to identifying and resolving issues within their school community. Cook-Sather (2006) notes, reimagining leadership demands a challenge to the traditional educational foundations of prediction, control, and management.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the project can be read as a partial rupture in dominant disciplinary structures. When students were empowered to propose, create, and implement actions, they challenged established relations of

power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980). Participation became a site of productive power, enabling new discourses of inclusion and belonging, even as institutional boundaries continued to shape what was sayable and thinkable (Foucault, 1972). Students demonstrated insight into school policies that supported or inhibited their sense of belonging, reflecting the transformative potential of authentic engagement (Fielding, 2006; Mitra, 2006; Flynn, 2014; Goodall, 2015).

Brona's comment about the confusion she faced from peers and teachers when distressed, "They are so lost," exposes a rupture in institutional intelligibility, where behaviour outside normative scripts is misread or misunderstood (Foucault, 1977). This underlines the urgent need for reconstituting discursive fields to centre neurodiverse experiences (Horgan, Kenny, and Flynn, 2022).

Students' insights offer powerful opportunities for school improvement (Mansfield, 2014, 2015), disrupting traditional 'dispositifs' that produce docile subjects (Foucault, 1980; 1982). Robinson and Taylor (2007) stress that authentic student voice initiatives challenge embedded hierarchies, with Fielding (2004) highlighting the 'threat' such initiatives pose to established regimes of truth and power.

A vivid example of these dynamics surfaced in the dialogue between Ben and Grainne regarding the school's courtyard space. Ben proposed an outdoor sensory space; Grainne, while affirming Ben's views, simultaneously explained the institution's limitations and rationales. This interaction becomes a 'micro-site of power negotiation' (Foucault, 1980), where student subjectivity is acknowledged, but institutional frameworks ultimately guide outcomes. From a Foucauldian view, even such moments of authentic responsiveness can operate within a model of 'pastoral power,' where care and regulation intertwine (Foucault, 1982). Thus, while the initiative fostered student agency and visible shifts in school culture, it also illustrated the complex interplay between empowerment and institutional reproduction. Change was negotiated, not revolutionary, operating within the logic of governance that continues to structure relations of power in subtle but enduring ways.

5.4 Research Question 3:

CLI team perceptions of the impact of involving autistic students on its recommendations and action planning

5.4.1 Vision and Culture

Creating an inclusive and learning-focused school culture is critical to effective educational leadership. Principals and leadership teams play a pivotal role in promoting student voice and fostering collaboration through distributed leadership models. By encouraging genuine dialogue, supporting professional development, and prioritising relational care, leaders like Micheal and Saoirse illustrate how meaningful student engagement can transform the school environment. This inclusive approach is particularly impactful for autistic learners, helping them feel valued, connected, and integral to the community, thereby enhancing their educational experience and strengthening the overall school culture.

5.4.2 A Vision of an Inclusive Culture

The principal plays a critical role in fostering an inclusive culture within the school (Winter and O' Raw, 2010), a role that becomes even more pivotal when autistic students are meaningfully involved in team processes. Grainne, as the formal leader, exemplifies a commitment to school reform aligned with principles of equity and inclusivity (Ainscow and Miles, 2008; Booth and Ainscow, 2011; Ainscow, 2020). However, as Kearney and Kane (2006) observe, initiatives aimed at redistributing power often encounter resistance from those embedded within traditional structures. Foucault (1977; 1980) reminds us that power is not simply repressive but productive: it shapes institutional norms, identities, and expectations, making resistance not an aberration but an inevitable feature of change efforts.

In this context, distributed leadership presents challenges. As decision-making decentralises, clarity and accountability must be actively nurtured. Leadership

becomes less about command and more about orchestrating the conditions for collaborative action, what Foucault (1982) describes as the ‘conduct of conduct’. Leaders like Grainne must navigate these dynamics, creating spaces for experimentation while managing the risks inherent in disrupting established orders. Such moments introduce possibilities for ‘discursive rupture’(Foucault, 1972), where new truths about inclusion, ability, and participation may emerge, potentially reshaping the institutional episteme itself.

The involvement of autistic students in leadership structures has far-reaching implications, repositioning them from subjects of intervention to producers of knowledge, challenging entrenched special education discourses (Foucault, 1977). Yet these shifts are not merely about practice; they transform the very conditions under which education and inclusion are conceptualised. As leaders and teams reflected on recommendations and action planning, it became clear that inclusion was framed not only as an ethical commitment but as a managerial task embedded within institutional knowledge systems. Foucault (1980) challenges us to ask: who defines inclusion, and according to whose terms?

Ultimately, change at the level of school culture and classroom practice signals not just adjustments in operational dynamics, but deeper reconfigurations of the power/knowledge networks that constitute educational ‘truths’ (Foucault, 1972; 1982). It is here, in the micro-practices of everyday school life, that the possibilities for a genuinely inclusive future are contested and constructed.

5.4.3 Developing a New School Culture

Developing a new school culture emerged as a significant finding in addressing the third research question. This process involved acknowledging and valuing the diverse expertise within the team to foster an inclusive environment, where autistic students could flourish and co-construct new understandings of difference. Such cultural shifts represent a reconfiguration of institutional discourse, destabilising dominant norms and enabling the emergence of new subjectivities (Foucault, 1980). Authentic student voice demands a ‘rupture of the ordinary’ (Fielding, 2004, p.

296), a transformational process that challenges both teachers and students to reimagine their roles (Kinsella, 2018).

Through active participation, students transitioned from being ‘objects’ of schooling to ‘subjects’ who shape institutional knowledge (Foucault, 1982). This transformation was fostered through relational and dialogic leadership practices, where authority was redistributed through mutual recognition rather than imposed hierarchies. Interactions between students and staff, such as Roisin’s acknowledgment of the new insights gained from students and Grainne’s validation of Ben’s contributions, exemplify moments of discursive reordering where student testimony gains institutional legitimacy (Foucault, 1980).

The emphasis on co-constructing an understanding of difference highlights the role of collaborative learning and shared epistemic authority in transforming school cultures (Milton, 2014). By actively engaging with students’ perspectives, educators shifted from gatekeepers of knowledge to facilitators of meaning, enacting an ethical form of governance centred on dialogue and mutual transformation (Foucault, 1982). As Roisin reflects on adapting her practices based on student feedback, and Grainne publicly supports student contributions, leadership becomes a technology of power that enables growth and inclusion rather than enforcing compliance.

Importantly, this model of co-ownership resists the traditional logic of exclusion that has characterised special education, offering an alternative grounded in relational accountability and shared agency (Foucault, 1977; 1980). By embedding diverse perspectives into the fabric of school decision-making, the initiative laid foundations for sustainable cultural change. In doing so, it aligned with broader calls for educational practices that empower all students, including autistic learners, to shape their own environments (Smyth, 2006; Mitchell, Sheppard and Cassidy, 2021).

To conclude, this form of engagement represents a generative form of resistance, one that contests institutional norms while simultaneously constructing alternative ways of being, knowing, and relating within the educational field (Foucault, 1982).

5.4.4 Developing Collective Agency for Change - becoming a learning school

The collaborative spirit among the CLI team nurtured the co-construction of an inclusive school culture, unsettling dominant narratives around expertise and difference. This shift aligns with Foucault's (1980) view of power as relational, enacted through everyday practices and mutual recognition rather than imposed hierarchies. The initiative transformed leadership and teaching practices by foregrounding dialogue, relational care, and shared ownership of change.

Teachers and students engaged in reciprocal learning, with figures like Roisin highlighting how student feedback informed professional growth. This reflexivity exemplifies Foucault's 'technologies of the self,' where individuals reshape their practices through critical engagement with others (Foucault, 1982). Students, in turn, became epistemic agents, disrupting traditional hierarchies and participating in reshaping institutional knowledge (Foucault, 1980).

Concrete practices, such as rethinking Google Classroom organisation, illustrate how inclusive strategies can redistribute pedagogical power. Student input led to a standardised framework that supports equitable access and aligns with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (CAST, 2018; Flood and Banks, 2021). Consistency across digital platforms reduces cognitive load and promotes engagement for all learners, particularly autistic students, reinforcing education as a dynamic, evolving process.

Moreover, shifts away from passive notetaking towards active engagement highlight a reconfiguration of classroom power relations. As noted by Grainne and Micheal, students increased discursive agency in how they interact with knowledge reflects a broader institutional transformation towards inclusive, participatory learning.

These pedagogical innovations embody a critical ontology of ourselves (Foucault, 1982), where teachers, leaders, and students collaboratively reconstruct educational practices. In line with Fullan's (2011) theory of change, teacher agency flourished through continuous reflection, student engagement, and an ethos of co-

responsibility for learning. This inclusive and collaborative approach lays the foundation for sustainable cultural change, ensuring that all students, including autistic learners, are integral to the shaping of their educational experience.

5.4.5 Learner Empowerment for Change

Ben's comment about understanding teachers' stress reflects a reconfiguration of traditional subject positions. Students moved from passive recipients of education to reflective, empathetic agents, participating in an emerging discourse of care and mutual respect (Foucault, 1980). This transformation disrupted conventional hierarchies, fostering an inclusive environment based on dialogue and co-construction.

This shift resonates with Milton's (2011, 2012) double empathy problem, highlighting the mutual effort required to bridge neurodiverse and neurotypical perspectives. Through relational practices grounded in care and reflexivity, students and educators co-constructed new ways of understanding difference, challenging deficit-based narratives and establishing counter-discourses that valorised diverse voices (Foucault, 1977; 1980).

Students' feelings of empowerment, as expressed by Aisling, Brona, and Ben, illustrate a Foucauldian process of subjectivation, where individuals develop agency within and against institutional structures (Foucault, 1982). Through active participation, students became epistemic agents, shaping their educational environments and contributing to cultural change within the school.

This empowerment is not merely symbolic but generative, expanding students' capacities for critical consciousness and sociopolitical engagement (Freire, 1970; Flynn, 2014). As Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) argue, when students are granted real choice, challenge, and collaboration, motivation and transformative potential are ignited. Within a Foucauldian framework, empowerment becomes a form of counter-conduct, producing new possibilities for being, knowing, and acting (Foucault, 1982).

Recognising students as partners in educational reform not only fosters personal growth but reconstitutes the very discursive fabric of schooling, making inclusion, agency, and relationality central rather than peripheral. This study thus highlights how authentic engagement with student voice can drive sustainable organisational change, offering a model for more just and inclusive educational practices.

5.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the transformative impact of involving autistic students in collaborative leadership initiatives within the school. Through reflective thematic analysis, key themes emerged: redistributing power, enacting collaboration, and co-constructing leadership (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2020). Framed through a Foucauldian lens, these practices disrupt dominant power relations and normative discourses within educational institutions (Foucault, 1977; 1980). Rather than simply opposing institutional norms, student voice and teacher agency function as productive forces that reshape them (Ball, 2013).

The creation of inclusive environments that value diverse perspectives (Fielding, 2007; Emerson and Costley, 2023) represents a reconfiguration of subject positions, enabling previously marginalised voices to participate in knowledge production and institutional governance.

Findings from the initiative suggest that a shift toward empathy, mutual understanding, and shared responsibility challenges prevailing disciplinary mechanisms and opens spaces for counter-discourses of participation and empowerment (Flynn, 2014; Milton, 2012). Students, teachers, and leaders engaged in open dialogue, destabilised traditional hierarchies, and collaboratively shaped practices that resist normative scripts of ableism and compliance (Harris and Spillane, 2008; Fullan, 2011; Foucault, 1980). In doing so, they subverted conventional power/knowledge structures and laid foundations for continuous co-creation of an inclusive culture where all participants are recognised as agents of change (King and Stevenson, 2017).

This approach aligns with broader educational theories of distributed leadership (Harris, 2013) and UDL (CAST, 2018), reinforcing the importance of listening, collaboration, and mutual respect. Viewed through a Foucauldian perspective, such practices are acts of ethical self-formation and collective agency, disrupting institutional norms and advancing a more just and equitable educational space (Foucault, 1980; Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Chapter 6: Recommendations and Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

The final chapter will conclude the thesis by consolidating its key findings and drawing out some the key implications of these. It will offer a reflexive section from the author on the experience of carrying out this research study and outline how the findings contribute to new knowledge. Recommendations will be made with consideration of the broader implications for policy, practice, and future research. It will comment on the strengths and limitations of the research, drawing out some lessons from the conduct of this work and making recommendations for future studies in the area., It will conclude by offering summative insights and reflections.

6.2 Summary of Findings

This study asked three research questions, which were set out in Chapter 1; the first question asked was how the CLI team participants perceived the value of including autistic students in their work. Several themes were developed that informed this question. These themes were used to delve into the micro-politics of change within the educational setting studied, in ways that emphasised the power dynamics operating there, and illustrated how power influenced decision-making processes regarding inclusion at that site. Findings supported literature that highlights the value of including traditionally marginalised learner voices (Flynn, 2014; Goodall, 2018; Goodall and MacKenzie, 2018; Horgan, Kenny and Flynn, 2022) in facilitating a shift towards authentic distributed/collaborative forms of leadership towards more inclusive practice (Winter and O Raw, 2010; Woods and Roberts, 2018). It pointed to the value of, creating a ‘safe space’ for autistic students to participate in authentic collaborative initiatives. The familiar classroom setting facilitated open communication and authentic engagement for the students, contributing to the success of the initiative and fostering a sense of student empowerment (Goodall, 2018; Flynn, 2014; Kenny McCoy and O’Higgins, 2023).

Lastly, findings emerged to support the principal's role as pivotal in shaping the school culture and promoting inclusivity. Evidence from the literature supports this finding where it is suggested that the principal's commitment to student voice and ongoing professional development highlights the importance of leadership in fostering inclusive practices and empowering all members of the school community (Winter and O Raw, 2010; Gentilucci and Muto, 2007; Surian and Damini, 2014).

The second question explored how the team members perceived the impact of involving autistic students in the team on its processes and operational dynamics. The findings to question two highlight the complexities of power dynamics (Foucault, 1970) in education (Allan, 1996) and the importance of fostering inclusive environments where students' voices are valued (Fielding, 2004; Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Flynn, 2014). It highlights the significance of breaking down power relations and fostering open communication channels for students to express their thoughts without fear. It emerged that engaging students in the decision-making process is key to promoting a sense of belonging, and it also has the potential to empower students (Mansfield, 2014, 2015). The literature supports this by highlighting that authentic student-teacher partnerships, which develop through relational care, are central to developing collaborative teams engaging with solution-focused strategies, where the motivation for change is driven by actively seeking out and valuing student perspectives, ultimately leading to tangible improvements in the educational experience for all (Flynn, 2014; Goodall, 2015, 2018).

Research question three asked how the members of the collaborative leadership team perceived the impact of involving autistic students regarding the outcomes (recommendations and action planning for the future) generated by the team. The findings emphasise the importance of exploring the development of a new school culture (Kinsella, 2018), the process of co-constructing an acknowledgement and acceptance of differences within the educational community and the potential for empowerment among students and teachers. The findings suggest that creating an inclusive culture that values diverse perspectives has the potential to empower all individuals, and in particular autistic students (Goodall, 2015, 2018, 2020). Through the teams' collaborative efforts and meaningful engagement with the students,

teachers, leaders, and students worked together to foster empathy, open communication, and mutual respect (Costley et al., 2021; Pellicano and Heyworth, 2023). This approach not only enhanced the experience for neurodiverse students but also has the potential to promote personal growth, motivation, and engagement for all students (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012). By prioritising student voice and embracing diverse viewpoints, it is suggested that this study lays the groundwork for sustainable organisational change and continuous improvement within the schools (Kinsella, 2018).

6.3 Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity is “the act of examining one’s own assumption, belief, and judgement systems, and thinking carefully and critically about how these influence the research process. The practice of reflexivity confronts and questions who we are as researchers and how this guides our work” (Jamieson, Govaart, and Pownall, 2023). Engaging in this study has been a profoundly transformative experience, both professionally and personally, for me. As a teacher and researcher, I have always believed in inclusive education, where all students are educated together and can learn from each other. However, my journey through this research has deepened my understanding of what true inclusion means, especially for autistic students.

From the outset, prioritising student voices within the traditional educational framework was a significant challenge. I became increasingly aware of how power operates within educational settings, and how, drawing on Foucauldian theory, the act of giving voice and agency to marginalised students becomes a form of resistance to dominant discourses and normalising structures that often define what is considered acceptable knowledge and behaviour in schools. The established hegemony of power and rigid norms in schools often unintentionally silence the voices that need to be heard the most. Giving autistic students a platform to express their perspectives was a significant shift in mind-set and power dynamics. However, the courage shown by the collaborative leadership team in embracing this challenge reaffirmed my belief in the possibility of innovation for meaningful change.

Throughout the research study, I consistently monitored my own thoughts on these subjects as the results emerged. I made a conscious effort to let the student voices take precedence, aware of the need to minimise my own biases. I recorded reflective journal entries after each initiative meeting and focus group discussion to achieve this. These entries became memos in my data set, aiding my analytical process during the coding and interpretation of the interview data. Additionally, I regularly consulted with my research supervisors, who challenged my thinking and provided invaluable support. This helped me to step back from my professional experiences and better understand the findings emerging from the research.

One of the most enlightening aspects of the study was seeing how establishing a safe space and fostering partnerships rooted in relational care for all participants allowed students to express themselves freely, which significantly alleviated their anxiety about uncertainty. The concept of IU (Hodgson et al., 2015) resonated deeply with me. Seeing how a supportive environment where students felt genuinely heard and respected could alleviate their discomfort was both humbling and inspiring. It highlighted the immense potential of schools, where schools must become havens of security and acceptance, fostering an atmosphere where all students, particularly those with autism, can thrive.

Furthermore, delving into Damien Milton's double empathy problem provided a critical lens through which to understand the reciprocal nature of miscommunication between neurodiverse and neurotypical individuals. This aspect of the research was particularly poignant for me. It highlighted the importance of fostering mutual understanding and empathy, not just from the teachers and leaders towards autistic students but also vice versa. Realising that the gap in understanding is a two-way street was a pivotal moment in my journey, reinforcing the need for proactive efforts to bridge this divide through empathy, patience, and open communication.

Reflecting on the outcomes of involving autistic students in the collaborative leadership team, I am struck by the impact their inclusion had on the overall group, on the dynamics of the group while working together, and in the decision-making processes which resulted in a high-quality action report which was produced by the group. Their insights and perspectives not only identified barriers to inclusion but

also paved the way for innovative, solution-focused strategies. This experience taught me the invaluable lesson that those who are often perceived as needing help actually hold the key to many of the solutions we seek. Empowering students by valuing their input fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility that is crucial for sustainable change.

Finally, the most rewarding aspect of this study has been witnessing the growth and empowerment of the students involved. Their journey from feeling marginalised, excluded at times or on the periphery to becoming active contributors to school policy and practice was a testament to the power of this inclusive initiative and a taste of what inclusion could actually be. It reinforced my belief that what is essential for a few can indeed be beneficial for all. Creating an inclusive culture that embraces diverse perspectives not only supports autistic students but enriches the entire school community, promoting personal growth, empathy, and respect. I have long been 'alive' to issues of inequity in education, acutely aware of the uneven playing field many students face. However, engaging with Foucault's ideas throughout this research has offered me a conceptual framework with which to make sense of how power is structured, maintained, and reproduced within educational institutions. This theoretical lens has helped me interpret the nuanced dynamics at play and will continue to guide my critical approach to inclusion and equity going forward.

In conclusion, this study has profoundly influenced my approach to education. It has reinforced the importance of listening to and valuing every student's voice, especially those who are often unheard. It has also highlighted the critical role of collaborative leadership in fostering an inclusive, empathetic, and supportive educational environment. Moving forward, I am committed to advocating for and implementing these principles in my work, with the hope of contributing to a more inclusive and equitable education for all students.

6.4 Implications and Recommendations for Creating a More Inclusive Environment in Schools

In today's educational landscape, fostering inclusive environments and practices is paramount to ensuring the success and well-being of all students. Schools must explore various avenues and frameworks to guide their endeavours to become more inclusive. The following three sections outline recommendations for policy and practice to support school reform in the areas of professional development for school leadership, SSE, co-creating differences, and UDL to move towards a more inclusive school culture. Each of these areas offers unique opportunities for schools to enhance their inclusivity and effectiveness in meeting the diverse needs of their student populations.

6.4.1 Continuous Professional Development for Leadership

The potential of professional development for school leadership will be explored, beginning with an examination of how it can serve as a strategic response to a school's aspirations for greater inclusivity. Exploring the significance of professional development highlights its role in enhancing understanding and support for neurodiverse students. Evidence suggests that a proactive approach equips school leaders with the necessary tools and insights to cultivate inclusive environments where all students can thrive.

This leads to a necessary consideration of how initial teacher education can address emergent principals' needs in relation to equity and leadership. Future leaders must be equipped to foster a culture of listening to students and understanding social justice. Educational programs should include courses that examine the relationship between neurodiversity, disability, and ableist attitudes, alongside broader structural inequities, to prepare leaders capable of recognising and addressing these embedded barriers within schools.

Emergent leaders must also develop a critical understanding of how environmental factors, teaching practices, and material resources perpetuate systemic inequities, particularly for historically marginalised students. Schools require leaders who can

act as collaborators in reform initiatives, working alongside students and colleagues to challenge institutional practices that reproduce societal injustices.

Here, Foucault's (1977) notion of power as diffused rather than possessed becomes salient. Power circulates through discourses, relationships, and institutional practices, meaning that leadership is not simply a top-down function, but an ongoing negotiation enacted through everyday interactions. Recognising this invites school leaders to discern how both explicit policies and subtle norms regulate which voices are amplified and which are silenced. Professional development, therefore, should not only prepare leaders to disrupt dominant discourses but also to create spaces where marginalised voices are actively heard and valued.

Mansfield (2017) stresses that emergent leaders must have access to leadership development that offers conceptual underpinnings necessary for advancing social justice leadership. Leadership programmes should move beyond generalised methods courses, offering training that empowers future leaders to facilitate student voice initiatives, conduct equity audits, and foster participatory practices such as student-led focus groups. In doing so, leaders move beyond traditional hierarchical models, stepping toward more democratic and inclusive school communities.

It is indeed a paradox, as Mansfield (2017) notes, that sharing power can strengthen leadership rather than diminish it. By recognising students as genuine partners in the educational process, school leaders not only enhance their own effectiveness but also foster deeper school reform. Professors in leadership programmes and practicing school leaders alike should embrace the often-unexpected insights students bring, understanding that true leadership lies not in controlling outcomes but in cultivating collective wisdom.

At the core of this argument is the proposition that educational leaders must enact a Foucauldian shift from hierarchical control to distributed, participatory forms of leadership. Only by engaging authentically with the ethics of inclusion and grappling with the complexities of power can school leaders create learning environments where all students can have the opportunity to thrive.

6.4.2 School Self-Evaluation Process

The SSE process is a valuable tool for fostering school development and collaborative internal improvement (McNamara et al., 2011). By gathering input from diverse stakeholders, it provides meaningful insights into the lived experiences of the school community (O'Brien et al., 2021). However, concerns remain about its limited impact on the wider teaching community, pointing to a need for more participatory and systemic approaches (O'Brien et al., 2021).

In response, this study advocates for a more comprehensive model of SSE leadership that integrates both top-down and bottom-up strategies (Fullan, 1993; Stoll and Fink, 1996). Collaborative teams, supported by strong leadership, can systematically examine curriculum, instruction, assessment, and support systems to identify priorities for action. A bottom-up approach empowers teachers and fosters professional agency, while top-down structures provide the necessary support to implement new strategies effectively (King, 2017). Such environments are particularly important for enabling autistic students to participate meaningfully in decision-making about their education (Goodall, 2018).

Viewed through a Foucauldian lens, SSE can be understood as a mechanism through which power circulates relationally, rather than being exercised solely through hierarchical structures (Foucault, 1977). Inclusive and participatory self-evaluation processes can resist traditional models of surveillance and normalisation, exposing and challenging dominant discourses about what is valued in education and whose voices are legitimised in decision-making.

The success of SSE ultimately relies on cultivating collective responsibility, professional trust, and collaborative practice (O'Brien et al., 2015). To support systemic cultural change, schools are encouraged to set clear, shared goals based on self-evaluation findings, which should inform structured action plans detailing specific steps, resources, and timelines (Kinsella, 2018). In this study, an action plan was developed over a five-week initiative, with one action agreed upon each week and presented to the Board of Management (BOM) for approval. While initial implementation occurred, it was recognised that the impact of these actions would require ongoing evaluation, underscoring the need for robust systems for data

collection and outcome assessment (O'Brien et al., 2021). The research model demonstrated how participatory approaches promote collaboration, build consensus, and mobilise collective efforts among students, teachers, and school leaders towards inclusive school development (Kinsella, 2018; Goodall, 2019), with regular monitoring ensuring that St. Aoibhinn's self-evaluation efforts remain responsive and aligned with shared objectives.

6.4.3 Co-creating Difference: Moving Towards a More Inclusive School Culture

Schools can cultivate critical consciousness by fostering diversity and implementing inclusive policies and practices. This consciousness equips the school community with the necessary attitudes, skills, and understanding to flourish in a diverse society (NCSE, 2024). Co-creating difference within schools significantly supports inclusion by creating environments where diversity is not only acknowledged but celebrated. Cultural knowledge and pedagogical approaches that emphasise diversity also cultivate empathy, democratic participation, personal agency, and a deep respect for varied ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, and social backgrounds (Lac and Mansfield, 2018; Pike, Kearney and Lucas, 2023).

Incorporating diverse perspectives, representations, histories, and contributions across the curriculum ensures all students see themselves reflected in their learning. This includes broadening literature selections, historical narratives, scientific achievements, and cultural studies to challenge dominant canons. Drawing on Foucauldian theory, the curriculum can be understood as a site of power, shaping norms, identities, and hierarchies through what it includes and excludes (Foucault, 1977). Embedding multiple voices disrupts traditional narratives and resists the normalising effects of dominant discourses, offering space for counter-narratives that empower marginalised students.

Pedagogical practices such as group projects, collaborative learning activities, and community service initiatives can further reconfigure relational power in classrooms. These approaches promote belonging by enabling students from diverse

abilities, backgrounds, and perspectives to work toward shared goals (Slavin, 2014; Goodall, 2018). Engaging students in discussions, role-plays, and real-world projects addressing social justice, equity, and inclusion fosters empathy and a deeper respect for others lived experiences.

Central to this process is recognising students not merely as recipients of education but as co-creators of their learning environments. Partnership models in education, defined as collaborative, reciprocal processes where all participants contribute equally (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 6), emphasise this shift. Co-creation and negotiated curricula, as proposed by Bron et al. (2018), further enable collective ownership of learning and school culture.

The findings of this study support empowering students to assume leadership roles in advancing inclusion. Student-led diversity clubs, participatory decision-making forums, and advocacy opportunities create avenues for real engagement. Equitable access to resources, including educational materials, technology, and support services, is essential to ensure that all students, regardless of background or ability, have meaningful opportunities to contribute.

Thus, fostering critical consciousness through inclusive curriculum design, participatory pedagogy, and empowered student leadership enables schools to create environments where difference is co-created and valued. This approach moves beyond rhetoric to practical transformation, equipping school communities with the necessary foundations to thrive in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

6.4.4 Universal Design for Learning

Over the last two decades, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework has emerged as a key pedagogical approach to challenge the conventional ‘one size fits all’ curriculum still prevalent in many classrooms (CAST, 2018; Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014). UDL recognises learner diversity and provides guidelines to promote flexibility and choice in both how students learn and demonstrate knowledge (Chardin and Novak, 2023). While some interpret UDL as a checklist or flexible model, it is best understood as a dynamic toolkit that informs planning and

practice (Meo, 2008), enabling curriculum adaptation to enhance access, participation, and progress for all (King Sears, 2009).

UDL's three core principles, engagement, representation, and expression, guide educators in designing meaningful, multimodal learning experiences (CAST, 2018). In this study, these principles informed one key action: developing consistent learning practices across digital platforms using multiple forms of representation. This initiative encouraged educators to reflect critically on pedagogy and prompted the suggestion that these UDL principles could also inform leadership. By tailoring communication and fostering inclusive team environments, leaders can support equitable participation and contribution from all members.

UDL's inherent flexibility aligns with inclusive leadership and helps reduce the impact of IU and the double empathy gap. When embedded into leadership, UDL fosters cultures of equity and belonging, promoting autonomy while enabling individuals to reach their potential. Drawing on the study's findings, a pragmatic model is proposed: collaborative leadership underpinned by UDL to support authentic student participation in school policy development. Here, UDL becomes more than a technical tool, it evolves into a relational and ethical stance, a 'way of being' that reshapes leadership and redefines school culture (Browder et al., 2021; Novak and Rodriguez, 2018).

From a Foucauldian lens, UDL-informed leadership resists normative discourses around 'ability' and 'success' (Foucault, 1977; Allan, 2008), favouring distributed agency and valuing difference as central to knowledge and decision-making (Senge et al., 2012). This counters hegemonic models of compliance, advancing co-agency and relational inclusion (Slee, 2011). Learning environments thus become intentional spaces of access and empowerment (Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014; Chardin and Novak, 2023), echoing Foucault's insight that space and discourse shape power (Gore, 1998; Graham, 2007). Culture, viewed through this lens, is an evolving ecology shaped by daily practices and negotiated belonging (Kemmis et al., 2014), with UDL offering a transformative framework for redefining inclusion (Floriano and Black-Hawkins, 2011; Waitoller and Artiles, 2013).

6.5 Contributions to New Knowledge

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge in the critical area of leadership for autistic voice, addressing the challenges of anxiety, uncertainty, and the need for safe, supportive environments within educational settings. By prioritising the perspectives of autistic students, it presents a novel approach to student engagement, challenging traditional norms and promoting a strengths-based, solution-focused framework for inclusive leadership (Bertrand, 2014; Welton, Mansfield and Lee, 2015; Goodall, 2019).

The research further illuminates how collaborative leadership, and inclusive practices can mitigate the impact of IU for autistic students, fostering spaces where they feel empowered to unmask and participate fully (Costley et al., 2021; Pellicano and Heyworth, 2023). Central to this approach is the recognition of the double empathy problem, highlighting the necessity for reciprocal understanding and proactive efforts to genuinely embrace neurodiverse perspectives, thereby enhancing communication and mutual respect within school communities (Milton, 2012; 2015).

Through these contributions, the research offers a pathway for developing more critically inclusive and empathetic educational environments, environments where difference is not merely accommodated but valued as integral to the collective growth of all students.

6.5.1 Leadership for Autistic Voice

Engaging student voice in schools is not easy (Bertrand, 2014; Welton et al., 2015; Goodall, 2019). Prioritising the perspectives of autistic students, in particular, challenges deeply entrenched norms and presents an even more ambitious goal. Nobody has tried this before; it is a novel approach requiring a brave and innovative mindset. It demands significant resources and, importantly, a willingness to venture into uncharted waters. Fear of uncharted waters, of confronting the unfamiliar and unsettling established practices, could easily derail efforts to authentically include autistic students in school reform initiatives.

Building on this recognition, this study has proposed a collaborative leadership paradigm that partners school leaders, teacher leaders, and student leaders to create opportunities for disrupting traditional power dynamics, identifying barriers to inclusion, and co-constructing more inclusive practices. Rather than repeating conventional models, the leadership team developed a framework rooted in the creation of safe spaces, authentic listening, and the recognition of difference, essential foundations for fostering meaningful student participation.

A strengths-based, solution-focused approach underpins this model, encouraging students to use their voices not merely to identify problems but to co-develop pathways toward inclusion. Recognising that students often know best how to support themselves fosters a sense of ownership, responsibility, and authentic investment in school policy and practice (Goodall, 2019; Kenny, McCoy and O'Higgins, 2023). In this study, students demonstrated the capacity to critically identify barriers and to propose practical, solution-oriented changes, reinforcing the value of student voice not as a token gesture but as a fundamental driver of inclusion.

This evidence supports a broader principle: what is essential for some is beneficial for all. As Slee (2001, p.116) contends, "Inclusive education is not about special needs; it is about all students." Inclusion must move beyond rhetoric to cultivate a genuine culture of listening, one where every student is recognised as an expert on their own experience and an active contributor to the school's collective future.

6.5.2 Anxiety, Ambivalence of Uncertainty: Creating Safe Spaces

The findings of this study can contribute to new knowledge in the area of anxiety, uncertainty and autism by shedding light on how inclusive practices and collaborative leadership can help address this issue within an educational context. As highlighted in the literature, IU refers to an individual's discomfort or inability to cope with ambiguous or uncertain situations, which can manifest in various forms, including resistance to change or reluctance to embrace diverse perspectives (Hodgson et al., 2015). This study emphasised the importance of creating an

inclusive environment where all voices, including those of traditionally marginalised, such as autistic students, are valued and respected. By actively involving the autistic students in the CLI and providing them with a ‘safe space’ to express themselves, the study demonstrates how developing collaborative teams where autistic students build partnerships with teachers in a ‘safe’ and ‘caring’ environment can help reduce IU which in turn allows students unmask (Costley et al., 2021) and truly participate (Goodall, 2018; Pellicano and Heyworth, 2023). When students feel heard and included, they may become more open to embracing uncertainty and navigating change.

6.5.3 Acknowledging, Understanding and Accepting Differences

This research deepens our understanding of neuro-differences beyond empathy by highlighting the structural roots of miscommunication. Drawing on Milton’s (2012) double empathy problem, it reveals how differing cognitive styles can lead to reciprocal misunderstandings, often exacerbated by interpretive uncertainty (Costley et al., 2021). Viewed through a Foucauldian lens, these dynamics are shaped by institutional discourses that normalise neurotypical communication, marginalising neurodiverse perspectives.

Rather than framing empathy as goodwill, the study positions it as a form of resistance against normative power. Autistic students were empowered not as passive recipients but as epistemic agents shaping inclusion within their school. This disrupted hierarchical structures, embraced uncertainty as a productive space, and legitimised neurodiverse discourse.

The study shows that addressing the double empathy gap requires structural change. Through collaborative leadership, an inclusive ethos emerged where autistic students’ perspectives informed policy and practice, demonstrating the real potential for power redistribution in schools.

Looking ahead, the study proposes involving autistic students in all school working teams. This shifts inclusion from accommodation to co-agency, challenging historical hierarchies and promoting epistemic justice. Schools can thus reimagine

themselves as sites of shared authority and negotiated meaning—a hallmark of neuro-affirming practice.

6.6 Research Strengths and Limitations

This study provides a nuanced exploration of autistic student inclusion through the lens of collaborative leadership, emphasising the critical role of school leadership in fostering inclusive environments. By centring student participation, the research contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for authentic student voice in educational reform. Drawing on Foucault’s concepts of power and discourse, the study examines how institutional norms shape who is heard and whose knowledge is legitimised, positioning inclusion as a political and ethical challenge rather than a procedural one. In this context, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) emerges not only as a pedagogical framework but as a strategic ‘way of being’ of redistributing power, promoting flexibility, accessibility, and co-agency in both learning and leadership. The findings highlight the benefits of open communication and genuine engagement, particularly for students whose voices are often marginalised, promoting a sense of belonging and empowerment.

However, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, as participants’ perceptions may not fully encapsulate the complexities faced by autistic students across diverse contexts. Additionally, while the study highlights the pivotal role of principals in driving inclusive practices, it may not sufficiently account for the variability in support and resources across different schools, potentially affecting the generalisability of the findings.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights that can inform practices in similar educational contexts. Schools with comparable structures and challenges may find the collaborative leadership model adaptable to their unique needs, fostering environments where all students, including those who are neurodiverse, are supported and valued.

6.7 Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, future research could incorporate a broader range of educational settings and longitudinal designs to assess the sustainability of inclusive practices over time. Employing mixed methods within a case study approach would be particularly valuable, as it enables a rich, contextualised understanding of complex educational phenomena. Quantitative data can provide measurable insights into the impact of student involvement on outcomes such as engagement and achievement, while qualitative data offers depth through the lived experiences and perspectives of participants. This combination allows for triangulation, enhancing the validity of findings and offering a more holistic view of how inclusive practices unfold within specific school contexts. Such an approach is well-suited to exploring the nuanced interactions between policy, practice, and individual agency, particularly in diverse and evolving educational environments.

Further studies should also examine the scalability of collaborative leadership models, with attention to how systemic barriers might be addressed or mitigated across varied educational contexts. Key areas for development include strategies for fostering authentic student leadership among marginalised groups, such as autistic students, and identifying the structural shifts necessary to sustain equitable and inclusive school cultures.

Deepening the investigation into how power is redistributed within leadership teams, particularly the relational dynamics between students, teachers, and school leaders, remains a critical area for exploration. Understanding how these power shifts influence decision-making processes, and the long-term viability of inclusive practices would offer valuable insights for educational reform. In particular, fostering authentic student leadership across all marginalised groups, has the potential to transform inclusion from a reactive policy into a proactive, shared ethos. This approach not only challenges entrenched hierarchies but creates a genuinely inclusive culture where diverse experiences inform school policy and practice from the ground up.

Recommendations for future researchers include maintaining a critical lens on the power dynamics embedded in school structures, ensuring the meaningful

participation of all stakeholders, and designing adaptable frameworks that support context-specific implementation. Such research could significantly advance the ongoing project of reimagining schools as spaces of shared authority, relational belonging, and epistemic justice.

6.8 Final Comments and Conclusion

In reflection, this study has been an invaluable experience, offering deep insights into the intersection of student voice, rights, social justice, and empowerment within inclusive education. Witnessing the active involvement of autistic students in the LFI team was particularly powerful, leading to tangible changes in policy and practice and demonstrating the transformative potential of co-created leadership. The research process itself reflected the very values it sought to advance, equity, authentic participation, and relational care, and showed how inclusive leadership can challenge established power structures to foster a more just, empowering school culture for all students, particularly those historically marginalised.

Completing this research has profoundly shaped my professional path, leading to a new role with the NCSE where I can continue pursuing my passion for inclusive education. In this position, I am committed to driving cultural change across schools, amplifying student voice, and embedding active student participation in decision-making processes. I aim to help build educational systems rooted in shared responsibility, relational trust, and equity, environments where every student feels empowered, valued, and included. This role offers the opportunity to continue advocating for a system where inclusive leadership is not simply an aspiration but a lived, daily reality for all members of the school community.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Plain Language Statement for Adult Participants and Parents of Participant students

Dear Participant,

My name is Rachel Ryan, and I am currently an Ed.D (Doctorate in Education) student at the Institute of Education Dublin City University under the supervision of Dr. Neil Kenny, Dr. Aoife Brennan and Dr. Eamonn McCauley. I am researching the impact of including autistic learners in a collaborative leadership for inclusion team. Students attending the school who have been identified through their psychological report as being autistic and following a phone call requesting their parents' permission, will be invited to take part in the study. There will be six adult participants in the study and three student participants, nine participants in total in the study. The study will begin in May 2021 and end in January 2022. The research aims to explore: More about how teachers and students can work together to bring about change in their school.

- How students could feel more included in decisions made at their school.
- How students could feel more included in school in the future.
- How to help students become leaders of change.
- How to help students feel that their opinion on school life is important to their teachers, Principal and Deputy Principal.

You(r) (son/daughter) are (is) invited to take part in this study. The study will comprise of an initiative that will involve participation in six collaborative leadership meetings, which include student participation (those assessed as being on the Autism Spectrum). The meetings will be video recorded and transcribed. At the meetings, the School's policies and practices will be examined to identify areas of school practice that require development for students on the Autistic Spectrum with the aim of producing plan of action for change at the end of the six meetings.

You(r) (son/daughter) will then be invited to take part in an interview after all the meetings take place. The interview will last about 40 minutes (30 minutes for students). The purpose of the interview is to collect more detailed information on the experience of being part of a group that involves student participation and to gather information about the group's development of an 'action plan' for change. The interview will be recorded on a digital audio device and transcribed to help me write up the findings. Participation is entirely voluntary, and I will offer you a summary of the findings on completing the thesis. No personal information, no details of your (son/daughter's) school and no identifying features will be included in the thesis. Complete anonymity, however, cannot be guaranteed, as there may be a chance that you(r) (son/daughter's) identity could become known when you(r) (son/daughter) participate in a small study, but every effort will be made to prevent this. The findings of this research will appear in a thesis and may be published. Information supplied is subject to the established legal limits on confidentiality. Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions. You, (your son/daughter) can withdraw at any stage from the study without explanation, however, data collected up to the point of withdrawal will be reported in the findings. There are no financial costs involved in carrying out this research project. I would be very grateful if you would agree to assist me in my research and facilitate me by participating in the study. If you have questions about the research, I can be contacted by email at rachel.ryan55@mail.dcu.ie If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, email rec@dcu.ie. All data will

be held on a password-protected computer. If you wish to contact the DCU Data Protection Officer, Mr. Martin Ward, please email data.protection@dcu.ie.

Participants have the right to lodge a complaint with the Irish Data Protection Commission. All records will be disposed of

appropriately within seven years, in accordance with DCU Data Protection Policy.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Ryan

Appendix B: Plain Language Statement for Teacher

Dear Participant,

My name is Rachel Ryan, and I am currently an Ed.D (Doctorate in Education) student at the Institute of Education Dublin City University under the supervision of Dr. Neil Kenny, Dr Aoife Brennan and Dr. Eamonn McCauley. I am researching the impact of including autistic learners a collaborative leadership for inclusion team. Students attending the school who have been identified through their psychological report as autistic and following a phone call requesting their parents' permission, will be invited to take part in the study. It is intended that there will be six adult participants in the study and three student participants, nine participants in total in the study. The study will begin in May 2021 and end in January 2022. The research aims to explore more about how teachers and students can work together to bring about change in their school.

- How students could feel more included in decisions made at their school.
- How students could feel more included in school in the future.
- How to help students become a leader of change.
- How to help students feel that their opinion on school life is important to their teachers, Principal and Deputy Principal.

You are invited to take part in this study. The study will comprise of an initiative that will involve participation in six collaborative leadership meetings, which include student participation (those assessed as being on the Autism Spectrum). The meetings will be video recorded and transcribed. At the meetings, the school's policies and practices will be examined to identify areas of school practice that

require development for students on the Autistic Spectrum with the aim of producing plan of action for change at the end of the six meetings. You will then be invited to take part in an interview after all the meetings take place. The interview will last about 40 minutes. The purpose of the interview is to collect more detailed information on the experience of being part of a group that involves student participation and to gather information about the group's development of an 'action plan' for change. The interview will be recorded on a digital audio device and transcribed to help me write up the findings. Participation is entirely voluntary, and I will offer you a summary of the findings on completing the thesis. No personal information, no details of your school and no identifying features will be included in the thesis. Complete anonymity, however, cannot be guaranteed, as there may be a chance that your identity could become known when you participate in a small study, but every effort will be made to prevent this. The findings of this research will appear in a thesis and may be published. Information supplied is subject to the established legal limits on confidentiality. Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

You can withdraw at any stage from the study without explanation, however, data collected up to the point of withdrawal will be reported in the findings. There are no financial costs involved in carrying out this research project. I would be very grateful if you would agree to assist me in my research and facilitate me by participating in the study.

If you have questions about the research, I can be contacted by email at rachel.ryan55@mail.dcu.ie If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, email rec@dcu.ie. All data will be held on a password-protected computer. If you wish to contact the DCU Data Protection Officer, Mr. Martin Ward, please email data.protection@dcu.ie. Participants have the right to lodge a complaint with the Irish Data Protection

Commission. All records will be disposed of appropriately within seven years, in accordance with DCU Data Protection Policy.

Yours Sincerely,

Rachel Ryan

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form Adult Participants Teachers and Parents

Invitation to participate in a research study

You(r) (son/daughter) are(is) invited to take part in a research study for a Doctoral Thesis. This form provides you with information about the study. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not you want (your son/daughter) to take part.

Introduction to the research study

The purpose of this exploratory single-site case study is to explore the impact of including autistic learners on the processes and products of a collaborative leadership for inclusion team operating in a mainstream Irish post-primary school. Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language I invite you(r) (son/daughter) to take part in my study. The study will comprise of an initiative that will involve participation in six collaborative leadership meetings, which include student participation (students assessed as being on the Autism Spectrum). The meetings will be video recorded and transcribed. At the meetings, the school's policies and practices will be examined with the intention of identifying areas of school practice that are problematic or require development to support students on the Autistic Spectrum with the goal of producing an action plan for change at the end of the six meetings.

You(r) (son/daughter) will be invited to participate in an interview after the six meetings have taken place. The interview will last about 40 minutes (30 minutes for student participants). The purpose of the interview is to collect more detailed information on the experience of being part of a group that involves student

participation and to gather information about the group's development of an 'action plan' for change. The interview will be recorded on a digital audio device and transcribed to help me write up the findings.

Potential benefits

The research aims to explore:

- More about how teachers and students can work together to bring about change in their school.
- How students could feel more included in decisions made at their school.
- How students could feel more included in school in the future.
- How to help students become a leader of change.
- How to help students feel that their opinion on school life is important to their teachers, Principal and Deputy Principal.

Confidentiality, storage, and future use of data

I will ensure that your name (student's name) will not be attached to any data. I will use codes instead of names. The data will be kept in a password protected Google Drive folder. Interview recordings will only be accessible to me. The recordings will be used to complete my thesis, but no identifying information will be included. The recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. The consent form signed by you may be looked at by my supervisors. Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law; it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim, or mandated reporting by some professions. Hard copy data will be destroyed by means of shredding on completion of the research. Soft copy (digital) data will be held in a password protected Google Drive folder for 5 years; this will be completely deleted. As the main researcher I,

Rachel Ryan will take responsibility for deleting all data. There are no financial costs involved in carrying out this research project.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. You(r) (son/ daughter) may change your mind and withdraw from participation in the study at any time. If You(r) (son/ daughter) withdraw from the study, the data provided up to that point will be used to write up the thesis.

Contact Information

The researcher carrying out this study is Rachel Ryan, who is an EdD student in the School of Education, DCU. If you have questions, you may email me at rachel.ryan55@dcu.mail.ie. If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Telephone 01-7008000, email rec@dcu.ie
Interview Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me) Yes/No

I understand the information provided Yes/No

I understand the information provided in relation to data protection Yes/No

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study Yes/No

I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions Yes/No

I am aware that my interview will be audio recorded Yes/No

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researcher, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent for my son/daughter to take part in this research project.

Participants Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Informed Assent Form Student Participants

Invitation to participate in a research study

You invited to take part in a research study for a Doctoral Thesis. This form provides you with information about the study. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not you want to take part.

Introduction to the research study

The purpose of this study is to find out about including autistic learners in a collaborative leadership for inclusion team working in a mainstream Irish post-primary school. Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language I invite you to take part in my study. The study will involve you taking part in six meetings with your teachers, Principal and Deputy Principal. The meetings will be video recorded. At the meetings, different aspects of school life will be discussed to find more about supporting autistic learners in school. It is hoped that at the end of the meetings, the team will have a plan of action for the future to help autistic learners feel listened to and included in all areas of school life. When the meetings are over and the action plan is written, I invite you to discuss the six meetings. The discussion will last about 30 minutes. The purpose of the discussion is to collect more information on your experience of being part of a group that involves students and teachers working together. The discussion will be recorded on a digital audio device to help me write up the findings.

Potential benefits

The potential benefits of this study are as follows:

- I may find out more about how teachers and students can work together to bring about

change in your school.

- It may help you feel more included in decisions made at your school.
- It may help you feel more included in school in the future.
- It may help you to become a leader of change.
- It may help you feel that your opinion on school life is important to your teachers, Principal and Deputy Principal.

Confidentiality, storage, and future use of data

I will ensure that your name will not be attached to any data. I will use codes instead of names. The data will be kept in a password protected Google Drive folder. Interview transcriptions will only be accessible to me. The recordings will be used to complete my thesis, but no information that will identify you will be included. The recordings will be destroyed once the interviews have been typed out. The consent form signed by you may be looked at by my supervisors. I can keep your data confidential within the limits of the law. Hard copy data will be destroyed by means of shredding on completion of the research. Soft copy (digital) data will be held in a password protected DCU Google account.

Appendix E: Schedule/Agenda for Collaborative Leadership for Inclusion Team Meetings

Schedule/Agenda for Collaborative Leadership for Inclusion Team Meetings	
Leadership for Inclusion	<p>Principal</p> <p>Deputy Principal</p> <p>Special Education Needs Co-ordinator</p> <p>Special Class Co- ordinator</p> <p>Researcher/Participant: Special Education Needs Co-ordinator, Special Class Co- ordinator, Assistant</p> <p>Principal I (Year-head role)</p> <p>Student 1: Assessed as being on the Autism Spectrum</p> <p>Student 2: Assessed as being on the Autism Spectrum</p>

	Student 3: Assessed as being on the Autism Spectrum
Meetings	5 meetings over a six-week period: one meeting per week 40 minutes Recording meetings All meetings will be recorded
Record meetings	All meetings will be recorded
Suggested Themes for Meetings Themes will be decided at the student meetings and then addressed at the Collaborative Initiative Meeting CLI	Themes will be suggested for discussion at Meeting 1. The group will agree areas of focus for the agendas of the following meetings. Suggested Themes: Physical Environment Digital Technology Action Plan
Meeting 1	Agenda

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Introductions: Each member of the group will introduce themselves using a visual support (favourite piece of work, artist, piece of music,) (Use of visuals to support autistic learners)● Establish group rules for the meetings.● Elect a ‘recorder’ to take minutes of the meeting and distribute them before the next meeting.● Discussion of the format for the meetings.● Agree on a format for the meetings.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introduce the themes for the meetings (visual presentation). ● Discussion of Themes and agreement on Agenda for subsequent meetings ● Outline our goal for the meetings: to produce an ‘Action Plan’ document, which will be ratified by the BOMand initiated in the coming academic year 2020/2021.
<p>Meeting 2: Meeting 3, Meeting 4, Meeting, 5</p>	<p>Agenda</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review of minutes from previous meeting

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Revisit the rules for the meeting ● Presentation on the development of (Agreed Topic) ● Think/pair/share activity based on the presentation ● Mentimeter word cloud activity based on the presentation ● Discussion following the activities ● Agreement of action for ‘Action Plan’ ● AOB
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Appendix F: Leadership Focus Group Interview

Semi-Structured Participant Focus Group Discussion Framework- Principal Deputy Principal

Explain interview process: interview structure

Confidentiality issues

Consent form

Introductory explanation: Research topic and rationale

Theme 1: Experience

Establish role of Principal/Deputy principal, length of time in school, number of students to provide for. Establish an understanding of their role of leading inclusive education in a mainstream post-primary school.

Q1. Tell me about yourself, your teaching experience?

Q2. Tell me about your role as a Principal/Deputy Principal?

Q3. What did you think about the study when you first heard about it?

Theme 2: Value of including student voice

Identify what's involved in the role of leading inclusive education in a post-primary school. Establish how student voice plays a role in leading inclusive policy and practice.

Q1. What does inclusion mean to you?

Q2. What does 'student voice' mean to you?

Q3. What is the value of including 'student voice' when it comes to making decisions in school?

Q4. What were your expectations of being involved in the initiative?

Q5. What did you expect to gain from participating in the initiative?

Theme 3: Challenges to including student voice Establish an understanding of the different ways of including student voice. Identify the challenges to authentic listening and the inclusion of student voice. Identify existence of middle management teams. (Role of leadership teams in BOM meetings, access and equity in the development of school policies and curricular planning). Establish presence of an Inclusion plan and those involved in drawing it up.

Q1. How did it feel to be part of a leadership team that included students?

Q2. What did you think of the initiative?

Q3. What were the challenges to facilitating the initiative?

Q4. What other initiatives have you employed in the school to include student voice?

Q5. What are the challenges for leadership in developing and sustaining initiatives to facilitate

student voice?

Theme 4: Future recommendations for student voice collaborations. Understanding of role of other stakeholders (such as other teachers, support staff) in developing inclusive policies and practices for all students.

Q1. Do you think you would consider continuing the initiative in the future?

Q2. Would you give consideration to including student voice in other collaborative groups operating in the school?

Q3. If yes, what groups and how would you see it working?

If no, why?

Q4. Thinking ahead to next year, what aspects of this initiative will you bring forward with you?

Ending: Close interview and remind interviewee of right to withdraw.

Appendix G: Teacher Focus Group Interview

Semi-Structured Participant Focus Group Discussion- for the Teachers

Explain interview process:

Interview structure

Confidentiality issues

Consent form

Introductory explanation: Research topic and rationale

Theme 1: Experience

Establish role of teacher leader (SENCO, Special Class Co-ordinator), length of time in school, number of students to provide for. Establish an understanding of their role of leading inclusive education in a mainstream post-primary school.

Q1. Tell me about yourself, your teaching experience?

Q2. Tell me about your role as a teacher leader?

Q3. What did you think about the study when you first heard about it? Research and Innovation Support

Theme 2: Value of including student voice.

Identify what's involved in the role of leading inclusive education in a post-primary school.

Establish how student voice plays a role in leading inclusive policy and practice.

Q1. What does inclusion mean to you?

Q2. What does 'student voice' mean to you?

Q3. What is the value of including 'student voice' when it comes to making decisions in school?

Q4. What were your expectations of the being involved in the initiative?

Q. 5 What did you expect to gain from participating in the initiative?

Theme 3: Challenges to including student voice

Establish an understanding of the different ways of including student voice. Identify the challenges to authentic listening and the inclusion of student voice. Identify existence of middle management teams. (Role of leadership teams in BOM meetings, access and equity in the development of school policies and curricular planning). Establish presence of an Inclusion plan and those involved in drawing it up.

Q1. How did it feel to be part of a leadership team that included students?

Q2. Do you think the initiative was a success?

Q3. What were the challenges to facilitating the initiative?

Q4. What other initiatives have you been involved in that included student voice?

Q5. What are the challenges for a teacher leader in facilitating student voice?

Research and Innovation Support

Theme 4: Future recommendations for student voice collaborations

Understanding of role of other stakeholders (such as other teachers, support staff) in developing inclusive policies and practices for all students.

Q1. Do you think you would consider joining future initiatives that involve student voice?

Q2. Do you think including student voice in other collaborative groups operating in the school would work?

Q3. If yes, what groups and how would you see it working If no, why?

Q4. Thinking ahead to next year, what aspects of this initiative would you like to see brought forward?

Ending: Close interview and remind interviewee of right to withdraw.

Appendix H: Student Focus Group Interview

Semi-Structured Participant Focus Group Discussion- for the students

Interview structure

Confidentiality issues

Consent form

Introductory explanation: Research topic and rationale

Theme 1: Experience

Establish each student's length of time in school, year group, interests.

Q1. Tell me about yourself?

Q2. How long have you been at the school?

Q3. What year are you in?

Q4. What are your hobbies and interests? (multiple ways of representing answers will be employed, based on "individualised approach" on the preferences, wishes or expectations of the participants themselves e.g. drawing, collage, cue cards, visuals)

Theme 2: Value of including student voice

Establish how student voice is viewed by students. Identify key aspects of belonging to a group which works for change.

Q1. Why did you want to be part of the group?

Q2. How did you feel when you attended the meetings? Can you give me an example?

Q3. What did you think of working with your teachers? Why?

Q4. What activities did you like the best when you were working with the group? Why?

(multiple ways of representing answers will be employed, based on “individualised approach” on the preferences, wishes or expectations of the participants themselves e.g. drawing, collage, cue cards, visuals)

Theme 3: Challenges to including student voice

Establish an understanding of why it is important to listen to students and what challenges there are for students who want to be listened to.

Q1. What helped you take part in the group? How did it help? Why do you say this?

Q2. What made taking part in the group harder? How did it make things harder for you? Why did it do this?

Q3. What might help make these things easier? (multiple ways of representing answers will be employed, based on “individualised approach” on the preferences, wishes or expectations of the participants themselves e.g. drawing, collage, cue cards, visuals)

Theme 4: Future recommendations for student voice collaborations

Establish an understanding of the role of student voice plays for students and ways in which it can be achieved.

Q1. What changes would you make to the group for the future? Why do you say this?

Q2. Would you like the school to provide more opportunities to work with your teachers in the future? (multiple ways of representing answers will be employed, based on “individualised approach” on the preferences, wishes or expectations of the participants themselves e.g. drawing, collage, cue cards, visuals).

Ending: Close interview and remind interviewee of right to withdraw.

Appendix I: Student Meeting 1: Transcript

Participants:	Facilitator, Aisling, Ben and Brona
Subject:	Introduction to initiative
Duration:	9 Minutes and 48 Seconds

Facilitator [00:00:01] Okay. I think we're just starting to record now. And I'd like to really thank you all for joining our study and our meeting, and I hope you will enjoy it. Mm if at any time you don't want to partake, you can always leave the study at any time you want. And so far, I'm absolutely delighted that you're all joining with us. And I'm sure it'll be a very good experience for you and a very good experience to meet with the senior leadership and the leaders of SEN and the leaders of the special classes. And have your voices heard. Are you excited about that?

Aisling [00:00:38] Yeah.

Brona [00:00:38] Mmmm.

Ben [00:00:38] Yes

Facilitator [00:00:39] Yeah, really excited. A long, long time waiting on that, actually.

Aisling [00:00:43] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:00:43] Can you remember, Aisling, how long we're waiting on?

Aisling [00:00:46] Six years, anyway.

Facilitator [00:00:47] Six years to do this study. Oh, my God. This has been a long time in the making, so. And yeah, six years ago we said we were going to change things, didn't we? Said that was our goal to set out to change things. Six years in, and Aisling, could I ask each of you and ask Aisling first? since Aisling is the longest member of the class. Could I ask you to introduce yourself and tell us how long you are here at school?

Aisling [00:01:15] Mmm my name is Aisling, and I have been here for six years.

Facilitator [00:01:20] Six years. What year are you in?

Aisling [00:01:22] I'm in 6th year.

Facilitator [00:01:22] That's great..... Brona, what year are you in?

Brona [00:01:27] My name's Brona and I have only been here for like a year. I'm in 5th year.

Facilitator [00:01:32] A fifth year. Great..... snd Ben.

Ben [00:01:35] My name is Ben and I've been here for 4 years.

Facilitator [00:01:43] And what year are you in.

Ben [00:01:43] 5th year.

Facilitator [00:01:45] Excellent. So, a huge range of experiences here and I know Brona you've only been connected with us for the last year, but you've been in school for the last five years, here at St. Aoibhinn's And so, your experience at this school is invaluable. It's invaluable to the leaders of this school and to how they're going to, you know, lead the school in the future and the experience you have had you over the last number of years. It's just incredible.

If we can get that across to the leaders of the school, I bet it would change the way they think of the future of the school and about creating an inclusive school for everybody. And as Aisling said we are long time planning this and hopefully it will be very exciting. So, what we need to do in this meeting, it's going to be five weeks and in those five weeks, the first meeting is going to be introducing the topics for the meetings and putting them in order.

And mm the leaders are not going to get to choose any of the topics, that's going to be your job.

So, it's your voice, the topics you want to discuss. And I know we have a little bit of a preliminary chat before our first meeting and we came up with a few topics that we wanted to throw out for you, and we have a couple of blanks here as well that you can come up with topics that you would like to add, that you would like to talk about. So even within the topics that we can come up with, you might want to put

more headings in or whatever. So, the topics that mm we have put out here on the sheets are supporting students' mental health and wellbeing in school, and the wellbeing programs, that are delivered in school, the, use of technology throughout school, and the school environment. Just how do you feel about those topics now? Would anybody like to say, are you happy with those topics? Is there any one of them you would like removed?

Aisling [00:03:42] No, I think they're good. I think they cover all the bases.

Facilitator [00:03:46] That's a thumbs up from Brona. She thinks they are good too.

Facilitator [00:03:46] Do you think they cover all the different areas of school life and Ben how do you feel about those topics?

Ben [00:03:55] Yes.

Facilitator [00:03:55] Everyone's in agreement that they are four solid areas for us to look at. Any other ideas and other things that you think we could, that you think we could include in our meetings. Anything that springs to mind from your experiences.

Aisling [00:04:12] School uniforms?

Facilitator [00:04:15] Right. Okay. School uniforms Aisling you'd like to see us having a discussion about school uniforms.

Aisling [00:04:19] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:04:20] why.

Aisling [00:04:22] Just, you know, they don't suit all students and, you know, they don't, they may not be comfortable for all students and, you know, just understanding different students' needs and, you know, how the school uniform can really affect how they're learning.

Facilitator [00:04:37] Excellent. I think that's a great idea. Yeah, we could definitely look at that and definitely there's a lot of good ideas there. And I do know that the school is going to be doing a review of the uniform going forward. I know that we've discussed it already, so it's a real opportune time to get the diverse needs of students on the agenda. So that and you know, we can think broadly about the uniform that we wear. That's amazing Aisling. Anyone else got anything they would like to suggest.

Brona [00:05:11] I think that we should normalize crying.

Facilitator [00:05:14] Okay.

Facilitator [00:05:15] Why would you think that?

Brona [00:05:17] Because I do a lot of it. I just feel like it would be beneficial.

Facilitator [00:05:21] What does normalise mean to you?

[00:05:24] because, I feel like when like you're crying if something overwhelms you, I feel like some mainstream students just stand there looking at you. Oh my God. Some teachers don't know what to do. Like they just don't. They are so lost.

Facilitator [00:05:37] Yeah.

Brona [00:05:38] The SNAs are kind of the only people, but the SNAs kinda have an upper hand with it because they kind of deal with it a lot.

Facilitator [00:05:49] They know what the right thing to do. Yeah. To alleviate stress. That's a good one. I think crying is an emotion. And, you know, we're talking about normalising our emotions. You know that it's okay to express your emotions. That's an amazing topic. I'm a yes, we can put that on the agenda, and anything else that we're missing.

Ben [00:06:11] Well, it would be nice to have diverse sports.

Ben [00:06:15] Right, excellent?

Facilitator [00:06:16] Excellent. What do you think diverse sports means Ben or what does it mean to you? Why would you bring it up?

Ben [00:06:22] Suppose the ones that wouldn't usually be in schools. You wouldn't usually use.

Facilitator [00:06:28] Yeah. Okay. Ones that aren't that aren't common to schools at the moment. Yeah. And what do you not like about basketball and football. what would you say? Why do you not like those? Why would you be looking for other sports.

Ben [00:06:42] Well I suppose more options for people. Maybe people will be into them.

Facilitator [00:06:46] Okay. So maybe if you're not into a team sport that there are other types of sport, that's amazing because sport is a huge part of school life, as you know.

Ben [00:06:55] To connect people as well.

Facilitator [00:06:56] Yeah. It connects people. It gives you a chance to be competitive, you know, it's good for your health. It's good for your physical health, your mental health. So, that's an amazing topic to put on the agenda, like top class and like I think we've got a great range of topics there. I'm sure we kept going, we could come up with loads and loads and loads of them. I suppose, one I can think of is homework.

Aisling [00:07:19] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:07:20] There's another one you would like to put on the agenda.

Aisling [00:07:23] Yes, definitely.

Ben [00:07:24] Subjects

Facilitator [00:07:23] Okay, so we, we stick in homework as well. Definitely. And I'll stick another blank sheet here mm, yeah. Have you seen homework. What it means to us. It's great to hear you saying that because I love to just to hear your opinions on homework as well and how it has affected you here in school. You know, I think that's a great range of topics and I certainly think we can make an agenda for five meetings out of that list. Actually, meeting one will be just to present these topics to the leaders. So, in our first meeting, we're going to present them with all the leaders around the table. Are you nervous, or excited, how do you feel about that?

Aisling [00:08:00] Excited.

Facilitator [00:08:00] Excited.

Aisling [00:08:00] So good.

Facilitator [00:08:00] Oh my God, there's so much that you're excited about. So, we go to present these topics, and they don't get to change them. You know, these are

our topics now. And, mm, then what we try to do is put them in an order of the weeks we're going to address them. And then we're obviously only going to have four weeks in the study. But from what I can see, coming out here on the table. We could be adding weeks on even when this study is completed. I don't think this study will be completed. I think it might actually become a feature of St. Aoibhinn's, because it looks like there are lots to discuss and. Mm..... we can present them to the group and then we can put them in order and then and we'll be ready to go with our four other meetings.

So, it's only going to be five meetings in total. And then hopefully at the end of it I am going to interview you not so much about the topics because that's what the leaders are going to take on board as your voices, your opinions. But I'm going to interview you about your experiences of working as a collaborative team. How did you feel when you were working with the principal, the deputy principal? How did they make you feel? Did you feel you were listened to? Did you feel the topics were appropriate? Did you feel you had a voice? You know, so you needn't worry about any of that now. We'd be doing all of that as we go along. And what I want you to really do is to enjoy the experience, you know what I mean? Just enjoy the experience, mmm, and mmm hopefully it will be a positive one when we get going. Okay, would anybody like to anything or say anything else now in this meeting.

Aisling [00:09:37] no.

[00:09:37] You are all very quiet. Are you happy with all of that?

Aisling [00:09:42] Yeah,

Facilitator [00:09:44] You're all good to go.

Aisling [00:09:46] Yeah.

[00:09:47] Mm you're good to go so.

[00:09:48] And yeah, well, I think we do a little bit of work on these topics. So, the next day then we discuss how we're going to fit them into the four meetings. That's great. Thank you everyone. I can stop the recording now.

Student Meeting 1: Meeting Notes
Date: [April 2025]
Facilitator: Researcher
Participants: Aisling Ben and Brona

Today marked the beginning of an exciting and long-anticipated initiative, six years in the making, centered around student voice and inclusion. It was a momentous occasion not just because of the time and energy it took to bring this initiative to life, but also because of the potential impact it could have on school culture and leadership practice at St. Aoibhinn's Post Primary School

Establishing a Safe and Respectful Space

From the outset, I wanted to ensure the students felt safe, valued, and respected in the space. Emphasising voluntary participation and student agency was key, and the early signs of openness and engagement, evident in their responses, felt encouraging. The warm responses, particularly Aisling's recollection of our six-year journey and the students' enthusiastic agreement on the importance of having their voices heard, felt affirming and motivating.

Student Voice in Action

The exercise of co-constructing the agenda was powerful. By inviting students to choose the topics for discussion across the five weeks, we reinforced the commitment to genuine collaboration. The students offered initial suggestions and responded positively to discussion around the following topics (mental health, wellbeing programmes, technology use, and school environment), and then confidently offered their own additions to each of these areas:

School Uniforms (Mental Health and Wellbeing) Aisling raised this thoughtfully, linking it to comfort, self-expression, and how uniform policy can impact learning. It was a nuanced and empathetic contribution that shows a deep understanding of equity.

Normalising Crying

(Mental Health and Wellbeing) Brona's suggestion was both moving and insightful. Her willingness to discuss emotional expression so candidly highlights

the importance of emotional literacy and the role schools can play in shaping compassionate cultures.

Diverse Sports (Mental Health and Wellbeing)

Ben brought in the idea of expanding physical education beyond traditional team sports. His rationale was inclusive and forward-thinking, highlighting the value of offering multiple ways for students to connect and participate.

Homework and Subjects (School Environment): These emerged organically and reflected ongoing themes in student life that warrant deeper exploration.

Reflections on Facilitation and Group Dynamics

As a facilitator, I felt a strong sense of responsibility to ensure every voice was not only heard but validated. Brona and Ben, although newer or quieter initially, grew more confident as the meeting progressed. Creating that sense of belonging and trust from the outset is essential, and I'm hopeful it will deepen over the coming weeks.

Looking Ahead Final

What struck me most was the richness of topics and the potential for real, sustained change. There was a clear appetite for meaningful engagement, not just tokenistic consultation. This first meeting was about laying the groundwork, but already it feels like the students are ready to step into their roles as co-creators of a more inclusive school culture.

I'm mindful that this is only the beginning. The true test will be how these voices are received by school leadership and whether systems and mindsets shift in response. Still, today gave me hope. It reminded me that inclusive education isn't just about policies or programmes, it's about people, relationships, and respect.

Mental Health and Wellbeing :agreed topic for the first Collaborative Leadership Initiative (CLI) meeting.

Appendix J: Student Meeting 2: Transcript

Participants:	Rachel Ryan, Aisling, Brona Ben
Subject:	Mental Health and Wellbeing
Duration:	9 Minutes and 50 Seconds

Facilitator [00:00:02] Okay. So welcome to our second meeting. Mm, I'm just wondering how you all are feeling, having met with the leaders the other day. How did you feel about the meeting was it exciting?

Aisling [00:00:13] Yes, very positive. Very. You know, you can definitely see that there are going to be changes and it's very exciting.

Facilitator [00:00:21] What struck you most about meeting with the leaders of the school.?

Aisling [00:00:26] Mm all, you know, their like, willingness to actually hear what we have to say and, you know, to take on board everything and, you know, everyone's just positivity was just yeah.

Aisling [00:00:37] It was alive, the room. The room was alive with excitement. Brona what struck you? Was there anything unusual that happened in the meeting the other day when you met with the leaders that you didn't expect or that was unusual?

Brona [00:00:51] Mmmm, the fact that they said that it was interesting how mainstream affects some students and that they didn't know.

Aisling [00:00:57] Right, thats brilliant

Brona [00:00:57] I liked it though.

Aisling [00:00:58] Yes, you liked it, you liked doing it. I could sense you were all very positive. What about you Ben? What did you think meeting the leaders?

Ben [00:01:05] I enjoyed it. It's nice talking to them, Like, from person to person, you know.

Aisling [00:01:10] Yeah. I heard you saying something at the meeting, that usually, or at the end of the meeting, usually people talk to you as if you are a child.

Brona [00:01:17] Yeah.

Ben [00:01:17] Oh Yeah

Facilitator [00:01:18] You didn't feel that at the meeting? No. Can you explain what that was there? Can you explain how they made you feel at the meeting?

Ben [00:01:26] Mmmm like I was, like I was with them, like a team, almost.

Rachel [00:01:31] Like a team member. Wow, that's just lovely to hear. I was so excited when I heard that. The other thing, I know I did lead it in the meeting. I introduced myself as Rachel, but I was really proud to hear everybody at the meeting, like your Principal and Deputy Principal introducing themselves by their first name. What did you think of that?

Brona [00:01:51] I thought it was very nice.

Aisling [00:01:52] Yeah. I thought, yeah. Like, it just, it made, you know, you didn't feel like less than them, we kind of everyone felt equal.

Ben [00:02:01] Yeah, exactly.

Brona [00:02:01] Part of a team.

Aisling [00:02:02] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:02:03] Well, that's just. That's exactly what I wanted to hear. So now we have a bit of a job because we decided all the topics for the meetings, and we did this the last day. So now we presented the topics, and it seems like they're pretty excited about the topics. You know, they seem very happy about them. So now what we have to decide is the order in which we do them. Mmm, so I think at

the meeting we sort of decided that supporting mental health, wellbeing, school environment, technology, are the four weeks, but I know m you're happy enough if we brought school uniform in under your school environment do you think that's okay and normalising crying, where do you think we could bring that in.

Brona [00:02:49] Maybe in the supporting student's mental health one.

Facilitator [00:02:52] Right, okay we could bring that in there and support it. So maybe what would you be thinking when we do the week on that? You'd be thinking about talking, you could think about talking about that and, you know, give that as one of your opinions.

Brona [00:03:03] I'd be a bit nervous that, like Ms. Donohue or Mr. Kenny might turn around and be like what.

Facilitator [00:03:08] I don't know well I can't say, but you can prepare yourself for that, I suppose. You can be ready for it, but certainly the way they acted the other day, I don't think they would ever say what? But if they do, you can be prepared for that, you can have your answer ready. The thing is that you're passionate about it and you want to get your voice across. You know, that's the important part. And what about the sport and the homework? Can you see anywhere that they could fit in?

Aisling [00:03:37] The well-being.

Facilitator [00:03:39] Yeah well-being yeah definitely homework and sport, because sport improves your wellbeing, your physical and mental health and the homework definitely impacts your well-being. doesn't it. And yeah, that's really good. it could come into the mental health as well so you could think about them in there and that way would be we'd be touching on all of the topics. I know they're very full, these topics, but m we'll try, we'll, you know, we will give one a week to each of them and hopefully we get to most of the subsections in them, the different things we will try our best anyway. So now what we have to decide in this meeting is what order we're going to do them in, so, what would your number one priority, so like, we are only going to have one week each, so what is your top topic to talk about.

Brona [00:04:29] Supporting student's mental health.

Facilitator [00:04:30] You definitely think that Brona. Yeah. How about you Aisling?

Aisling [00:04:34] Yeah, I would agree. Definitely.

Ben [00:04:35] I agree.

Facilitator [00:04:36] You're on that one too. So, we go with that week one, do you think. So, everyone's in agreement with that. Okay, so that's week one. So, week two where we're going to go from there.

Aisling [00:04:47] Mmmm I think the m school environment is one that like could be very good after that one.

Facilitator [00:04:55] Okay. So why would you pick, what do we have here in school environment, we have in like year zones, the base classrooms, the canteen, staggered lunches, the end of term celebrations.

Brona [00:05:07] Where's the sensory corridor?

Facilitator [00:05:09] The sensory corridor. Well, I think we said, and we were going to put that, didn't we talk about that the last class, and we said we were going to put it in to supporting mental health, so that will come in as a sub-topic there. So, we will go through that in our next meeting when we're making our PowerPoint, we will have that in there. So, and we'll go with school environment then do you think for week two, are you happy with that?

Ben [00:05:30] Yes, I was thinking that.

Facilitator [00:05:31] You were thinking that as well Ben, so you are happy to go week two, school environment and so week three we have two left and well-being or technology which is your priority?

Aisling [00:05:41] Well-being.

[00:05:41] Well-being for you Brona

Brona [00:05:43] Well-being. Yeah.

Ben [00:05:45] Well-being.

Aisling [00:05:45] Well-being, yeah, you think that's week number three.

Ben [00:05:47] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:05:48] Yeah. God this is very easy. You are super. You are very definite in your, in your thinking. Week three for that one and then that leaves us with technology for week four.

Aisling [00:05:59] Perfect.

Facilitator [00:06:00] And you know, and you know what, like, like this just an observation. What like from staff meetings and from meetings in the office, you know, everybody's always talking about the importance of technology and, you know, driving the technology, we are an iPad school. And there you are putting it fourth down the list, you know isn't there even something in that, like it's not your, it's obviously not your priority getting out of bed in the morning.

Aisling [00:06:24] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:06:28] Would you have any little comment for me now on that. Why?

Aisling [00:06:29] Yeah well like you know I think obviously we're a technology school so we're going to push technology, but I think that if you have students in the right headspace and they're just, you know, if they're coming school positive, then the technology will go more naturally. Like the, I mean, wanting to work with technology.

Facilitator [00:06:47] Amazing. And I think that is an amazing point to make when you get the well-being right, when people are in a good headspace, the learning, the technology, everything else falls in. Like, Aisling, if you can make that point in one of the weeks, you know, I think that would change the mindset of people. That's an amazing point. You know, the ideas are just top class coming from you. You know, I think I'm, I'm so proud. And I know Ms. Donohue will be so proud of you, to hear such strong, you know, informed your opinions. Really well done, and so our first meeting is going to be supporting student's mental health. So, I think what we do is collaboratively together in our next meeting, we will design a PowerPoint for that and that's where, Brona, we will get in your sensory corridors because we've been talking about those and they're quite exciting. And even Ms. xxxxx came to me, yesterday about designing the new sensory nurture room for learning support.

Brona [00:07:49] Where is that?

Facilitator [00:07:49] Mmm, it's the corner room out here, I'm very bad on numbers, you know when you get to the bottom of the link, the corner room there. It is the new, kind of sensory, nurture room where they're going to have games and tea and social skills and she's going to design the walls and she came in to me to ask me, and I was like, oh, I'll get the guys here to talk to you. But rather than putting up murals of images she's talking about, like you know, putting up patterns

of colours and stuff. So that, that would be sensory. And I'm even just thinking now, could we add sensory textures to some of those? You know, you could go in and...

Aisling [00:08:30] Yeah, definitely.

Facilitator [00:08:31] Yeah, that would be good. So that's even more exciting stuff that's happening outside of these meetings. Mmm, you know, so we're leaning in all directions.

Brona [00:08:40] Who is that nurture room for?

Facilitator [00:08:41] It's for everybody in learning support that needs, that likes to visit us here, for cup of tea and chat and social skills and play games and for our social skills classes. So, it's now to provide that for mainstream students, that don't have a place here. So, you know, it's creating the nice environment we have here for everybody else in the school, because they can't all come to our class. You know, so, it's good, it's spreading the ideas and the practice, elsewhere. What do you think of that Brona?

Brona [00:09:16] I really like that idea.

Facilitator [00:09:17] Don't worry. We won't send you off there, you can stay here with us. But you might like to go and visit it sometimes and join in on what's happening there too. We can organise that too. Okay, well, I think that pretty much decides now that we know the order will be presenting that at the next meeting. And

we also have to prepare our and supporting students' mental health presentation. So, we do that in our next meeting, just before the meeting with the leaders. Thank you, guys. That was really good.

Facilitator [00:09:50] Thank you.

Student Meeting 2: Notes on Meeting

Date: [April 2025]

Facilitator: Researcher

Participants: Aisling Ben And Brona

I opened the meeting (Facilicator/Researcher) by welcoming the students and asking how they felt after their recent session with the school leadership. This emotional check-in set a supportive and reflective tone, acknowledging that the previous experience might have felt new or significant.

Aisling shared that the meeting was ‘very positive’ and expressed optimism, suggesting she sensed potential for real change.

Brona was surprised by the leadership team’s admission that they hadn’t previously considered how mainstream schooling impacts some students. This highlighted both her openness and the novelty of her experience being validated.

Ben appreciated being spoken to as a peer rather than a child, this was a meaningful shift for him and indicates how rare such experiences are in traditional school hierarchies.

Reflections on Power Dynamics and Equality

The use of first names during the meeting with leadership emerged as a key symbolic gesture that helped break down traditional adult–child or authority–student barriers. Aisling noted this helped everyone feel "equal."

Ben and Brona both reinforced this sentiment, with Brona repeating the phrase “part of a team. “The facilitator intentionally introduced herself by first name to model this informality, and it appeared to succeed in making the space feel collaborative rather than top-down. This simple linguistic shift served as a soft challenge to

institutional norms and created a discursive space where students felt more confident and safe to speak.

Planning Future Sessions – Topic Prioritisation

The students were asked to determine the order in which pre-identified topics would be addressed in upcoming sessions. This task helped reinforce their agency in the process.

The final order, agreed upon unanimously, was:

Supporting Student Mental Health

Chosen as the highest priority, reflecting its immediacy and significance in the students' lives.

School Environment

Recognised for its influence on anxiety and sensory needs (e.g., year zones, sensory corridors).

Well-being

Students made connections to sport and homework as factors influencing emotional and mental health.

Technology

Though often prioritised by staff, students placed it last, expressing that emotional readiness and well-being must come first for learning and technology use to be effective.

This section showed the students were not only capable of strategic thinking but also confident in articulating what matters most to them—sometimes in direct contrast to institutional priorities.

Integration of Subtopics

Several related issues were folded into broader thematic categories:

Normalising crying: Brona suggested this topic fit well under mental health. However, she expressed apprehension about how leadership might respond.

I encouraged her to be prepared but reassured her that the tone of the leadership team so far suggested openness.

Sport and homework: These were proposed as components of the well-being session, with students noting how both can significantly affect their mental state.

Sensory corridor: This was already earmarked as part of the mental health topic, acknowledging its role in supporting self-regulation.

This integrated planning ensured that emotionally charged or nuanced topics could be addressed in a coherent and supportive way.

Discussion of the Sensory Nurture Room

I shared an update on an exciting development: the creation of a new sensory nurture room in the learning support area.

This room is designed to provide a calm, engaging space for students needing sensory or social support. Ideas included using textured walls, soothing colours, and integrating games and social skill activities. Brona asked who the room was for, and the facilitator explained that it's meant for broader access—not just for students in special classes but also those in mainstream who would benefit from it. The fact that a teacher had asked for student input on the design demonstrates that students are starting to influence practice beyond the immediate group, a key moment in the diffusion of inclusive thinking throughout the school.

Final Thoughts and Next Steps

The group concluded the meeting with clear decisions and a sense of progress:

The weekly topics were agreed upon and sequenced.

The next session will involve co-creating a PowerPoint presentation on mental health and well-being, to be shared with the leadership team.

I praised the students for their thoughtful contributions and highlighted the significance of Aisling's insight: "*If students are in the right headspace, the technology will go more naturally.*" This powerful statement challenges dominant educational narratives by placing emotional well-being at the heart of learning readiness. The meeting ended with renewed energy and a strong sense of direction. Students are beginning to see tangible evidence that their voices are not only heard but are starting to shape school culture and decision-making.

Appendix K: Researcher Reflexive Journal: Student Meeting 1: Introduction to the Initiative

Facilitator: Researcher

Participants: Aisling, Brona and Ben

Subject: Mental Health and Wellbeing

This meeting, six years in the making, it felt deeply significant both personally and politically, an indictment of systemic silence. Underpinning the session was a clear commitment to disrupting traditional power hierarchies in schools, an effort that aligns with a Foucauldian critique of institutional structures and the discourses that govern them.

Constructing Space for Student Voice

From the outset, I aimed to establish a space where students could speak freely, without surveillance or coercion. As Foucault suggests, power is not simply held by institutions or individuals but is exercised through everyday practices and interactions. By explicitly stating that students could withdraw at any time, and by making it clear that the agenda would be shaped by them, not by senior leadership, I sought to reposition power. This rebalancing, however subtle, resists the dominant discourse of schooling where adult voices are often privileged as ‘truth-tellers’ and students are framed as passive recipients, today, they appeared to be at the centre. The students’ enthusiasm was heartening, particularly Aisling’s recognition of the longevity of this journey and her investment in its purpose. Her ability to speak on the impact of school uniforms on learning and comfort was a powerful challenge to the normative discourse around uniformity and conformity in schools. Here, we see resistance to the disciplinary techniques Foucault (1980) identifies such as the regulation of bodies and behaviours through policy and dress codes.

Emergent Counter-Discourses

Brona's call to 'normalise crying' introduced a deeply personal yet politically charged perspective. In many school environments, emotional expression is regulated, some feelings are sanctioned while others are rendered inappropriate or pathological. Brona's contribution can be read as a counter-discourse, challenging how students are expected to act, (performative norm of emotional control expected in schooling.) Her framing of SNAs as more attuned to emotional needs also reveals the micro-politics of care and support within schools, suggesting that not all staff exercise power in the same way. Similarly, Ben's proposal for "diverse sports" can be read as an act of speaking back to the narrow curriculum and the privileging of competitive, often masculinised, forms of physical education. His comments expose the hidden curriculum, those implicit values and expectations that shape belonging and exclusion.

Facilitation, Power, and the Role of the Educator

Facilitating this session through a Foucauldian lens meant being critically aware of my own role in reproducing or resisting power. Even as I sought to flatten hierarchies, I recognise that power flows through me too, through what I choose to validate, how I interpret, and how I frame students' ideas. The challenge, then, is to remain reflexive and accountable, conscious that even well-intentioned spaces can reinscribe dominant norms if we are not careful.

Looking Ahead

What emerged today was not only a list of important topics (mental health, uniform, emotion, sport, homework), but also a demonstration of students actively participating in discourse production. Their voices, long marginalised, are now beginning to circulate within formal leadership structures. The key question moving forward is whether these voices will be *heard* in a way that transforms rather than tokenises. As Foucault would ask who has the power to speak, to be believed, and to shape 'truth' in institutional contexts? I find myself struggling with the space between being heard and being transformed. While the meeting felt like a

breakthrough for the students, there is a caveat, the system can absorb voice without yielding change. This initiative is not simply a project in student engagement. It is a political act, one that interrogates the workings of power, knowledge, and truth in the everyday life of schools. If sustained, it has the potential to disrupt dominant discourses and generate new imaginaries of inclusive education in the school but hopefully beyond also.

Researcher Reflexive Journal: Student Meeting 2: Mental Health and Wellbeing

Facilitator: Rachel Ryan

Participants: Aisling, Brona and Ben

Subject: Mental Health and Wellbeing

1. Introduction and Contextual Grounding

This second session unfolded as a continuation of our initial engagement with student voice, but it also surfaced deeper dynamics of power, subjectivity, and institutional norms. My aim was to assess how students reflected on their meeting with school leadership, and to scaffold a co-constructed agenda for future discussions, especially focusing on mental health and well-being. The energy among the students, Aisling, Brona, and Ben, was palpable. They seemed enlivened by the prior session with school leaders, suggesting that the initiative is, on the surface, fostering empowerment. Yet in terms of a Foucauldian perspective, I remain cautious. We must interrogate whether these moments of voice are truly emancipatory or simply permissible spaces within a pre-existing institutional discourse that tolerates student input without disrupting entrenched hierarchies.

2. Student Reflections: Power, Language, and the Performance of Equality

The students repeatedly mentioned feeling 'equal' and 'respected' notably linked to the use of first names by leadership. While encouraging, this linguistic shift invites scrutiny. From a Foucauldian lens, name usage can be read as a discursive technique that produces a *simulation* of equality, softening hierarchical boundaries while maintaining the underlying asymmetries of institutional authority.

Ben's comment that he is usually addressed "as if [he was] a child" foregrounds how discourses of childhood and authority intersect. Foucault's work on the *technologies of the self* prompts us to consider how Ben, in this moment, was both resisting and reinscribing normative constructions of student subjectivity, desiring to be seen as a collaborator while still operating within adult-defined boundaries.

3. Mental Health and the Politics of Visibility

Mental health emerged unequivocally as the students' top priority. Brona's suggestion to normalise crying pushed the boundaries of what is typically deemed speakable within school settings. From a Foucauldian perspective, this is a moment of discursive rupture, challenging dominant norms of emotional restraint and performative 'resilience' in education. Aisling's remark that "if students are in the right headspace, the technology will go more naturally" articulates an implicit critique of the neoliberal school model, which often prioritises efficiency and output over well-being. Yet, it is important to ask: is this move towards mental health merely a reconfiguration of the self-care discourse, another technique of governance that places the burden of wellness on the individual, rather than interrogating the structural conditions that produce distress?

4. Emergent Empowerment or Managed Participation?

The sense of empowerment was evident, particularly in how students began to shape the agenda and articulate their concerns. Brona's reflections on mainstream schooling highlighted her role as a *subjugated knower*, whose lived experiences had not previously been recognised within institutional discourse. However, we must remain sceptical: is this empowerment genuine transformation, or are students being enrolled into a more palatable form of managed participation? Foucault reminds us that power is not always repressive, it can be productive. The collaborative format of the sessions may well be a new technology of power that governs through the appearance of inclusion, rather than through overt exclusion.

5. Challenges: Silences, Surveillance, and Speaking Risk

Brona's hesitation around how leadership would receive her ideas, particularly regarding emotional expression, signals the persistent presence of internalised surveillance. Her concern is not just about being misunderstood, but about transgressing the unspoken norms of what constitutes acceptable discourse in schools. This hesitation also highlights the role of *disciplinary power*, the subtle, pervasive forces that shape what can be said, by whom, and in what manner. As a facilitator, I'm reminded of the importance of not filling silences too quickly. These gaps often reveal the limits of what is sayable and provide valuable insight into the power dynamics at play.

6. Reflections on Facilitation: Disruption and Discipline

I was intentional about balancing my guidance with student agency. The process of consensus-building around topics flowed smoothly, and it was heartening to see the students take increasing ownership. Yet I remain aware that my own role is not neutral. I am both enabling and delimiting their participation through my own position within the school structure and my discursive choices.

Encouraging Brona and others to pre-record their ideas on iPads for the forthcoming CLI meeting may offer a strategy to navigate discomfort, but it also raises questions about voice, presence, and authenticity. Are we empowering voice, or simply finding more institutionally acceptable ways for it to be heard?

7. Next Steps: Sustaining Agency in a Disciplined Space

Our next session will centre on co-developing a student-led presentation on mental health. My goal is to deepen their sense of ownership, while also acknowledging the need to scaffold their confidence in navigating institutional structures.

Supporting Brona's push to normalise crying demands that we explicitly discuss how discourses of emotion and vulnerability are regulated in schools. Role-playing, peer feedback, and critically reflecting on leadership responses will be key strategies for this.

8. Final Reflections: The Promise and Paradox of Student Voice

This session reinforced the powerful potential of student voice, but also its contradictions. While students are increasingly engaged, we must critically examine whether their voices are transforming the institution or simply being absorbed by it.

Foucault reminds us that power is everywhere, not because it dominates, but because it produces. In these sessions, students are not just expressing themselves; they are being shaped as particular kinds of subjects: confident, articulate, emotionally literate, but still ultimately governable.

As facilitators, our task is not just to amplify voice, but to interrogate the frameworks within which that voice operates. Only then can we move beyond symbolic inclusion towards meaningful, transformative change.

Appendix L: Sample of CLI Meeting

Participants	Rachel Ryan, Aisling, Ailish Grainne, Roisin, Brona , Micheal , Saoirse Ben,
Subject	Initiative Introduction
Duration	26 minutes

Facilitator [00:00:01] Okay. I think we're ready to go, so. So, as I just said, I'd like to welcome you all and thank you so much. It's going to be five weeks. So, we're going to be meeting for five weeks. As I explained in the letter, and I've explained to our students before, we're a long time waiting on this to happen in our school. It's an historic event. It's probably the first time we've ever had the leadership team meet with our students individually, and from our special classes to actually help lead and develop our inclusive practice across our school. So, I am very thankful to them for being willing to take part in this, and I'm very thankful to the leadership team because I know it's not easy to find time to have these meetings. So, I just thought we'd start off with a little icebreaker. I know the girls probably know everybody here, but just in case you don't know everybody's name and in case anybody has forgotten, I thought we'd start off with a ball game. And you can throw the ball to whoever you want, and whoever catches it just says their name and what their role is in the school or what year they're in, for the students. And I suppose just before we start that, I suppose I'd like to say that this is a safe space for us all. We will all listen to each other's opinions, and everybody's entitled to their opinion, and that it's about sharing. It's not about changing anything here. It's about sharing ideas and being open and helping each other to understand everybody's position. And that we would be respectful of that and respectful of everybody's time to speak. Everybody is happy with that. Okay. So, I want to start off with, my name is Rachel and I'm a special class coordinator and I'm a long, long, long time here, 28 years now and 30 years teaching and they've been, it's been a wonderful time. And I want to pass to my friend Aisling.

Aisling [00:01:59] Uh, my name is Aisling. I'm a 6th-year student here. [00:02:01]
(Students reserved and cautious)[0.0s]

Ailish [00:02:01] my name is Ailish. I am a newbie here. I really only joined full-time here in September as a lead teacher in xxxxxx, as you all now know, I hope so and if not, I'm doing my job very badly. And yeah, I'm excited to be part of it.
[00:02:23] (Teachers cautious)[0.0s]

Roisin [00:02:25] Um, my name is Roisin and I'm an Aen teacher, mainstream teacher and 5th year, year head. And I am delighted to be part of AEN in the school because I think it teaches us great diversity and we learn a lot about our students on a one-to-one basis, and when we meet in smaller groups, I'm delighted to be part of this.

Brona [00:02:48] My name is Brona I am a 5th-year student.

Grainne [00:02:56] Good woman, thanks Brona. My name is Grainne. I am the principal of the school. This is my 15th year as principal. I am extremely proud of our two special classes, X and X and I am delighted to have been invited to take part in this exciting project. I can't wait to get started.

Micheal [00:03:19] Short pass. My name is Micheal. I'm the deputy principal here, it my fifth year as deputy principal in the school and again like Grainne I am delighted to be involved in the project. And I think looking at our two special classes from a distance at times, we're very proud of how you interact with our

school and how you perform in our school, and today. Long may the special class continue to prosper in our school, so well done, and it's just nice to be here.

Saoirse [00:03:49] Okay. Um, my name is Saoirse and I'm like Ailish. I'm a newbie here. So, I'm only here since September but I love it so far. And, between SEN and geography, I'm kept busy, but I'm really looking forward to getting into this project as well with Rachel, I think it's going to be very interesting.

Facilitator [00:04:12] Thank you. Thank you, everybody. I think that was excellent. [00:04:15](Everybody introduced themselves by their first name)[0.0s]

Facilitator [00:04:17] Okay. So just to explain, I know I have to thank you all and give you information on the project. It's a collaborative leadership initiative. And an initiative means that it can run for a little short while and then we assess the value of the end. I suppose the intention is that we may be able to establish something like this ongoing in the school, not only for our special classes, but maybe for our mainstream students as well. It's about giving a voice to our students. It's about listening authentically to their voice and using their understanding of the world they live in, to help support our school develop its inclusive practice. Now, you may see sheets on the table there. So we have already, I have already met just to fill in the leadership team. I have already met with our students. We have had a meeting already and we have decided is the topics for the four meetings that are going to follow this meeting. So this meeting is introducing the topics to you. And then we have four following meetings where we would take one topic each week. Now we have a discussion about what topics we would come up with. And the students felt that these, the topics that we have chosen are the most relevant for them. So unfortunately, the leadership team, that we have established are not getting to choose. So the students have gotten to choose. So they are getting the first call on the topics. So, the format of each meeting will take place around a discussion and activities. So nobody will be put on the spot. We make a little presentation each

week on a PowerPoint about the topic and then you're going to go into your groups. The students have already, we've already worked out the groups and I will email them on to you this week and you will go away and work together in your group and there'll be little activities to do, like a mentimeter, or a word cloud. They're all apps that the students are familiar with using. So if any of the teachers haven't used them in the classroom, the students will be well able to support you with using them. And then we'll get the feedback then to the main group and then we will have a small discussion around the feedback. And hopefully at the end of each meeting, we will come up with one action, one action that we can take into consideration for acting upon in the future. So we have one action that we might decide we can bring to the board management or whatever in the future. Hopefully, as a group, as a collaborative group, we'll all agree on this. And if we don't come to a conclusion, that's okay too. You know what I mean? There is no pressure. [00:07:00](the format of the meetings has been explained in the plain language statement and by email)[0.0s]

Facilitator [00:07:02] So the first topic that the students came up with was supporting students' mental health in the schools. So the kinds of things they would like to look at under supporting their mental health is breakout cards from class. The use of them, how you use them, use them, how you spread them across the school. You know, are they more useful for students with autism? Are they useful for mainstream students as well? And they like the discussion around that. The second thing was, time-out. You know, can you take time out from a class, particularly with the hour long class? How do you establish that? Does this work the way we have it established? Because these are all things we have established already and a discussion around how could we improve them, make them better, make them more accessible, across the whole school. Sensory walks, we carry those out too, too quite a bit. And again, a discussion about around, you know, putting a format for a sensory walk, you know, how could we develop that practice and make it and make it more universal to our school, across the school and then Braincalm. Braincalm Is an OT program that we use with our special classes and with our AEN students in mainstream. And again, how do we develop that? How do we inform people about

it, how can we spread it across practice in the school? Can we spread it to practice at home, and how might we develop that in helping inclusive activity in a school? So that's one week. Now, the topics that I'm delivering out to you, we haven't decided the order of the weeks that we're going to do that in. So when I go through them all, we're going to put you into twos, our threes and we'll work out what you think the best or what you'd like to work on first, second, third and fourth. Okay. The second one, the second topic, the students came up with, was our Wellbeing program at Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle. So looking at the well-being program, you know what is of huge benefit in it to students with ASD and what also could be included in it may be, you know, is there any new topic so a week around discussing that and helped develop that.

Facilitator [00:09:16] Our third topic is the school environment and the students felt looking at year zones and student based classrooms, canteen and staggered lunches and end-of-term celebrations. And I know these are all things that are coming up very topically with our staff as well. So it's good to hear the students' feedback on them at Same time. Our last topic is technology, so the use of iPads, Apple Pens, Apps, Google Classroom email and wireless keyboards, and how that supports students with as, and how we can support them in mainstream classes, with homework, with their learning, transitioning between mainstream and special class. So they're basically our topics. And the only tasks that you have to do today is to maybe have a little discussion in your groups about the topics and then to decide what to order. So if each and each group take one of these, each team, and put you into teams now and take one of these pages. And if you just write down the order that you think you would like to choose, the order that you would like to work. So, Aisling, Ms. Byrne and Ms. Doyle are going to go together. Brona will go with Ms. Smith and Mr Walshe. And, Mrs Canney you can go between the two groups and just listen to what happening in each and I'm going to observe and just be a bystander, have no part in it really. So, Saoirse, Ailish and Aisling, do you want to take your things to the desk over here, And Brona and Ms. O Reilly, you can go over there.

Facilitator [00:11:14] You can just go through the topics

Roisin [00:11:28] now

Facilitator [00:11:31] Well, they should have four. Yeah.

Facilitator [00:11:34] And then you have a blank page, to write down the order you think we should work in.

Facilitator [00:11:41] Laughter from all [00:11:41](laughter and chat from everyone as they get organised with materials, much more relaxed).[0.0s]

Micheal [00:12:10] Brona, I think you have all the answers here, do you?

Micheal [00:12:13] Huh?

Facilitator [00:12:15] We have to put these in order. Is that right? Well Rachel.

Facilitator [00:12:19] What order do you think we should address each topic in?

Facilitator [00:12:28] You know we have only four, today is one, five weeks altogether. Today is one.

Facilitator [00:12:32] Okay, I want you to pick your favourite one. I have one or.

Brona [00:12:37] I think the one that applies most to me was the one that has the break from class. I wouldn't really have much opinion on the apple pens or anything like that, Mm because I wouldn't really have an opinion on that at all.

Grainne [00:13:03] So, that's supporting students' mental health then.

Facilitator [00:13:03] So you'd like to talk about that one first. Yeah. So next week, this is the one you would like to talk about first, good.

Grainne [00:13:09] Time, out, sensory walk and brain calm.

Facilitator [00:13:09] Very good. Mr. Kenny.

Micheal [00:13:15] How do you find that helps you Brona? Just out of interest.

Brona [00:13:18] Well now, you know what? Now I find it very hard to sit in a class for an hour, because I don't I know I just get very fizzy. I go to the bathroom in like every class, because I don't have a break from class card. So I just have to go to the bathroom.

Micheal [00:13:28] right, ok, yea. [00:13:28](Good affirmation of Brona's point without comment or criticism).[0.0s]

Grainne [00:13:28] And if you had to have a break from class-card, what would you do with it?

Brona [00:13:46] I would probably just go to the bathroom and back, because I'm like moving and that's what I've been doing kind of all year.

Grainne [00:13:52] Ok.

Micheal [00:13:52] That is your little routine so that when you go back then it's easier in the classroom then is it.

Brona [00:13:56] Yeah, I find it a lot more easier to concentrate

Micheal [00:13:59] Ok and even if you know you are going to get a little break, would it be easier beforehand as well as when they come back?

Brona [00:14:08] Probably.

Micheal [00:14:08] Yeah, Mm interesting.

Grainne [00:14:08] That's good to hear how useful it is.

Roisin [00:14:08] Do you use Braincalm?

Brona [00:14:09] No.

Grainne [00:14:28] You would like that topic that card to be week one then the second week. Which order then.

Grainne [00:14:33] I'm hoping when I'm hearing about iPads and Apple pens, that you will be able to teach me. I would be the Same as you, Brona. You're saying the Same and I'm sure you're able to use some of it possibly.

Brona [00:14:45] Oh, the iPad I'm grand with but I wouldn't know much about the Apple pens.

Grainne [00:14:49] I'd be the Same.

Brona [00:14:54] Or a wireless keyboard.

group [00:15:09] [00:15:09]laughter unclear chat and laughter [0.1s]

Grainne [00:15:10] How do you find these ones? You are in 5th year aren't you Brona, so do you think it's easier? Because this is kind of what interests me, because this kind of looks for the big school the whole school and kinda were getting to look at our numbers, our school is getting bigger. And so it's kind of like even this corridor is longer now. We have to look see how we manage the school but what do you think of these year zones. So let's say I'm in first year I don't have to go walking around the school to get to your next class.

Brona [00:15:30] I think it's handier, because like say for the life of me I'd forget my head if my head wasn't attached to my shoulders.

Grainne [00:15:30] You are being very hard on yourself.

Brona [00:15:30] But, say from the start of the year because if I saw somebody that i knew was like that, it's kinda all in one zone, I say to them kinda say to them it is all in the one zone, you kinda know where you're going. I think it's handier in that way.

Grainne [00:15:40] Is there safety in that? Does that make things easier?

Brona [00:16:02] Yeah, because then I'd be like 20 minutes later class because I couldn't find it.

Brona [00:16:07] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:16:07] Yeah, yeah. So this actual new layout really suits you. Yeah, good but lessens your anxiety.

Brona [00:16:15] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:16:15] Yeah, yeah that's good. And I'd say it does the exact Same thing for most students. End of term celebrations. What would you like to see there?

Brona [00:16:29] I find like being in my groups or like crowds is really sort of off-putting. I've a problem with nobody. I just find it kind of.

Facilitator [00:16:34] Overwhelming.

Brona [00:16:34] Yea. to be like in the room with so many people. I think it's a really nice idea, I do, but like it's just like just for me personally, but for the likes of other people in my year, it would suit them down to the ground like.

Facilitator [00:16:50] Could we do it on a smaller scale?

Brona [00:16:50] Yes probably

Facilitator [00:17:33] What about lunch times? Would you use the canteen?

Brona [00:17:36] Sometimes, yes when I was in my first year.

Grainne [00:17:36] Can I join you here?

Saoirse [00:17:45] I know what you mean, when there's notes and notes going up on the board you just need a couple of minutes.

Grainne [00:17:47] Yea, maybe that's for all students, mainstream.

Saoirse [00:17:52] Yeah. And maybe that's. Oh yeah, yeah.

Ailish [00:17:57] Like this built in task part is helping students with an identified need so not, just be it something we have got that works for someone who is genuinely finding it hard. A reason to give this.

Aisling [00:18:01] Anxious.

Grainne [00:18:01] This is interesting for teachers to hear, because maybe teachers apply content, content,

Saoirse [00:18:01] To get as much covered as possible.

Grainne [00:18:01] And if you took the breather here or every so often for a couple of minutes, you would end up with students getting more of the content.

Aisling [00:18:31] Yea as much covered as possible.

Aisling [00:18:32] Yes. If you getting like to that stage like everything is too much you are not taking anything in anymore.

Saoirse [00:18:38] Yea you could take two 5 minute breaks during that hour long class class or even 2, 3-minute break, you know. It would make a huge difference probably.

Ailish [00:18:43] That isn't a bad, like I'd even be thinking just for my mainstream classroom and literally call it a brain break.

Ailish [00:18:56]

Ailish [00:18:56] I would have always done that in a double anyway, which was 40 and 40. So it's the same idea I would have always given a little short break over to have it for just not out of the room, but yeah, within the class setting.

Grainne [00:19:07] Yea.

Ailish [00:19:14] But yea to show that calm in you, just for a few seconds.

Facilitator [00:19:15] So, have you come up with your order?

Ailish [00:19:17] No.

group [00:19:21] Laughter.

Facilitator [00:19:21] Will I give you another minute. Will I give you another minute?

Facilitator [00:19:27] You don't need to discuss them all.

Ailish [00:19:28] Sure we got into it Rachel.

Facilitator [00:19:28] You're doing a great job, but it's literally an order.

Grainne [00:19:32] You should be telling us what to do Aisling, to move on, stop talking.

Ailish [00:19:32] Yea, for God's sake.

Ailish [00:19:40] So will we go with school environment next, after we know what.

Saoirse [00:19:53] Yeah. And the first three are autism linked as well, wellbeing and then technology, Aisling what do you think?

Ailish [00:20:03] Yeah.

Ailish [00:20:06] There's no right or wrong. Each one of them is as invaluable as the next.

Grainne [00:20:12] Yeah, absolutely, these are great ideas you have come up with, you can see how they take in all the school, the whole school population. There are even some topics there that we will be discussing in the Same way at the staff meeting.

Ailish [00:20:27] Yeah. Yeah. And I do feel like now that we are getting into it.

Ailish [00:20:32] Yeah. We do know students that are in different classes, like maybe, they don't have the space, the break. I can think of one straight away in a 3rd year class, who always asks to go to the toilet, he just wants the break, he just wants to walk. He just needs the break, a brain break, a breather. I think a brain break, a breather that time out, I think that is brilliant. No joke, they just need that little break. Even ask any one of my classes in the next few weeks, I'll be like, ok like, brain-break. Thats a great idea.

Saoirse [00:21:02] I even think for anyone, with any anxiety, to have that card. I have that, yeah, I can leave if I want, that safety net, they probably they mightn't even ever use it. They have it, there would of peace of mind.

Ailish [00:21:28] So valuable.

Facilitator [00:21:28] Can we come back now to the group and we'll just round off.

Grainne [00:21:46] We were lucky with Brona to keep us on track.

Facilitator [00:21:50] Well, you know, I just want to say, well, done everybody. There was such a lively discussion there. You nearly have the four weeks done there in the last 15 minutes. You were dying to get stuck in. It's great to see you've come up with an order. We're not going to decide on an order now because what will happen each week is, now, I will meet with the students and we will look at the order you come up with and then they will come up with the order with me and then we will present. We will email that out to you in advance of our next meeting. Will also make the PowerPoint, the students and I will make the PowerPoint and will email out the PowerPoint to you as well in advance of the meeting. So you can be thinking about your ideas and what questions you'd like to ask the students and what you'd like the discussion to form around. So it's lovely to hear such open conversation and such lively questions for the students, you know, and thank you to the students who have just amazing answers. You know, they blow me away every time when they talk about their school life. And I know it's going to be so valuable for the leadership team to hear their opinions, they're just fantastic. So that's our meeting for today.

Grainne [00:22:57] Very enjoyable.

Facilitator [00:22:57] Which is as simple as that. Yeah. Each week will be quite similar format. It will be very simple and nobody needs to worry about anything. It's lovely to see that, relationships and friendships are building among you and openness in the conversation as well. So thank you, everybody. And anybody has any questions for me. You can ask me now or afterwards and I'm going to stop the recording now and you have my email as well. [00:23:21](Meeting ended but recording continued on for a couple of minutes).[0.0s]

Grainne [00:23:24] Thanks Rachel.

[00:23:24] Thank you, yeah, I think that was really good.

Facilitator [00:23:27] Yeah, I know. That was really tough! [00:23:29](Satirical, Laughter)[0.0s]

Facilitator [00:23:34] Yea really tough.

Grainne [00:23:35] Well done to Brona and Aisling . [00:23:35](Positivity all around from everyone).[0.0s]

Facilitator [00:23:35] Oh, amazing. Just an amazing start, yeah and we will have a little celebration at the end of it. A party.

Grainne [00:23:48] We were talking about celebrations Brona weren't we?

Brona [00:23:49] Yeah.

Saoirse [00:23:49] Brona would know how to celebrate any way I'm sure.

Facilitator [00:23:52] Well, it's unbelievable when I listen to the students here and the things they tell me and the things they come up with, it's I just think it's so valuable as a leadership team for us all to hear that because it just changes the way you see your school, you know, and how little things, little changes can be can be huge for, you know, for everybody. For the students that are attached to special class and are diagnosed with AS are no different from the students that are of the mainstream. Just maybe some of the difficulties are more concentrated, but any strategies that are put in place will benefit everybody in the school. So it's really valuable for everyone.

Facilitator [00:24:33] So well done.

Facilitator [00:24:35] Thank you very much for coming down, everybody. And next Thursday, are we ok for the meeting again next Thursday that's great.

Facilitator [00:24:55] Thank you

Appendix M: Researcher Reflective Journal on CLI1

Researcher's Reflective Journal: CLI 1

Date:

Facilitator: Rachel Ryan

Participants: Aisling , Brona ,Ben Ailish , Roisin, Micheal, Grainne, Saoirse

Subject: Initiative Introduction

1. Introduction and Meeting Setup

The first meeting of the CLI marked a foundational moment in redefining traditional dynamics between students, particularly those from special classes, and the school leadership. My goal was to create a relaxed yet purposeful space in which participants felt safe, heard, and valued. Importantly, this was the first formal encounter of its kind, and I recognised its significance as both an inclusive practice and a potential disruption of normative power relations in schools. The choice to use first names during introductions was deliberate. From a Foucauldian perspective, this could be seen as a symbolic gesture, a micro-disruption of hierarchical structures. Yet while it fostered comfort and ease, we must be cautious not to overstate its radicality. This informality may serve as what Foucault would call a *technology of power*, a way of softening authority without relinquishing control. By creating a more 'equal' setting, the leadership maintains its legitimacy while appearing accessible, thereby reinforcing its role in defining the terms of engagement.

2. Student and Leadership Engagement

Aisling and Brona's Cautious but Positive Engagement

The initial hesitation from Aisling and Brona was entirely understandable, given the

novelty of engaging directly with school leadership. But once the discursive space had been softened, through the use of first names and informal conversation, they began to share valuable insights. Brona's candid account of using the bathroom to manage her restlessness serves as a counter-discourse to dominant behavioural norms in schools, which often privilege stillness, silence, and compliance. Her act is one of subtle resistance, creating her own *micro-freedom* within a disciplinary regime. Micheal's response, offering the idea of a 'break card,' represents an institutional attempt to formalise and thus contain that resistance within the existing framework. Foucault reminds us that power always responds to resistance by adapting, often absorbing it rather than dismantling the structures that give rise to it.

3. Leadership Team's Willingness to Engage

The leadership team, particularly Grainne and Micheal, demonstrated openness and curiosity, with Grainne stating that she hoped the students could "teach her" about certain aspects of the school's technical infrastructure. On the surface, this seems to invert traditional hierarchies. Yet we must question whether this is a redistribution of knowledge or a *strategic humility* that allows the leadership to maintain its authority while appearing progressive. Micheal's validation of Brona's coping mechanism is noteworthy. It indicates a willingness to shift policy based on lived experience. Still, under a Foucauldian gaze, we must consider whether such gestures represent genuine transformation or simply new modalities of governing behaviour, offering students *regulated freedoms* within the boundaries of school norms.

4. Reflections on Key Topics and Emerging Themes

Mental Health as a Priority

The unanimous agreement on prioritising student mental health suggests a shift in school discourse from performance to well-being. Yet this too can be interpreted through a Foucauldian lens as part of a broader trend toward *pastoral power*, where institutions increasingly govern through the management of life, bodies, and emotional states. One meeting does not make a culture. To what extent will this

collaborative ethos persist when decisions become contentious? Will student voices continue to hold weight when leadership is challenged? Including students alongside educators reflects a shift towards a more participatory and student-centred approaches to educational leadership and decision-making, but it must be pervasive and sustained across all practice to be viable. Students' suggestions, such as break cards and sensory walks, are deeply practical. However, they also signal a desire to resist the normative structures that govern time, space, and behaviour in schools. These requests point to the limits of the current disciplinary framework and suggest a need for flexibility. But once formalised by policy, such strategies risk becoming new instruments of regulation, embedding self-surveillance and emotional management within students' daily routines.

5. School Environment and Inclusivity

Brona's reflections on the physical layout of the school, especially the benefits of year zones, highlight the spatial dimension of power. Foucault reminds us that power operates not just through language and norms, but through architecture and design. The arrangement of space is never neutral; it shapes movement, behaviour, and emotional states. Her discomfort with large end-of-term celebrations illustrates the pressure for students to conform to dominant social norms of participation and enjoyment. Her preference for smaller gatherings invites us to rethink what inclusive participation really means, and how school events often privilege certain types of subjectivity over others (extroverted, neurotypical, high-energy).

6. Reflections on Facilitation and Group Dynamics

As facilitator, I was pleased with how the dynamic unfolded. The informal tone allowed students to speak with more ease, while the leadership team's receptivity fostered mutual respect. Still, my position within the institution necessitates reflection. As Foucault reminds us, there is no position outside of power. My own facilitation, though intended to be neutral, contributes to shaping what is sayable, whose knowledge is valid, and how students come to see themselves as "legitimate" contributors. Time management remains a practical issue, but also a symbolic one.

The ability to control time, whose voices are heard and for how long, is itself a subtle form of power. While I strive for equity, I must also be alert to how time and structure can discipline discussion, limiting spontaneity and dissent.

7. Emerging Challenges and Considerations

One of the key tensions I observed was balancing the informality that nurtures openness with the need to stay on task. The risk here, from a Foucauldian lens, is that informality becomes a technique for deeper assimilation, encouraging students to speak only in ways that align with institutional expectations of “constructive” or “respectful” discourse. Brona’s concern about raising sensitive topics like crying reflects a broader tension: the *regulation of emotion*. Certain expressions, especially those deemed too raw, vulnerable, or challenging, are often subtly marginalised in school discourse. Her hesitation is a reminder of how emotional expression is governed not just by policy, but by cultural norms around acceptability and control.

8. Looking Ahead: Next Steps

The next session will focus on student mental health, a topic identified by both students and staff as foundational. My role will be to help translate student insights into a presentation format that maintains authenticity while still fitting within the expectations of a formal leadership setting. Again, this translation raises critical questions: Are students being empowered to speak on their own terms, or are they learning to tailor their speech to fit what the institution can accommodate? As Foucault might suggest, empowerment is always entangled with control; even our attempts to “give voice” are shaped by the very systems we seek to challenge.

9. Final Reflections

This meeting exceeded my expectations in its openness and collaborative spirit. Students felt heard, and the leadership team responded with care. But we must not become complacent. The real challenge lies in sustaining this dialogue without co-

opting it, ensuring that student voice does not become a tokenistic performance within an unchanged system. From a Foucauldian standpoint, the CLI initiative holds immense potential, but only if we remain critically attuned to the ways power circulates through discourse, space, and policy. Inclusion must be more than representational; it must be transformative. Ultimately, the meeting reaffirmed my belief in the importance of student voice, not simply as a democratic ideal, but as a site of contestation, where new ways of being, speaking, and knowing can emerge, if we remain willing to question the very structures that claim to “include.”

Appendix N: Data Analysis Braun and Clarke RTA: (2006, 2019, 2020)

Phase 1: Familiarising myself with the Data, Listening to the recordings, transcribing, and journaling. Reflecting on the literature, Research Questions, Conceptual Framework.

Phase 2: Open Coding: Generating Initial Codes

Critically Looking at Inclusive Policy and Practice

SCM: Special Class Vs Mainstream

FO: Feelings of being othered

PBB: Practices that enable barriers to belonging

CCPP: Critical consciousness of policies and practices that inhibit inclusive culture

EF: Expectations of students to fit in

KS: Information Knowledge sharing on policy and practice

SB: Skill building on how to develop a critical consciousness of how to build an inclusive culture

SB: Sense of belonging

PB: Practices that provide a barrier to listening

Autistic Voice

ES: Enthusiasm for Sharing

SP: Sense of Partnership

FI: Feeling Listened to

FAEP: Feeling Affirmation of Experiences and Perspectives

FE: Feelings of Empowerment

AR: Actively Reflecting on Policy and Practice

FB: Feeling a sense of Belonging

FA: Feeling a Sense of Agency

BH: Barriers to being Heard

BS: Barriers to 'What can be said'

Leadership

BP: Building Partnership

SH: Speaking Honestly

AL: Act of Listening

BT: Building Trust

AEP: Affirming the Experiences and Perspectives of Others

EI: Enthusiasm for the Initiative

EPS: Engagement in Problem-Solving Discussions

KS: Knowledge Sharing

PS: Power Sharing

DCC: Developing a critical consciousness

MPE: Modelling and Sharing Personal Experiences

Phase 3: Collapsing codes and generating initial themes by counting the number of times the code is repeated in the data

Critically Looking at Inclusive Policy and Practice

Theme 1: Balcony View of Policy and Practice

Codes: SCM, FO, PBB, PP, KS, AR, EF

Theme 2: A Conceptual Understanding of Social Justice

Codes: FO, EF, DCC, SU, EPS, MPE, PS

Theme 3: Critical View/Understanding of Social Justice and the Impact of Policy and Practice on a Specific Context.

Codes: SCM, FO, PBB, PP, EF, AR, DCC,

Listening to the Voice of Autistic Students

Theme 1: Enthusiasm for Innovation

Codes: ES, SP, FL, EJ, FB, FA, SH, AL, BT, EPS, MPE

Theme 2: A Sense of Partnership

Codes: ES, SP, FL, EI, FB, FA, SH, AL, BT, EPS, KS, PS, MPE, CCP

Theme 3: Constructivist Approach to Leadership

Codes: ES, SP, FL, EJ, AR, FB, FA, SH, AL, BT, EPS, KS, PS, MPE, CCP

Co-Constructing Leadership

Theme 1: Affording Respect for the Lived Experience of Autistic Students

Codes: ES, FL, FAEP, SE, MPE, SP, FE

Theme 2: Co-constructing Important School Decision-Making

Codes: AR, CCP, FA, FB

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes. Is it a Theme is it a code?

Questions I asked myself

1. Is this a theme (it could be just a code)?
2. If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme (does it tell me something valuable about the data set and my research question)?
3. What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include and exclude)?
4. Is there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme (is the theme thin or thick)?
5. Are the data too diverse and wide-ranging (does the theme need coherence)?

Phase five: Defining and Naming theme:

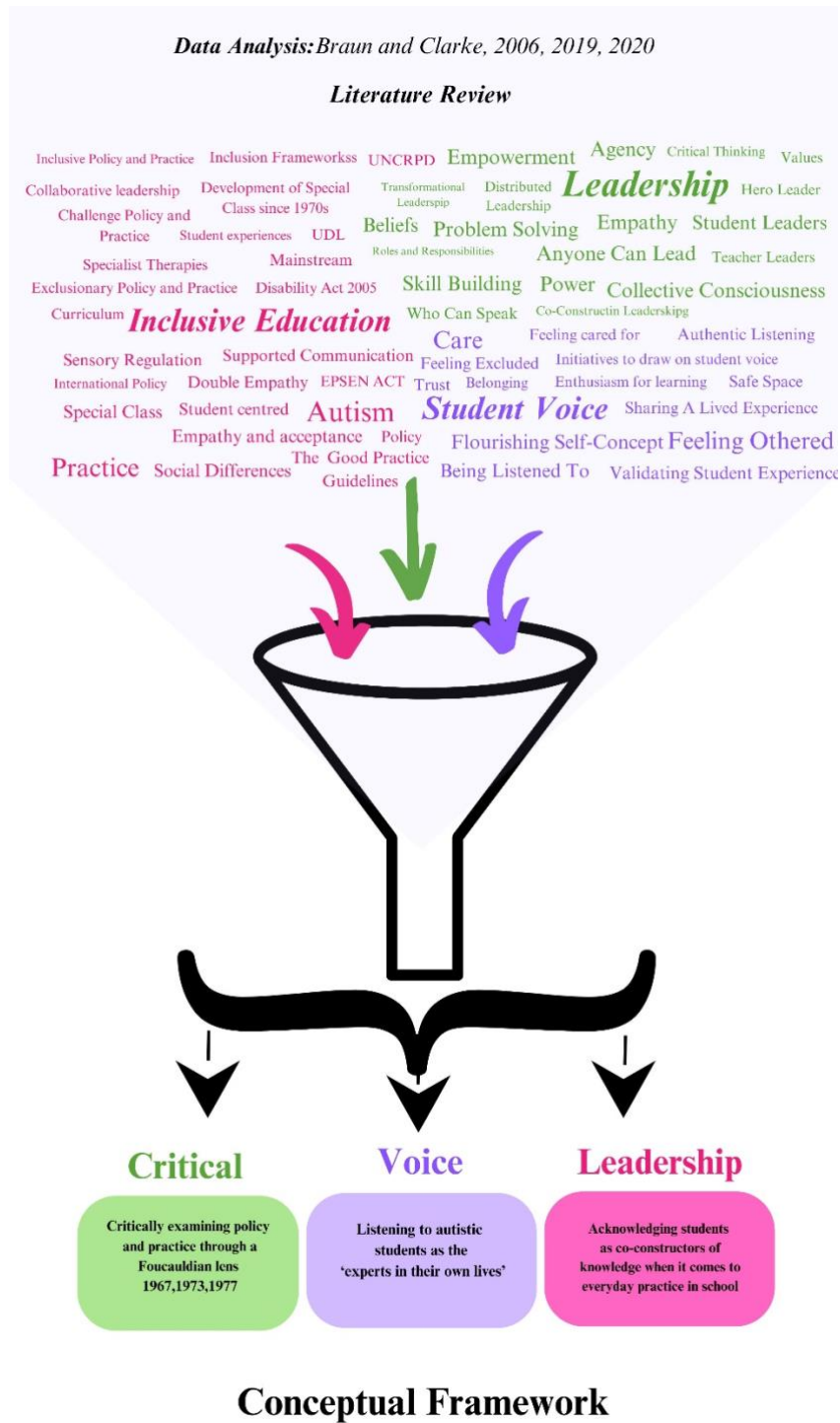
1. Developing a Critical Perspective and Re-distributing Power.
2. Enacting Collaboration.
3. Co-constructing Leadership

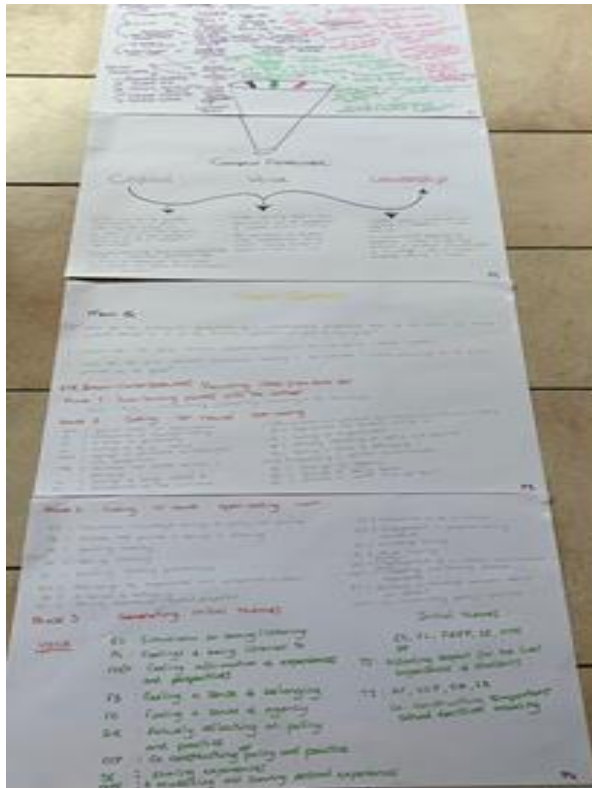
Phase five: Defining and Naming theme:

1. Developing a Critical Perspective and Re-distributing Power.
2. Enacting Collaboration.
3. Co-constructing Leadership

Phase 6: Writing up the Report

Appendix O: Data Analysis Visual Braun and Clarke RTA: (2006, 2019, 2020)





**Appendix P: Data Analysis: Sample of Collapsing Codes Developing Themes
Braun and Clarke RTA: (2006, 2019, 2020).**

Partnership		
	Data extract	Reflection
<p>EI: Enthusiasm for initiative</p>	<p>S1 Facilitator [00:00:43] Can you remember, Aisling, how long we're waiting on doing this study?</p> <p>Aisling [00:00:46] Six years, anyway.</p> <p>S1 Facilitator [00:07:23] Actually meeting one will be just to present these topics to the leaders. So in our first meeting, we're going to comment on with all the leaders around the table. Are you nervous, or excited, how do you feel about that?</p>	<p>Field notes: Meeting 1: Everyone is very excited to get started and ask me on several occasions is the meeting going ahead. Teachers and leaders are just as excited as the students to get started.</p> <p>Emotions and Participation: Students</p>

	<p>Aisling [00:08:00] Excited.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:08:00] Excited.</p> <p>Aisling [00:08:00] So good.</p> <p>S2 Facilitator [00:00:02] Okay. So welcome to our second meeting. Mm, I'm just wondering how you all are feeling, having met with the leaders the other day. How did you feel about the meeting was it exciting.</p> <p>Aisling [00:00:13] Yes, very positive. Very. You know, you can definitely see that there are going to be changes and it's very exciting.(Aisling is visibly very elevated)</p> <p>Facilitator [00:00:21] What struck you most about meeting with the leaders of the school.?</p>	<p>express feelings of excitement and positivity about having their voices heard by school leaders.</p> <p>Aisling and Brona emphasise the importance of student input and leadership's willingness to listen.</p>
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Aisling [00:00:26] Mm all, you know, their like, willingness to actually hear what we have to say and, you know, to take on board everything and, you know, everyone's just positivity was just yeah.

Aisling [00:00:37] It was alive, the room. The room was alive with excitement. Brona what struck you? Was there anything unusual that happened in the meeting the other day when you met with the leaders that you didn't expect or that was unusual?

Brona [00:00:51] Mm, The fact that they said that it was interesting how mainstream affects some students and that they didn't know. (Brona is amazed at the teachers and leaders response to her experiences)

	<p>Aisling [00:00:57] Right, that's brilliant</p> <p>Brona [00:00:57] I liked it though.</p> <p>Aisling [00:00:58] Yes, you liked it, you liked doing it. I could sense you were all very positive. What about you Ben? What did you think meeting the leaders?</p> <p>Ben [00:01:05] I enjoyed it. It's nice talking to them, Like, from person to person, you know.</p> <p>Aisling [00:01:10] Yeah. I heard you saying something at the meeting, that usually, or at the end of the meeting, usually people talk to you as if you are a child.</p>	<p>Enthusiasm for Initiative:</p> <p>Students were excited about the opportunity to share their voices and influence school practices.</p> <p>Aisling and Ben were especially enthusiastic about suggesting changes and seeing their impact.</p> <p>(Aisling, Ben were excited about their participation).</p>
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	<p>Brona [00:01:17] Yeah.</p> <p>Ben [00:01:17] Oh Yeah</p> <p>Facilitator [00:01:18] You didn't feel that at the meeting? No. Can you explain what that was there? Can you explain how they made you feel at the meeting?</p> <p>Ben [00:01:26] Mm like I was, like I was with them, like a team, almost.</p> <p>C 1 Facilitator [00:11:41] Laughter from all [00:11:41](laughter and chat from everyone as they get organised with materials, much more relaxed).[0.0s]</p> <p>Micheal [00:12:10] Brona, I think you have all the answers</p>	<p>Inclusive Environment:</p> <p>There is a significant focus on creating an</p>
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	<p>here, do you?</p> <p>S4 Facilitator [00:16:28] Why do you look forward to the meeting?</p> <p>Aisling [00:16:30] It's just. Ehm it's nice to see them, you know, taking on board what we say and actually, like, you know, being like, oh, yeah, they are, that's a good point. You know, realising that the things that we do and the things that we think about are actually like.</p> <p>Ben [00:16:46] *unaudible.*</p> <p>Aisling [00:16:46] Things that could come into our school every day and yeah</p> <p>Facilitator [00:16:49] Become part of the regular programme. Say that again</p>	<p>inclusive</p> <p>environment, with</p> <p>discussions about</p> <p>emotional well-being, such</p> <p>as normalising crying and</p> <p>addressing barriers to participation (e.g., emotional or mental barriers).</p>
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	<p>Ben.</p> <p>Ben [00:16:52] Valuable.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:16:54] yeah valuable. Yeah. And you feel they genuinely listen, do you?</p> <p>Ben, Aisling [00:16:58] Yeah.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:17:00] yeah Amazing. How would you know they're genuinely listening?</p> <p>Aisling [00:17:03] well Just like, you know, even with Ms Donohue, like the principal being like, oh, that was such an amazing idea and being like, so enthusiastic about, like, things that we were saying and like, taking notes and everything. And already some of the teachers coming back and saying, Oh, I used that idea you gave us in our</p>	<p>Well-Being Programs:</p> <p>The students discuss topics</p> <p>such as well-being programs, technology integration, sensory spaces, and life skills, emphasising their relevance for both mainstream and special needs students.</p>
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	<p>class . And it actually really worked like,.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:17:22] Excellent.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:17:23] So are you enthusiastic for our next meeting?</p> <p>Aisling [00:17:26] Yeah.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:17:26] Ready? Ready to put those ideas forward to them?</p> <p>Aisling [00:17:30] Definitely.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:17:31] Okay, well, I think that sets us up. Ready for today. You're happy with the PowerPoint that we're going to deliver to them and the ideas we're going to get across. And we're going to try</p>	<p>Leadership Interaction:</p> <p>Students reflect on their positive experiences with school leaders, noting how the leaders treated them as equals, listened attentively, and took action based on their suggestions.</p>
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	<p>and move to that main focus that we're going to talk about getting that whole skills for life transitioning into Ehm into our school programme here into our wellbeing programme.</p> <p>Aisling [00:17:53] Yeah, sounds good.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:17:54] Great stuff. We'll be ready to go. So thank you. Thanks for another great meeting.</p> <p>Aisling [00:17:59] thank you.</p> <p>Aisling [00:13:44] Yeah.</p> <p>S5 Facilitator [00:13:45] Are you happy with that? Do you feel confident going into the meeting to talk about technology and how, how you can get your voice across?</p>	<p>Recommendations and Feedback:</p> <p>Students provide practical suggestions such as introducing more sensory spaces, better managing class schedules, improving buddy systems, and creating a more structured, inclusive environment for all students. They also value having consistent supervisors and access to tools like Google</p>
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	<p>All [00:13:52] Yeah. Yeah,.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:13:54] Well, there's smiles all round when I say get your voice across. it's obviously that's the important part, just getting your voice across.</p> <p>Aisling [00:14:04] Most definitely.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:14:05] Yeah, most definitely. Okay, so we're good for this meeting so a bit of your getting giddy about the meeting.</p> <p>All [00:14:12] (laughs).</p> <p>Facilitator) [00:14:12] everybody sounds a bit giddy there. Okay. I think we can leave it at that for today So and good luck with the meeting</p>	Classroom.
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today.

Aisling [00:14:22] thank you

SFG Section 1 – Question 1:

What did you think about me doing that? So, you, when I first explained all that to you, what did you think about my study? About what I wanted to do? About why I wanted to have you there? Anyone got an opinion on that?

Ben: [00:6:11] I thought it was great. It was a great idea. A great opportunity for us.

Rachel: [00:6:15] Okay. A great opportunity for you. Why a great opportunity for you Ben?

Ben: [00:6:22] I suppose to get our voices heard?

	<p>Rachel: [00:6:24] To get your voice heard. And how was that different for you in telling, different from telling me something and me passing it on. How was it different that you would actually get to say that to those leaders yourself? What's the difference between me delivering it or you actually saying it?</p> <p>Ben: [00:6:43] If feels more genuine.</p> <p>Rachel: [00:6:44] It feels more genuine?</p> <p>Ben: [00:6:45] Yeah.</p> <p>Rachel: [00:6:45] It impacts you as a person.</p> <p>Ben: [00:6:48] Yeah.</p>	<p>Challenges: Some challenges include managing anxiety, crowded school spaces, and technology reliance, such as needing iPads charged to participate in lessons.</p>
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SFG Aisling: [7:32] M...I was excited. Genuinely at the start I wasn't really sure it was going to work or anything because I was like you know these are the principal, like this is the principal of our school listening to students but like that well obviously very quickly changed when you started but yeah, I was kind of... I was really excited, but I don't know if this is actually going to work so.

SFG Aisling: [21:07] M... I quite enjoyed it because it was you know it was the afternoon, so we were just finishing school. Like, you know we were finishing school for the evening, and we were just getting close to the weekend, so everyone was kind of in a good mood.

SFG Aisling: [24:50] Yeah. Signs just telling people not to

come in, but I think you did a pretty good job -

Rachel: [24:55] Aw... Thank you!

Aisling: [24:56] ...organising it.

Ben: [24:57] I do too.

Rachel: [24:57] Thank you Ben.

Brona: [24:59] So, do I.

Rachel: [24:59] Thank you Brona. So, yeah, I think we did get fairly well organised. I remember week one, well, I think I'm the most looked for teacher in the school, so that is difficult.

But Roisin did a great job standing guard there on the

day. She told people I wasn't available, so that was a really important point because if somebody is giving their opinion it's not nice to be interrupted and your train of thought goes. So, that's a great recommendation.

M... And again, I suppose the one, the Covid one, it would be great not to have disruptions to the week that the school could actually set aside those weeks and that time. And it's precious.

Aisling: [25:35] Yeah.

Rachel: [25:35] And, and I do know that I can communicate to you that Ms. Donohue, she made that time precious. Like, I know for a fact she came back from a busy principal's meeting one day and she texted me on the way to say, "Rachel, I've left the meeting, I will be there on time for the

	<p>study.” You know, amazing. You know that you and your opinion is valued.</p> <p>TFG Rachel: [14:24] That’s amazing. Just to move on then from that then.</p> <p>Question 3: When you first, when I first spoke about the initiative and what I was planning to do. How did you feel about? What was your gut reaction to that? Like, what did you think when I said, okay we’re going to take our leadership team and we’re actually going to bring some students on to it? What was your gut reaction to that like? Did you feel it would work? Not work? No?</p> <p>Ailish: [14:47] I think it’s a very... I definitely feel that it’s quite a natural part of education. A thing, an aspect, yeah. Yeah, it’s a really important aspect to have in the</p>	<p>Collaborative</p> <p>Atmosphere: The group discussions are often</p>
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	<p>school now because students are huge, they're the population, the vast majority of the population of this school. And to have a few representatives that engage with staff members and management is so valuable.</p> <p>Rachel: [15:13] I suppose it's not often that you would get students that are diagnosed and placed on the autism spectrum and placed in a special class setting meeting with the principal and deputy principal of the school. Did you see anything unusual in that?</p> <p>Saoirse: [15:29] I found, I was so amazed by how the students have the confidence talking to management and they weren't just saying what they thought management wanted to hear. They were actually very open.</p> <p>Rachel: [15:41] Could they</p>	<p>relaxed, with humour and camaraderie among students and facilitators, indicating a comfortable, supportive environment for these dialogues get started.</p>
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take it back a step like to when I said to you, this is what I plan to do? Just that moment when I said, this is what I'm planning to do, would you like to be involved?

What was the, what was the gut, what was thought in your head?

Saoirse: [15:53] Well, in my mind it was embrace it whole heartily.

Ailish: [15:55] Yeah, yeah. Definitely, yeah.

Roisin: [15:57] I, I do think the school is unique in the sense that m... from the moment I stepped in the door 8 years ago there was a different relationship between teachers and students. M... It was really about the holistic development. It wasn't focused just on the academic. It was everything. Because

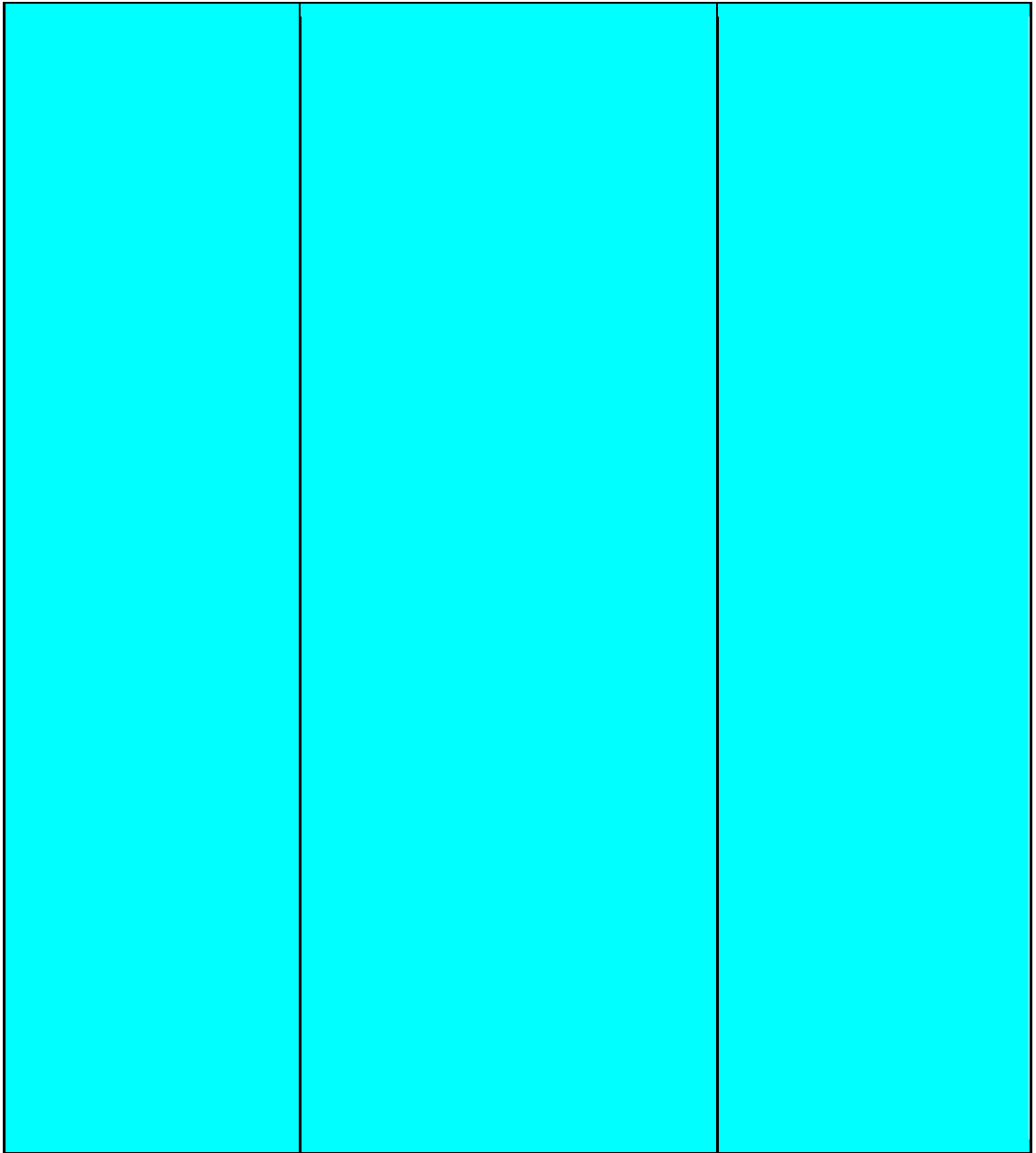
when the student was well and felt good in themselves everything thrived and that is the goal in the teachers and the management here. And so, to think that we were actually scheduling something that was more formalised, I think it just was... I suppose standardising what we were actually doing and probably a hidden curriculum you know, you know. And we were actually just embedding what actually was happening, and because I had some of the students, I just knew that they would rise to the challenge. And I knew that what was going to be most incredible at it is, that they would be honest. And then what you were going to hear from them was un-pending because having taught them, they would tell you that class didn't work for me today.

Roisin: [17:02] And you know, I would be, I had to learn how to receive that and

reflect on my own practice and change again. And I think as management nobody ever should feel that they know it all. There's always room for improvement and I think if we can encompass and ensure that the voice of our ASD (autism spectrum disorder) students and our SEN students are heard around the table along with anybody who's in mainstream with staff, I think can only, it's onwards and upwards.

TFG Ailish: [19:22] And I don't think for any of us going into this we thought, oh what we could get out of it as in what I personally can get out of this. What I thought how can this benefit this group of people? How can we progress through this sharing space? And it's, it's a collective, it's not a personal. Like, obviously we gave an insight and all of that, but I don't know, I definitely think going into it and saying this is what I can

	gain.	
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<p>SU: Shared understanding</p>	<p>S1 Facilitator [00:01:45] So even within the topics that I can come up with, you might want to put more headings in or whatever. So the topics that mm I have put out here on the sheets are supporting students' mental health and wellbeing in school, and the wellbeing programs, that are delivered in school, the use of technology, throughout school and the school environment. Just how do you feel about those topics? Would anybody like to say, are you happy with those topics? Is there any one of them you would like removed?</p> <p>Aisling [00:03:42] No, I think they're good. I think they cover all the bases.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:03:46] That's a thumbs up from Brona. She thinks they are good too.</p>	
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Facilitator [00:03:46] Do you think they cover all the different areas of school life and Ben how do you feel about those topics?

Ben [00:03:55] Yes.

Facilitator [00:03:55] Everyone's in agreement that they are four good areas for us to look. Any other ideas and other things that you think we could, that you think we could include in our meetings. Anything that springs to mind from your experiences.

C 1 Micheal [00:13:52] That is your little routine so that when you go back then it's easier in the classroom then is it.

Brona [00:13:56] Yeah, I find it a lot more easier to

concentrate

Micheal [00:13:59] Ok and even if you know you are going to get a little break, would it be easier beforehand as well as when they come back?

Brona [00:14:08] Probably.

S5 Facilitator[00:11:16] You know, would you ever experience any of those difficulties yourself in the classroom where that where you'd been treated equally, but it wasn't actually equitable for you to take part in an activity or a piece of work. Can you think of a situation or you don't have to think of it now, but you might think about that before the meeting with leaders. You know, was it ever that a teacher treated you equally to everyone else? But it was still impossible for you to do it

because of a barrier that you had to taking part in, something it wasn't actually equitable for you.

Ben [00:12:58] May be a mental barrier.

Facilitator [00:13:00] Yeah. Yeah. Okay, that's really good.

Ben [00:13:05] given all the tools but, you know, not everyone , everyone is different mentally, different stages. Different levels.

Facilitator [00:13:13] Yeah. Different levels of emotional connection maybe. Yeah. So it might not always be equitable the task yeah because you might not have the, you might not have the, the emotional positioning at that time to access it. Yes, that's a very good that's very

	<p>good point. Ben . I take that very well. There all things you can think about, I think we have a lot there to talk about at the meeting.</p> <p>Aisling [00:13:44] Yeah.</p>	
<p>FB: Feeling a sense of belonging</p>	<p>S2 Facilitator [00:01:18] You didn't feel that at the meeting? No. Can you explain what that was there? Can you explain how they made you feel at the meeting?</p> <p>Ben [00:01:26] Mmmm like I was, like I was with them, like a team, almost.</p>	
<p>EPS: Engagement</p>		

<p>with problem solving discussions</p>	<p>S1 Brona [00:05:11] I think that we should normalize crying.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:05:14] Okay.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:05:15] Why would you think that?</p> <p>Brona [00:05:17] Because I do a lot of it. I just feel like it would be beneficial.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:05:21] What does normalize mean to you?</p> <p>[00:05:24] because, I feel like when like you're crying if something overwhelms you, I feel like some mainstream students just stand there looking at you. Oh my God. Some teachers don't want to do. Like they just do. They are o lost.</p>	
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C1 Grainne [00:18:01] This is interesting for teachers to hear, because maybe teachers apply content, content,

Saoirse [00:18:01] To get as much covered as possible.

Grainne [00:18:01] And if you took the breather here or every so often for a couple of minutes, you would end up with students getting more of the content.

Aisling [00:18:31] Yea as much covered as possible.

Aisling [00:18:32] Yes. If you getting like to that stage like everything is too much you are not taking anything in anymore.

Saoirse [00:18:38] Yea you

could take two 5 minute breaks during that hour long class or even 2, 3 minute break, You know. It would make a huge difference probably.

Ailish [00:18:56] I would have always done that in a double anyway, which was 40 and 40. So it's the Same idea I would have always given a little short break over to have it for just not out of the room, but yeah, within the class setting.

C2 Brona [00:32:02] And that maybe they could be mini buddies for first years because sometimes you dont even for remember who your buddy is.

Facilitator [00:32:09] That is excellent. So a mini buddy system. I love that . excellent. We could improve that. That's really good. So the next

group. well done. Well done they really top class. you know. What were doing really well there it's very good. But they're lovely ideas of what we could draw from to improve. Excellent. Ehm next group.

C2 Ben [00:41:53] all teachers would be more aware of autism and have experience with it.

Facilitator [00:41:57] Okay. So, brilliant Ben.

Ben [00:42:01] They would experience it first hand.

Grainne [00:42:05] Yeah. yeah, very, true.

Grainne [00:42:12] And we have another point to put in

Ben [00:42:17] And we said to put in what's working well is respect for one another.

C2 Ben [00:42:40] what we put here in what we could do better, is translating to other languages.

Facilitator [00:42:44] Okay. So translating our notices and....

Ben [00:42:48] you know for people. Who wouldn't be as fluent.

Facilitator [00:42:51] very good. Yes, so translating our notices into different languages.

Grainne [00:42:55] Ehm so Ben was saying there like the way the covid notices. The

important ones are put up in different languages, Arabic and that and you know.

S5 Facilitator [00:04:40]

Exactly. Like if you're like me. I used to find it hard to keep. I never like when I back to the notes that I got before would be at home, when I'd be at home. The notes that I got for what I'd want would be at school in my locker. So it's amazing. It's all in one place.

Ben [00:04:55] Different topics and sub topics.

Facilitator [00:04:57]

Topics and sub topics. Okay. So you can have the sub topics within topics. So, Ehm what do you think about we put it to the leaders today that we look at what's good about classrooms we have, we look at the classroom that's good to us and we show them what's

	<p>good about it</p> <p>Aisling [00:05:15] Yeah, that sounds good.</p>	
<p>MPE: Modelling and sharing personal experiences</p>	<p>C 1 Grainne [00:14:33] I'm hoping when I'm hearing about iPads and Apple pens, that you will be able to teach me. I would be the Same as you, Brona. You're saying the Same and I'm sure you're able to use some of it possibly.</p> <p>Brona [00:14:45] Oh, the iPad I'm grand with but I wouldn't know much about the Apple pens.</p> <p>Brona [00:13:18] Well now, you know what? Now I find it</p>	

very hard to sit in a class for an hour, because I don't I know I just get very fizzy. I go to the bathroom in like every class, because I don't have a break from class card. So I just have to go to the bathroom.

S2 Facilitator [00:06:28]

Would you have any little comment for me now on that. Why?

Aisling [00:06:29] Yeah well like you know I think obviously we're a technology school so we're going to push technology, but I think that if you have students in the right headspace and they're just, you know, if they're coming school positive, then the technology will go more naturally. Like the, I mean, wanting to work with technology.

C2 Grainne [00:21:27] I

know, I love if I can get out into the garden, I feel good. So that's where I spent most of last Saturday, yes, cutting the grass. Sometimes, you get the lovely smells from flowers, or you see the butterflies, I'm lucky enough that I have the lake, I love that so I know your physical surroundings does help you.

C3 Brona [00:07:10] Um, I like it with people that you're comfortable with.

Rachel [00:07:13] And where's that for you?

Brona [00:07:15] X

Facilitator[00:07:15] X.
Okay, very good. Excellent. And that's good. Would you be able to say that, that would be allowed?

Facilitator[00:07:23] Yeah.
Yeah. So you be able to
communicate that to the
leaders?

Brona [00:07:26] Yeah

C3 Facilitator [00:21:38]
And about speaking up and
having a voice how do you
advise them to do that?

Aisling [00:21:43] yeah,
definitely.

Aisling [00:21:48] I dunno ,
It is it is difficult. It's going to
like, schools going to be hard.
schools hard for everyone and
especially hard for people
with autism. And it's just
knowing that it's going to be
hard, like, you know,
knowing that there will be
things that will be
challenging, but you will get
through them. And, that
there's a lot of support there

if you actually look for it there is a lot of support from people that will help you.

4S Facilitator [00:12:55]

Managing money, excellent Ben. Managing money. Like a big thing that came up for me. Maybe you have mastered it at this stage. but a big thing that came up for me in the last year is getting into revolt. You know, I had in my head that revolt was sort of, you know, for people over there, you know,.

all [00:13:15] (laughs).

Facilitator [00:13:16] You know, I go to a meal and people say aw do you have revolt, and i say . No, no, I don't have revolt that's for people over at that table there not like, its not for me, you know. And then all of a sudden when I looked at it , I said, this is so simple, like,

you know, this is actually so doable. Any of you on revolut,.

Brona [00:13:34] no.

Facilitator [00:13:34] and would you.

Ben [00:13:37] I have an an post bank thingy.

Facilitator [00:13:38]
Excellent. Same idea. Same idea, you know. So there you go. Like there's something a dinosaur like me has gotten into. and found so handy to be able to use revolut, but, like, shouldn't every leaving cert student be getting access to that? But you'll probably be sitting at the table with college friends next year and somebody say, Oh, use revolut , you'll all be like what's revolut , whats revolut, oh thats for the

people at that table over their not us, you know, where it's you know, it's making these things accessible to everybody. And the one way of doing that is to put it into an actual structured programme that's going on in this school. So I think that would be great if .. they're great ideas we could bring up with the leaders this afternoon, how do you think they will take to wanting to bring life skills for living outside our school into the programme in school? How do you think the leaders would take to that?

Brona [00:14:37] I feel like when they were our age they would have had them questions themselves.

Facilitator [00:14:40] Excellent. I'd say so Brona . Yeah yeah. Maybe about different things. I don't know. if revolution was around then.

ehm definitely they would have had the Same experiences going into like going to college and, you know, maybe having to cook for themselves even, you know, and, the very Same experience is just different times, different difficulties. So yeah, hopefully they will be able to able to identify with that. Any other any other concerns you have about the meeting this evening? Do you find this harder or easier to talk about?

Aisling [00:15:18] Ehm I dont know I think it's ok. We've had like, you know, in here, we've done like in a part of our unit, we've done a lot of like life skills and a lot of well being. So it is more so looking at like other students perspectives and the things that they've missed out on that we've you know we've had the Ehm.

	<p>Facilitator [00:15:37] The opportunity.</p> <p>Aisling [00:15:39] the Opportunities to you know take part in and learn all these years.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:15:42] It's really like spreading and what we do here to the rest of the school.</p> <p>Aisling [00:15:45] to Everybody else, yeah</p>	
<p>KS: Knowledge sharing</p>	<p>S1 Facilitator [00:05:49] They know what the right thing to do. Yeah. To alleviate stress. That's a really good one. I think crying is an emotion. And, you know,</p>	

we're talking about normalizing our emotions. You know, that it's okay to express their emotions. That's an amazing topic. I'm definitely yes, we can put that on the agenda and anything else that we're missing.

C2 Grainne [00:25:12] The last one there, fostering respect for diversity. is that like the relationships in the school

Grainne [00:25:12] Indistinct chat from both groups.

Grainne [00:25:12] the way you feel as a student yeah I suppose i think I feel as a principal, I sometimes i often wonder what it might feel like from a students point of view, how so its great to always hear it from you'll be very conscious of these when myself and Mr. Kenny aswel when we are developing

policies for teachers, I really do, I think respect is huge. When I'm interviewing, I want to hear that, the password to get a look in for the job in

Grainne[00:26:12] Mercy Ballymahon is for the future prospective teacher to say respect. I want to hear this because we feel we've that in our community and so for anyone coming in new, we want to see, everyone to buy in, no more than for the new students. I always give the first years a little bit of a lecture when they come in, "you've heard about our good reputation, about how students get on with one another, now you have to respect that as well." That's good to hear you say that Ben because you've experienced that.

[00:26:22] Yeah, Yeah

Grainne [00:26:44] so, great respect for one another is working in.

C1 Facilitator [00:23:52] For the students that are attached to special class and are diagnosed with AS are no different from the students that are of the mainstream. Just maybe some of the difficulties are more concentrated, but any strategies that are put in place will benefit everybody in the school. So it's really valuable for everyone.

S2 Facilitator [00:08:41] It's for everybody in learning support that needs, that likes to visit us here, for cup of tea and chat and social skills and play games and for our social skills classes. So it's now to

provide that for mainstream students, that don't have a place here. So, you know, it's creating the nice environment we have here for everybody else in the school, because they can't all come to our class. You know, so, it's good, it's spreading the ideas and the practice, elsewhere. What do you think of that Brona?

Brona [00:09:16] I really like that idea.

C2 Facilitator

[00:05:45] And they say that student well-being is present when students realise their abilities, take care of their physical well-being and cope with normal stresses of life and have a sense of purpose and belonging to the wider community.

<p>AR: Actively reflecting on policy and practice</p>	<p>C 1 Grainne [00:15:10] How do you find these ones? You are in 5th year aren't you Brona, so do you think it's easier? Because this is kind of what interests me, because this kind of looks for the big school the whole school and kinda were getting to look at our numbers, our school is getting bigger. And so it's kind of like even this corridor is longer now. We have to look see how we manage the school but what do you think of these year zones. So lets say I'm in first year I don't have to go walking around the school to get to your next class.</p> <p>Brona [00:15:30] I think it's handier, because like say for the life of me I'd forget my head if my head wasn't attached to my shoulders.</p>	<p>Collaboration and Reflection on Well-Being</p> <p>Programmes: Students</p> <p>identified gaps in the current well-being curriculum, particularly around transitioning from school to adult life (e.g., managing finances, booking flights).</p> <p>Katie highlighted this as an area for improvement.</p>

	<p>Grainne [00:15:30] You are being very hard on yourself.</p> <p>Brona [00:15:30] But, say from the start of the year because if I saw somebody that i knew was like that, its kinda all in one zone, I say to them kinda say to them it is all in the one zone, you kinda know where you're going. I think it's handier in that way.</p> <p>Grainne [00:15:40] Is there safety in that? Does that make things easier?</p> <p>Brona [00:16:02] Yeah, because then I'd be like 20 minutes later class because I couldn't find it.</p> <p>C2 Grainne [00:16:21] Does it make a difference? Both Mr. Kenny and myself, It was something we brought in the</p>	<p>Inclusive Learning Environment:</p> <p>There was a focus on making the school environment more inclusive through sensory spaces, improved technology use, and enhanced support systems. Brona emphasised the need for</p>
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	<p>beginning for checking masks. and different things, and Then we saw, you know a lot more benefits. As the school gets bigger, we got to say hello to people on their way in.</p> <p>Grainne [00:16:53] They see Mr. Kenny or myself, so if there is some thing they need to say to us, it is an easy way of getting us a message, parents do it and some teachers do it as well. It s that nice link, so actually we have decided we are going to stay doing it. Yeah, because I think everybody. Yeah. so you'd like to see it stay. do you think it would be a good idea?</p> <p>Ben [00:17:14] I think It would be good.</p> <p>Grainne[00:17:18] What do you think, do other students</p>	<p>sensory spaces in each year zone.</p>
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feel the Same, do you think.

Ben [00:17:19] Well, I would say most do.

Grainne [00:17:27] That's good to hear; that's good feedback. For Mr. Kenny and myself we think it's a very worthwhile 20 minutes.

Maybe the students who come in late might not think so, when I am still there at five past nine, directing them up to the office and maybe even finding out then what's happening with some of the students who are late, something might have happened in the morning at home and they can tell me and maybe there's something we can do to help. We keep that, so if you want to write in that, that's something that you think should be kept.

Working. That is something we just brought in for covid, but we're now thinking, yeah,

we will stay doing it.

C2 Grainne [00:19:10] Is there a way the buddy system could be improved?

Grainne[00:19:20] Do you remember having a buddy?

Ben [00:19:26] No, not really. or if I did, I didn't really, that was me personally.

Ben [00:19:28] Right. Okay. But it could have been maybe, the buddy you had as well. I wonder maybe to improve it, how could we improve it

Facilitator [00:19:35] Yeah. Would you ever have taught elm Ben that system could work like across the five years or six years for students in special class. Would it be a

good system to have a buddy in mainstream, for students in special class.

Ben [00:19:43] It probably would.

Facilitator [00:19:47] Would you like that?

Ben [00:19:56] Yea probably.

C2 Grainne [00:22:03] Yeah. that is nice, would you go out there, or is there something that we could do, do you think that we could do more about getting access to that courtyard, there is benches and a fountain.

Ben [00:22:04] I didn't know people were allowed

Grainne [00:22:04] I suppose

with our zones, we had that as restricted, so maybe opening up the courtyard

Grainne [00:22:28] I think, what might be quick a fix, is having grass and....

Grainne[00:22:28] Ideally more green, I know, its a very small area to put grass in and that why we have a fountain in, we used to have a load of shrubs there and it got very overgrown. We put in the water fountain as most people like to hear a trickle of water.

C2Ben [00:24:09] What about the year zones?

Grainne [00:24:11] You know, where, well you know we have changed, this is now then become 6th year zone actually. The corridors all the classes you know are grouped together rather than being all

over the school. so as a 6th year now, you know where your classes are going to be fixed. You still stay in the Same area and the 5th year is in the middle corridor then, so all your classes , you know your classrooms are they are in that area there or any specialist areas you are going to.

Ben [00:22:35] Yes, that definitely helps.

2 Facilitator [00:29:14] Do you think all teachers should spend time down here?

Brona [00:29:21] I feel like with new people, well like I dont really like new people coming in and kinda talking and new people kinda talking to me and ask me why I'm here, its kinda like

Facilitator [00:29:26] who are you.?

Brona [00:29:26] yeah and I'm like who are you , no but its nice

Facilitator [00:29:32] Yeah, so you say all teachers .

Brona [00:29:36] Yeah. Yeah. I think there should be like one class a week where all teachers have to come down here, because like say for people who don't go to mainstream, you know.

Facilitator [00:29:47] so all teachers should visit or teach in X and or X.

Facilitator [00:30:07] that's good isnt it.

Brona [00:30:08] Yeah.

Yeah.

S3 Facilitator[00:03:44] The year zones, can you tell me why you were interested in the zones?

Aisling [00:03:47] It just it makes such a big difference when, you know, you're, you know, you're constantly being surrounded by your own peers and, you know, it's not so much like not mixing with other the years, but then you just feel comfortable because you're just with your group, with people you know. And it's, you know, people that like, you know, know what's going on and everything as well.

S3 Brona [00:06:41] Well, we used to have was it a Christmas disco. I always

found that to be quite overwhelming because everyone had their separate groups, I never really fit into them, you know that sort of a way.

Facilitator [00:08:09] And for you, what do you think is better? Which would you. Which would you prefer, being, like, being the only choice of a disco or having the option of disco or disco or quiz?

Ben [00:08:23] What I'd prefer.

Facilitator[00:08:23] Yeah

Ben [00:08:24] Quiz.

[00:08:25] Yeah quizzes. Yeah. So that's probably your saying, you prefer an option, not just quiz, not just disco,

but to be given an option.

Ben [00:08:34] If someone finds overwhelming then they should be given an option.

S3 Brona [00:09:21] There should be more sensory spaces

Facilitator[00:09:26] Right, more sensory spaces in the school, you feel that would be important as part of your environment. So you might bring that up with your group.

Brona [00:09:33] Yeah.

Facilitator[00:09:33] And would that fit into any of our key topics that we have here? Would you fit into the year zones and student based classrooms. Do you think? Every, every, could you say something about maybe every

year zone or every area for students should have a sensory space.

Brona [00:09:52] Yeah.

Facilitator[00:09:53] Would you think that would be, would you feel that, only if you feel that would be important. Do you know, would you think it would be important that first years had to dedicated sensory space, and second years had a dedicated sensory space or even a sensory corner or sensory corridor?

Aisling [00:10:09] Yeah, yeah.

C3 Roisin [00:08:30] So what advantages to see for year zones?

Aisling [00:08:34] M, I don't

know its just, its just

Undefined [00:08:40]

whispered conversations from
all groups (unclear)

Roisin [00:08:42] It's good to
have a place to know where
you can go.

Aisling [00:08:47] Yeah.

Roisin [00:08:47] To know
where your group of people
are going to be. Has that
happened.

Aisling [00:08:53] Yeah.

Saoirse [00:08:53] You want
to keep them next year don't
you?

Roisin [00:08:56] Well, I'm

not here so.

Saoirse [00:08:58] So what would be the big things that would make you want to keep those things.

Aisling [00:09:06] You have your own space, which is, you know, your own peers.

Roisin [00:09:11] good.

Roisin [00:09:14] Your own space, with only peers.

Roisin [00:09:24] Anything else.

Roisin [00:09:24] Does it give a sense of seniority to senior students, as well, where your location is, there's pride of place as well isn't there.

Aisling [00:10:33] Ehm
you're not mixing with other
groups.

Roisin [00:10:34] yeah

Saoirse [00:10:42] especially
if pupils like your sister are in
a different year there's no
mixing at all.

Aisling [00:10:44] Yeah.

Grainne [00:10:48] that's
something that probably we
haven't done it usually

Roisin [00:10:50] so,
especially, some of our EAL
students like it's a smaller
group, population.

C3 Grainne [00:10:56] You
know , in first second or third

year you have 111, 112 or they're now A, B, C, D. and in that particular room, that they take on, kind of the personality of the class, or that you can decorate, decorate the homeroom do you think.

Brona [00:11:12] I think it makes it easier to settle into school.

Micheal [00:11:13] . Okay, perfect. And this one here, in the morning, a safe space, what does that mean?.

Brona [00:11:19] for people that come in earlier that they like have somewhere to go.

Brona [00:11:24] some people might not want them around.

Micheal [00:11:30] okay, that

makes perfect sense, for the year head then to find their students.

Brona [00:11:30] , because were already in the area anyway so it might help them.

Micheal [00:11:31] Ehm sixth years.

Micheal [00:11:33] your fifth year now aren't you.

Roisin [00:11:33] Yes, brilliant.

C3 Saoirse [00:13:50] It's nice for a change to be someone different.

Roisin [00:13:53] yeah change in environment

Saoirse [00:13:55] Especially if you do end up being somewhere you that's just maybe not as nice as other areas

Saoirse [00:14:00] do you know the way some classrooms just aren't as.

Roisin [00:14:00] pleasant as others yeah.

Saoirse [00:14:04] Some of them are cold ,some of them are you know,

Roisin [00:14:06] any more disadvantages?

Roisin [00:14:10] I think the whole school is more structured, the school is calmer. more advantages anyway.

Roisin [00:14:19] We can come back to it if you want to, canteen, separate lunches what's the advantage of it?

Aisling [00:14:29] not as Crowded.

Roisin [00:14:29] Good anything else?

Roisin [00:14:36] why was it done in the first place

Roisin [00:14:38] what are we just after coming through?

Aisling [00:14:43] covid.

Roisin [00:14:44] yeah, covid response.

Roisin [00:14:45] it enabled

us to follow guidelines, yeah?

Roisin [00:14:56] this first
then we can chat. (laughs)

Roisin [00:14:56] Okay, why
else was it an advantage to
stagger them?

Roisin [00:15:01]
Disadvantage.

Roisin [00:15:04] easier to
supervise, in ways as in less
people but.

Roisin [00:15:06] supervises
easier, less people.

Facilitator [00:15:13] do you
see there Ms O Reilly where
you say it was easier to
supervise in zones, Aisling
can I ask you a question like
was it easier for you to have

the Same supervisor in those zones every.

Aisling [00:15:26] Yeah? It was definitely nicer to know what teachers you know, you knew exactly what teacher was gonna be supervising that day. And, you know, you know, if there was a problem they would be there at that time.

Roisin [00:15:39] a go-to person So that was an advantage of it.

Aisling [00:15:40] Yeah.

Saoirse [00:15:45] Yeah, that's a good one yeah.

Facilitator [00:15:47] So there was a pattern of ehm, you know, repeated routine. Yeah, routine. Which was

good.

Roisin [00:16:00] was there any disadvantages to a staggered lunch? well, your junior and senior operating in the one space that probably could be hard sometimes over was it?

Aisling [00:16:08] yeah.

Facilitator [00:16:08] What would you find hard about having the whole school like a mix of people

Aisling [00:16:12] well it's like everybody around you. it was just It was very crowded. I mean, there was constantly a lot of people everywhere

Facilitator [00:16:19] The large crowds.

Aisling [00:16:20]

everywhere yeah.

Roisin [00:16:20] yeah so that was a disadvantage, the large crowds.

Saoirse [00:16:21] awh it was crazy, was it?

Saoirse [00:16:27] ehm, is this the disadvantages of the staggered?

Facilitator [00:16:29] And the canteen so it's both canteen and staggered lunches. so a disadvantage was the large crowds and it wasn't staggered.

Roisin [00:16:52] . Sometimes you spend your whole day queueing through and you don't actually get to

sit. Yeah. Less time to sit and relax.

Saoirse [00:17:08] Very hard to meet up with your group as well like and find people when it's so crowded id say as well is it?

Aisling [00:17:16] Yeah.

Roisin [00:17:19] what about noise level how did that impact you?

Aisling [00:17:23] Yeah. suppose if the canteen was really noisy.

Facilitator [00:17:29] What would you do if the canteen was very noisy.

Aisling [00:17:33] well you, you could either sit outside if

it wasn't raining or just try
find a corridor

Aisling [00:17:34] Like but
like they were always very
busy.

Roisin [00:17:42] corridors
are even busy to talk even

Aisling [00:17:44] That's
what's nice about you know
having the classrooms this
year. that you know you're
not constantly having people
walking around talking

Facilitator [00:17:51] You
can go in somewhere.

Saoirse [00:17:52] Yeah.

S5 Facilitator [00:02:40]
Okay. You guys talk about

the classrooms. Then why would you like to talk to the classroom?

Ben [00:02:47] Well it is the main one that we use for.

Facilitator [00:02:50] it's the main one. So every teacher, we did in 2016, I can tell you this ehm we introduced it I think around 2012 when the iPads come in and myself and Ms. O Riley introduced the Google Drive and the Google classroom soon as it was available, we introduced it. There were only three or four teachers, myself and Ms O Reilly who used it all the time and there's only a couple of us using it ehm but in 2016, we tried to push it out to every teacher using it, and then when COVID hit, then we made just like ehm sort of mandatory that every teacher put the work up to Google classroom. So that's why you have a Google classroom for

every single subject, you know, and that's why every teacher puts the work up on the Google classroom. So, you know, I, I can tell you that's the history of it. So you're used to having a lot of Google classrooms. but can you tell me? So what do you find good about Google Classroom and what do you find difficult?

Brona [00:03:51] it makes homework easily accessible?

Facilitator [00:03:53] It makes learning easily accessible. Yeah, because you just go to one place and you.

Brona [00:03:58] you Never miss anything.

Facilitator [00:04:00] excellent And why would you miss anything Brona?

Brona [00:04:02] So if you had days off, school activities.

Facilitator [00:04:05] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:04:05] Or you were, where might you be? if you weren't in class,.

Brona [00:04:09] X, you might be in X, you might not be going to class that day, you might not be able to go to class. So it means that your work is definitely there. So it makes, your very right Brona it makes the work accessible to you. It makes the classroom, and the learning accessible to you. Anything else you like about it?.

Aisling [00:04:30] It makes it easy to find like different topics you may have done a

few months ago, you know,
having notes from every
subject all in one place.

S5 Brona [00:09:20] If you
forget to charge your iPad,
your toast for the whole day,.

Facilitator[00:09:23] You're
toast.

Facilitator [00:09:24] Okay.
So maybe it's some kind of a
charging.

Brona [00:09:27] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:09:28]
System.

Brona [00:09:29] Yeah,
something like that.

Facilitator [00:09:30] And maybe a charger in every classroom.

Ben [00:09:35] It's true actually because I know, I know from experience being in different mainstreams and like a student would want to would ask the teacher, for they need to charge their ipad, the teacher would have to give the charger and they have to sit near the wall and it was, you know, kind of unstructured.

C5 Facilitator[00:20:34] And so I'm just wondering one thing that, yeah, I know you've been going to a number of classes lately where we have a policy in the school now where the teacher puts up what you're going to learn in the class at the beginning and across all

subjects. Just. ahead, you know, at the beginning of class. What are you going to learn?

Aisling [00:20:56] Yeah, definitely. It just gives you a way of preparation where, you know, when you go in, okay, this is what I'm doing today, that I can, you know. Just even if you need to like look at beforehand, just to ease your mind before going into a class that okay, like, you know, you can do it.

SFG Aisling: [27:04] Yeah, definitely like. I know a lot of students don't like but I like seating arrangements, I like to know what's happening and just to have that little bit of communication at the start of the year that like, you know this is what's happening, and this is where we're going to sit. Or even, at the start of the

	<p>class like, I just really, I really like and it's such a thing of when teachers like, okay, this is what we're doing today and they break down what's happening, yeah. Or they're just like what's happening in the class that day.</p>	
<p>PS: Power sharing</p>	<p>C 1 Grainne [00:02:56] Good woman, thanks Brona. My name is Grainne. I am the principal of the school. This is my 15th year as principal. I am extremely proud of our two special classes, X and X and I am delighted to have been invited to take part in this exciting project. I can't wait to get started.</p>	<p>The group introduce themselves by first name. Grainne introduces herself by he first name, everyone is equal at the table. There are no power titles.</p>

<p>SP: A sense of partnershi p</p>	<p>S2 Facilitator [00:01:18] You didn't feel that at the meeting? No. Can you explain what that was there? Can you explain how they made you feel at the meeting?</p> <p>Ben [00:01:26] Mmmm like I was, like I was with them, like a team, almost.</p> <p>Brona: [22:49] I think it could be just me but if we all had cups of tea or something to make it more homely.</p> <p>Brona: [23:13] And it would have been nice for Mr. Kenny and Ms. Donohue because I think that they've quite stressful days and just be able to sit down and have tea and be able to talk to students all about the plans.</p>	
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<p>BT: Building trusting partnershi ps</p>	<p>S2 Aisling [00:01:31] Like a team member. Wow, that's just lovely to hear. I was so excited when I heard that. The other thing, I know I did lead it in the meeting. I introduced myself as Rachel, but I was really proud to hear everybody at the meeting, like your Principal and Deputy Principal introducing themselves by their first name. What did you think of that?</p> <p>Brona [00:01:51] I thought it was very nice.</p> <p>Aisling [00:01:52] Yeah. I thought, yeah. Like, it just, it made, you know, you didn't feel like less than them, we kind of everyone felt equal.</p> <p>Ben [00:02:01] Yeah, exactly.</p> <p>Brona [00:02:01] Part of a team.</p> <p>Aisling [00:02:02] Yeah.</p>	<p>Student-Teacher</p> <p>Relations: There are multiple references to teachers visiting special classrooms more frequently, suggesting an improvement in building relationships and understanding between mainstream teachers and students with special needs.</p>
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	<p>2C undefined [00:05:30] Laughter</p> <p>undefined [00:05:30] Mr Kenny likes his vitamins.</p> <p>undefined [00:05:30] Laughter</p> <p>C2 Facilitator [00:14:55] No, I don't think you need anything. We will give you a pen. Mr. Kenny, would you work with Brona?</p> <p>Micheal [00:15:10] Come on.</p> <p>Micheal [00:15:16] I changed my jacket today.</p> <p>undefined [00:15:16] Laughter.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:15:20] Brona will have a pen. She's always has one, she lends me one all the time.</p>	
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Grainne [00:15:22] I've no pen Ms. Ryan

Facilitator [00:15:25] Oh, no problem. no problem.

Micheal [00:15:27] No pen, no iPad. Brona, What are we going to do with her?

3C Facilitator [00:00:05] So I'll be asking you now in a second to divide into your two team up in your groups, so you can go that group you were in the last time, if that's okay with you.

Micheal [00:07:11] We're in Brona don't worry.

Facilitator [00:08:00] M, you and Ailish were with Aisling, because Ms. O Reilly wasn't here. Saoirse, you can work with, m, Aisling today.

Saoirse [00:08:10] Perfect, great.

Aisling [00:08:10] You can write.

Roisin [00:08:10] Can I (humorously)

Facilitator [00:08:14] Aisling do you want to go into the middle.

Aisling [00:08:15] Yeah, alright,
You'll have to move.

Roisin [00:08:15] This is hard work.
Oh, you're in the middle, you'll have to write. (humorously)

Aisling [00:08:23] No, you can do it.

3C Roisin [00:12:20] what's the other advantage of it? Less moving. less time-wasting. ehm you get a chance to talk to your peers while you wait for the teacher to come in don't you, is that good or bad? more. Talking,.

	<p>Aisling [00:12:28] Laughs</p> <p>Roisin [00:12:28] less moving and more talking.</p> <p>Aisling [00:12:30] laughs.</p> <p>Roisin [00:12:38] to peers ehm.</p> <p>Saoirse [00:12:45] you're more organised you have all your stuff, you're not losing everything, it's your own time.</p> <p>Roisin [00:12:48] Students are more organized not teachers maybe but.</p> <p>Roisin [00:12:52] laughs, Good</p> <p>Roisin [00:12:57] Students are more organized ehm there's less anxiety about timetables for first years isn't there?</p>	
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Saoirse [00:13:05] Yeah. and getting to know the school

Roisin [00:13:07] around navigating in school.

Roisin [00:13:19] around navigating the school environment.

Roisin [00:13:21] good, disadvantages

Roisin [00:13:24] What's negative about it? some people like the movement break it. Suits them.

Roisin [00:13:29] A bit of fresh air in between classes and stuff?

Grainne [00:13:31] you know back to a room, whereas before your home base was probably down the corridor.

Grainne [00:13:36] Now things are a

bit different in here, your home base is X.

Roisin [00:13:39] no cheating Mr. Kenny come up with your own answers, Brona.

Roisin [00:13:43] your carrying a deadweight there it's tough.

Micheal [00:13:45] Brona who was the best team the last day, Brona.

TFG Roisin: [1:39] fortunate I've had a very hard working group of teachers that have been very willing to spend a lot of their time maybe in September and October focusing on just getting to know the student and gather that data. So, anything from their interests, their hobbies, areas that they might have struggled with, but it wouldn't just be an academic focus. It also would be what hobbies have they tried before and maybe that they didn't like, or

what do they watch. And really understanding what works well for those students because then we were able to develop lesson plans around that.

So, to talk about just even the partnership. Like teachers m... this year I've had 5 mainstream teachers that were also working in SEN. And I essentially gave a year head role under the SEN umbrella. So, one teacher would manage the SEN first year's students fortify's and personal pupil profiles. Then another would manage 2nd, 3rd and so on but what that meant was, they were also timetabled with the majority of those students at a particular time. So, they really got to know them.

TFG Roisin: [6:43] And in the past they might have been reluctant to that but because we opted as the staff with the one hour classes this was one of the things that people just had to embrace. And I have to say we rotated for a level 3 times a year. And we try our best to match the personalities and the subjects were possible, but I have definitely had

more staff members who have a new understanding of how to teach, and they've got to know their students on a whole different level because it is a different relationship when you're working with an SEN student in a smaller group setting. And they have found it really beneficial. They actually felt that they have improved their teaching because their working on one or two strategies. So, I think you know slowly but surely there's a shift.

Rachel: [7:28] Developing, yeah.

Roisin: [7:31] Eh, in the mindset and in the structure in school to allow a more inclusive partnership.

TFG Ailish: [9:56] And it is so important for any m... lead teacher or any teacher that will be working closely with that group coming in to meet over the summer eh... prior to their introduction into the special class. So, in that regard that's the difference I suppose between the unit and

Rachel: [10:14] mainstream.

Ailish: [10:15] more mainstream than support. That you do have to build that relationship and you've to work on that a little bit more before they even get into their first day in first year. And I'm sure that is what was done m, before. And I know it's the plan for this year m, with the 4, is it? The 4 incoming first years?

Facilitator: [10:35] Did you find that difficult then to build a partnership with them? Or was it pretty easy?

Saoirse: [10:53] I thought it was pretty easy to be honest.

Rachel: [10:54] Right. That's good.

Saoirse: [10:55] You have, you meet parents so much that you are in contact with them all the time and that partnership is there. And then the kids that there is so much information already gathered on them. And then

from even just speaking with them day to day

Ailish: [11:18] There's more opportunity in the likes of, unit then there is in learning support because they, it is the nature that you would have more familiarity with a student in a unit and definitely when I started there was a lot of communication from Sharon and Sinead m... before I, before I even came in. I met and I went on the day, I came in for my own kind of induction and I went out and I met all the students. And we were all introduced. And we sat and chatted.

I suppose it's the nature of and you talk about mainstream teachers and learning support, and it is invaluable that they've had that time because it is such, I think there's an element of... not fear I wouldn't call it fear but there's m... hesitation, that's exactly the word, yeah. There is a hesitation sometimes with mainstream teachers. They find, oh well I can't do that, or I wouldn't know what to do with a student. So, that

rotation really allowed for mainstream teachers to say, well actually there's such value to this and actually I can be of, I can help here.

And when it comes to a classroom environment like Bláthoo and X, it definitely is and we've spoken about this before, it's a vocation of sorts. So, we would have something in us already that allows us to relate very well to the students and allows us read social situations and really understand the student without any great you know prior knowledge. Like the day I came down here I hadn't seen the reports, I hadn't seen any m... IPs or any documentation. And you can just by sitting, yeah, you meet them as people and that is, that was great, but it is, you do spend a lot more time with the kids that have these special classrooms.

Ailish: [13:30] Yes. Because that's a brilliant idea and what I found was this year, I don't know if ye found it here or maybe I just find it busier because maybe it's just after the two years of Covid and it's my first full year here as

	<p>a, as a teacher in Bláthoo. I have found there are more mainstream teachers popping into Bláthoo. Like, it is like a conveyor belt, like teachers' belt. Yeah, and that has, that just shows that there is that hesitation is kind of not... And it's not that they're coming down teaching, they're just coming down for the chats. They might come down for a cup of tea and it's really... Like we are building an inclusive and for years, we have been known as an inclusive school, at one point quite champions, that aspect of school and holistic learning and everything. And that really for me that's a sure sign -</p>	
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Participation		
Code	Data	Reflection
MPE: Modellin g and	C 1 Grainne [00:14:33] I'm hoping when I'm hearing about iPads and Apple pens, that you will be able to teach me. I would	

sharing
personal
experiences

be the Same as you, Brona. You're saying the Same and I'm sure you're able to use some of it possibly.

Brona [00:14:45] Oh, the iPad I'm grand with but I wouldn't know much about the Apple pens.

Brona [00:13:18] Well now, you know what? Now I find it very hard to sit in a class for an hour, because I don't I know I just get very fizzy. I go to the bathroom in like every class, because I don't have a break from class card. So I just have to go to the bathroom.

S2 Facilitator [00:06:28] Would you have any little comment for me now on that. Why?

Aisling [00:06:29] Yeah well like you know I think obviously we're a technology school so we're going to push technology, but I think that if you have students in the right headspace and they're just, you know, if they're coming school positive, then the technology will go more naturally. Like the, I mean, wanting to

work with technology.

C2 Grainne [00:21:27] I know, I love if I can get out into the garden, I feel good. So that's where I spent most of last Saturday, yes, cutting the grass. Sometimes, you get the lovely smells from flowers, or you see the butterflies, I'm lucky enough that I have the lake, I love that so I know your physical surroundings does help you.

C3 Brona [00:07:10] Um, I like it with people that you're comfortable with.

Facilitator[00:07:13] And where's that for you?

Brona [00:07:15] X

Facilitator[00:07:15] X. Okay, very good. Excellent. And that's good. Would you be able to say that, that would be allowed?

Facilitator[00:07:23] Yeah. Yeah. So you be able to communicate that to the leaders?

Brona [00:07:26] Yeah

C3 Facilitator [00:21:38] And about speaking up and having a voice how do you advise them to do that?

Aisling [00:21:43] yeah, definitely.

Aisling [00:21:48] I dunno , It is it is difficult. It's going to like, schools going to be hard. schools hard for everyone and especially hard for people with autism. And it's just knowing that it's going to be hard, like, you know, knowing that there will be things that will be challenging, but you will get through them. And, that theres a lot of support there if you actually look for it there is a lot of support from people that will help you.

4S Facilitator [00:12:55] Managing money, excellent Ben. Managing money. Like a big thing that came up for me.

Maybe you have mastered it at this stage. but a big thing that came up for me in the last year is getting into revolut. You know, I had in my head that revolut was sort of, you know, for people over there, you know,.

all [00:13:15] (laughs).

Facilitator [00:13:16] You know, I go to a meal and people say aw do you have revolut, and i say . No, no, I don't have revolut that's for people over at that table there not like, its not for me, you know. And then all of a sudden when I looked at it , I said, this is so simple, like, you know, this is actually so doable. Any of you on revolut,.

Brona [00:13:34] no.

Facilitator [00:13:34] and would you.

Ben [00:13:37] i have an an post bank thingy.

Facilitator [00:13:38] Excellent. Same idea. Same idea, you know. So there you go. Like there's something a dinosaur like me has gotten into. and found so handy to be able to use revolut, but, like, shouldn't every leaving cert student be getting access to that? But you'll probably be sitting at the table with college friends next year and somebody say, Oh, use revolut, you'll all be like what's revolut, what's revolut, oh that's for the people at that table over their not us, you know, where it's you know, it's making these things accessible to everybody. And the one way of doing that is to put it into an actual structured programme that's going on in this school. So I think that would be great if .. they're great ideas we could bring up with the leaders this afternoon, how do you think they will take to wanting to bring life skills for living outside our school into the programme in school? How do you think the leaders would take to that?

Brona [00:14:37] I feel like when they were our age they would have had them questions themselves.

Facilitator [00:14:40] Excellent. id say so Brona . Yeah yeah. Maybe about different things. I don't know. if revolut was around then. ehm definitely they would have had the Same experiences going into like going to college and, you know, maybe having to cook for themselves even, you know, and, the very Same experience is just different times, different difficulties. So yeah, hopefully they will be able to able to identify with that. Any other any other concerns you have about the meeting this evening? Do you find this harder or easier to talk about?

Aisling [00:15:18] ehm I dont know I think it's ok. We've had like, you know, in here, weve done like in a part of our unit, we've done a lot of like life skills and a lot of well being. So it is more so looking at like other students perspectives and the things that they've missed out on that we've you know we've had the ehm.

Facilitator [00:15:37] The opportunity.

	<p>Aisling [00:15:39] the Opportunities to you know take part in and learn all these years.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:15:42] It's really like spreading and what we do here to the rest of the school.</p> <p>Aisling [00:15:45] to Everybody else, yeah</p>	
<p>ES: Enthusiasm for sharing and listening</p>	<p>C3 Aisling [00:19:25] Yeah, I think that I always really enjoy the awards ceremony. But eh yeah, no I just. I think even everybody just enjoys that. Like, it's a just a great feeling to have. sitting in there I think that, you know, even if you don't get an award, it's just great to just be there and watch your peers get stuff and just like, Yeah, yeah.</p> <p>Roisin [00:19:47] Embrace the success in the school its lovely.</p>	

Grainne [00:19:48] im just , listening to that. That's lovely actually.

Roisin [00:19:52] yeah.

Grainne [00:19:52] Aisling its very nice, its a joint celebration isnt it

Aisling [00:19:54] a lot of people like ehm you know, they wouldn't for all the stuff they did achieve, they wouldn't give themselves credit for it. And it's a nice way to see the whole, the whole school actually giving them credit for things theyve done.

Facilitator [00:20:06] Do you think that influences younger students in any way?

Aisling [00:20:09] Yeah, definitely.

Facilitator [00:20:10] How?

Aisling [00:20:11] Well, I just, you know, watching like senior students getting like get there awards you know, it does push them like, you know, that actually it would be a great feeling to get that.

Facilitator [00:20:21] Or, to celebrate even their friends getting it .

Roisin [00:20:23] its lovely. Role models possibly aswel .

Roisin [00:20:28] Role models good. anything else . It's a rite of passage isnt it.

Aisling [00:20:33] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:20:34] What what do you think of role models, Aisling? Do you do you see yourself as a senior student being a role model in any way.

Aisling [00:20:46] yeah, .

Aisling [00:20:47] Yeah, I guess.

Aisling [00:20:50] especially in here for
eh the first years.

Facilitator [00:20:55] What about for
being part of this? You know, do you see
yourself as a role model?

Aisling [00:20:58] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:20:59] In what way? .

Aisling [00:21:01] You know, it's
obviously something I always wanted to
do, you know, just have you know just
seeing differences been made in the
school because, of you know. something
that i was a part of.

Aisling [00:21:14] Just.

Facilitator [00:21:15] Being part of that
process.

Aisling [00:21:17] Yeah, yeah.

Aisling [00:21:19] And obviously being a role model for the other students with autism.

Facilitator [00:21:22] So what would you what how would you advise the other students with autism? What would you advise them? Younger students. How would you advise them to end up like you.

Aisling [00:21:32] ehm just Keep going you know

Facilitator [00:21:38] And about speaking up and having a voice how do you advise them to do that

Aisling [00:21:43] yeah, definitely.

Aisling [00:21:48] i dunno , It is it is difficult. It's going to like, schools going

to be hard. schools hard for everyone and especially hard for people with autism. And it's just knowing that it's going to be hard, like, you know, knowing that there will be things that will be challenging, but you will get through them. And, that theres a lot of support there if you actually look for it there is a lot of support from people that will help you.

TFG Ailish: [20:00] But then, that's because it's your initiative but I was going with your initiative as part of a collective. I didn't come up with it. [laughs] You were the one behind coming up with it and it was, it was being about something great and collective and knowing that management, students and the middleman like d'you know like we as a regular joe so teacher. We were the ones that were all coming together and as a collective we were going to benefit from it. M... And that is something really important to be part of because it's a really, this doesn't happen in every school and it was going to be something, a really special experience for everyone involved. And the voice of the student was going to be heard in, in, like loud and clear. And it was like I suppose that is my take on that it was going to be, like us a group make progress

	through this kind of special experience.	
EI: Enthusiasm for the initiative		
FL: Feelings of being listened to	<p>Aisling [00:16:30] It's just. ehm it's nice to see them, you know, taking on board what we say and actually, like, you know, being like like, oh, yeah, thyre, that's good points. You know, realising that the things that we do and the things that we think about are actually like.</p> <p>Ben [00:16:46] *unaudiable.*</p> <p>Aisling [00:16:46] Things that could come into our school every day and yeah</p> <p>Facilitator [00:16:49] Become part of the regular programme. Say that again Ben.</p> <p>Ben [00:16:52] Valuable.</p>	

Facilitator [00:16:54] yeah valuable.
Yeah. And you feel they genuinely listen,
do you?

Ben, Aisling [00:16:58] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:17:00] yeah Amazing.
How would you know theyre genuinely
listening?

Aisling [00:17:03] well Just like, you
know, even with ms donohue, like the
principal being like, oh, that was such an
amazing idea and being like, so
enthusiastic about, like, things that we
were saying and like, taking notes and
everything. And already some of the
teachers coming back and ssaying, Oh, I
used that idea you gave us in our class .
And it actually really worked like,.

Facilitator [00:17:22] Excellent.

Facilitator [00:17:23] So are you

enthusiastic for our next meeting?

Aisling [00:17:26] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:17:26] Ready? Ready to put those ideas forward to them?

Aisling [00:17:30] Definitely.

Facilitator [00:17:31] Okay, well, I think that sets us up. Ready for today. You're happy with the PowerPoint that we're going to deliver to them and the ideas we're going to get across. And we're going to try and move to that main focus that we're going to talk about getting that whole skills for life transitioning into ehm into our school programme here into our wellbeing programme.

Aisling [00:17:53] Yeah, sounds good.

Facilitator [00:17:54] Great stuff. We'll be ready to go. So thank you. Thanks for another great meeting.

Aisling [00:17:59] thank you.

Facilitator [00:17:59] And we'll be ready for them.

SFGRachel: [6:49] In what way do you feel impacted by that? In what way do you feel it helps you when you actually get to say it to the people who matter?

Ben: [6:59] M...

Rachel: [7:02] Can you, can you remember how it makes you feel when you come in at the end of the meeting how did you feel?

Ben: [7:10] Good.

Rachel: [7:11] Yeah. Good about yourself.

	<p>Ben: [7:14] Yeah.</p> <p>Rachel: [7:14] Good about yourself. Good about your opinion, you know because you were listened to.</p> <p>Ben: [7:19] I was heard</p> <p>SFG Brona: [8:55] I thought it was so good because m... you... You can't really... I don't know how to put this. But you would have never, you would have never really stopped to talk to any of them about how the difficulties that you have in school and how you can change things.</p> <p>Whereas when it's an open conversation I feel like it just works a lot better</p>	
<p>FB: Feeling a sense of belonging</p>		

<p>FA: Feeling a sense of agency</p>	<p>5S Aisling [00:07:11] Yeah .</p> <p>Facilitator [00:07:14] ehm.</p> <p>am [00:07:14] What Aisling was saying there about languages google classroom makes it easier for teachers to for teachers to keep to show what they were saying.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:07:22] Google translate.</p> <p>am [00:07:24] For people who might find it a lot harder to communicate.</p> <p>Facilitator[00:07:26] excellent so would you, would that something you could present as well that content should be translated into different languages. Yeah, I do. Do you know how many languages we have at the school?</p> <p>Brona [00:07:37] havnt a clue.</p> <p>Ben [00:07:37] a lot .</p>	
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Facilitator[00:07:37] I think they did a survey last week for our Culture Day. Did anybody hear at culture day how Many languages We have.

Ben [00:07:44] I didnt hear exactly.

Facilitator [00:07:46] well, I heard somebody at culture day saying we have 40 languages.

Aisling [00:07:51] Yeah, that sounds about right.

Facilitator[00:07:52] It's unreal, isn't it? So there's a great suggestion that ehm if, if you could present to the leaders that the different languages for the students in that particular class could be represented.

Aisling [00:08:05] Yeah. Yeah.

Facilitator [00:08:08] And then, and also the, the visual language, you know, that,

that all written language would be supported by visual. That would be another. Yeah, I know.

Aisling [00:08:18] To make it that bit more.

Ben [00:08:20] Some people learn it is something to learn visually.

Facilitator[00:08:23] Yeah. Yeah. So and the fact that different types of learners would be taken into consideration, the classroom.

Ben [00:08:30] I think that's a huge thing that should be taken into account that different types of learners would be, you know Supported.

Facilitator[00:08:38] through the classroom.

Ben [00:08:42] Yeah.

	<p>Facilitator [00:08:43] Yeah. Excellent. Great point Ben. will you make sure to make that point in your who do you work with in the leader group. In the small groups. You know, when I do .</p> <p>Ben [00:08:53] ms donohoe.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:08:53] . So there you go. Now there's the perfect person to, to make that recommendation to. That all sounds really good. And anything else about the classroom ehm . What are the difficulties? You know, is there anything about when when the work is put up on the classroom, you know, is therer any issues with that?</p>	
<p>FAEP: Feeling affirmati on of experienc es</p>	<p>4S facilitator (rachel) [00:15:45] . But isnt that an amazing way to look at it that like you're actually getting such an advantage by being part of a special class and it's nearly like seeing what's valuable here. And how to get that across the context of the school. Were nearly going to try and tell the leaders here what is</p>	

valuable about being here. And like, everybody needs that out there, you know, that's amazing. Aisling.

Aisling [00:16:14] yeah (giggles.)

S5 Facilitator[00:11:16] You know, would you ever experience any of those difficulties yourself in the classroom where that where you'd been treated equally, but it wasn't actually equitable for you to take part in an activity or a piece of work. Can you think of a situation or you don't have to think of it now, but you might think about that before the meeting with leaders. You know, was it ever that a teacher treated you equally to everyone else? But it was still impossible for you to do it because of a barrier that you had to takeing part in, something it wasn't actually equitable for you.

Ben [00:12:58] Maybe a mental barrier.

Facilitator [00:13:00] Yeah. Yeah. Okay, that's really good.

	<p>Ben [00:13:05] given all the tools but, you know, not everyone , everyone is different mentally, different stages. Different levels.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:13:13] Yeah. Different levels of emotional connection maybe. Yeah. So it might not always be equitable the task yeah because you might not have the, you might not have the, the emotional positioning at that time to access it. Yes, that's a very good that's very good point.Ben . I take that very well. There all things you can think about, I think we have a lot there to talk about at the meeting.</p> <p>Aisling [00:13:44] Yeah.</p>	
<p>EPS: Engagem ent with problem solving discussio</p>		

ns		
KS: Knowled ge sharing		
AR: Actively reflecting on policy and practice		
PS: Power sharing		

Developing a Critical Consciousness		
Code	Data	Reflection
SH: Speaking honestly AR:	4S Facilitator [00:03:49] Yeah. sort of , Ben, what do you find good about what's going on at the moment in wellbeing.	

<p>Actively reflecting on policy and practice</p> <p>KS: Knowledge sharing</p> <p>EPS: Engagement with problem solving discussions</p>	<p>Ben [00:03:53] . ehm, to be honest, I don't really know.</p> <p>facilitator (rachel)</p> <p>[00:03:59] Okay, that's fine. That's perfectly honest. You probably. You might not make it to many of the classes. Yeah, that's perfectly honest. That's grand. You don't really know what's good about it. Em, Aisling what do you find?</p> <p>Aisling [00:04:13] ehm, it definitely, like, it covers a lot of different bases, like, you know, kind of a wide variety of things that a lot of teenagers would be experiencing and going through it.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:04:32] Okay. Anything you feel ehm anything that you feel is missing</p> <p>Aisling [00:04:44] ehm i dunno about missing but like definitely things they could improve on</p>	
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Facilitator [00:04:47] Right. So improve on . Can you remember we did mention there in our preliminary meeting, we mentioned something about the transition from ehm from secondary schools to third level . Do you think there's anything missing on that level in the wellbeing programme.

Aisling [00:05:02] Oh yeah definitely they don't have any like you know, you're very much once you leave school you're very much thrown into the deep end.

Facilitator [00:05:12] Okay. Deep end of, of managing your life, if you go back and you look at those indicators, there on the junior cert. What we have , that I have on the slide for the junior cert that like to be active, responsible, connected, resilient, respected and ehm to be aware like how much of that, have you been prepared for third level in the programme that you're doing now?

Facilitator [00:05:40] . And even that word, resilient. What does resilient, can

	<p>any of you tell me what resilient means to you , has anyone ever explained resilient to you?</p> <p>Brona [00:05:50] is like, how, how much pushback you have.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:05:55] Yeah. So how much pushback.</p> <p>Brona [00:05:57] bounce ce back ability,.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:05:57] Bounce back ability. Yeah. How much ,like can you take a knock and then regroup, refocus and bounce back into your life. That's what resilience is. So how much of that have you been prepared for in what might happen at third level? What do you think, Aisling?</p> <p>Facilitator [00:06:49] You probably it has come up, you know, you've been told to be responsible sexually, about protecting yourself. about all of that ehm but how much have you actually practised any of the stuff that's going to help you with the</p>	<p>Partnership and Power Sharing:</p> <p>Students felt empowered and treated</p> <p>as equals during meetings with</p> <p>school leadership. The use of first</p> <p>names and informal settings made</p> <p>them feel valued and comfortable</p> <p>sharing their ideas. (Rachel, Aisling, Ben, and Brona expressed this).</p>
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transition like? ehm Let's say dream course, transition course. What do I need to know for my first year in college, can you give me any of the things you need to know for your first year in college? You're leaving home, you're rocking off, you're going up to stay and live with people,.

Brona [00:07:18] you need to know how to pay bills.

Facilitator [00:07:18] you need to know how to pay bills. You need to know, okay, you're rocking off and you're going to live with three strangers that are in first year in

Brona [00:07:27] how to like mould in with other people.

Facilitator [00:07:28] How to mould in with other people. And you get to the college on the first day and they ask you to register for new courses. What do you need to know there?

Brona [00:07:39] How to do it.

Facilitator [00:07:39] How to do it?
Where do you think you might be doing that?

Brona [00:07:44] No idea.

Facilitator [00:07:45] Has anybody told you where you might be doing this?

Aisling [00:07:48] No.

Facilitator [00:07:49] no Idea. So where do you look like? Is it going to be on a website? It's going to be filling in forms. Okay. You're in college for in your first year and they say for your placement, you need to be able to drive. anyone ever discuss that with you before,how you go about it.

Aisling [00:08:05] no.

Facilitator [00:08:06] Anybody yet.
Started to apply for their theory test or

anything. How did you find out about it?
How you apply. What you do.

Aisling [00:08:16] you Have to like use
the internet like look it up or ask other
people like, you know, it would be doing
something that would be very beneficial
for students.

Facilitator [00:08:24] You think it'd Be
good for a wellbeing programme? Yeah.

Facilitator [00:08:27] ehm going on first
leaving cert holiday ehm first holiday.
Probably going to be an after leaving cert
holiday. Were you prepared in any way for
getting ready for doing that?

Aisling [00:08:39] No.

Facilitator [00:08:39] So what did you
need to be able to do first?

Aisling [00:08:41] Well, you know, being
able to book flights, book

accommodations, know how to book flights, and, you know, knowing like, you know, ehm thing for our one was that even to know, like were we getting a good deal on it, where we actually paying like a reasonable price? Or was the fact that they were looking at, you know, 18 year olds that hadnt a clue what they were on about. Could they just, you know, make us spend so much more, so

Facilitator [00:09:10] excellent, they could , you could even have people out there with a false website , asking you to go on a fictitious holiday that doesn't exist. You know, how do you identify that?

Ben [00:09:19] are you talking about scam awareness?

Facilitator [00:09:19] scam awareness. There's scam awareness. That's a that's an amazing one. We only had a situation of that here this week myself the sna we're told that there was a package in the post office first, but I knew there wasn't one for me because I've never ordered anything to come to the post office, you know. ehm.

Ben [00:09:37] So maybe that should be.

Facilitator [00:09:39] Yeah, that could be part of your wellbeing programme. These are all the things that would help you to live on your own. Do you think when we're talking about a wellbeing programme and a wellbeing class, do you think that would be something you could bring up at the meeting with the teachers, with the leaders this evening that you could actually discuss, not, what you know, acknowledge what's good about what we have there, but actually discuss like how would our school bring in that as part of a programme, that transition to third level, how could we bring that in? What do you think of that? Does it fit into the wellbeing meeting?

Aisling [00:10:15] yeah i definitely think so you know it's eh, it's something that definitely a lot of students in leaving cert are thinking about now. And you know, they've. Nobody knows everyone's, you know, walking around asking each other, but nobody actually knows how to properly do all this stuff. that, you know, that would be something that'll be really beneficial for them to just have been

taught in school.

Facilitator [00:10:37] Do you think there are any advantages to have them back taught in school for students that have been either diagnosed and assessed as being placed on the autism spectrum or students that haven't been diagnosed but are possibly on somewhere on the autism spectrum. Do you think there's an advantage to having a good transition programme in school for them, and what would that advantage be? ... Did you ever think about that? Is it harder for you to access that knowledge?

Aisling [00:11:09] Yeah.

Facilitator [00:11:10] You think so, Aisling?

Aisling [00:11:12] Well, yeah. Like, I know a lot of us in here. We might not talk to a lot of people in mainstream that would be discussing, like, you know, that would be talking about this themselves amongst each other that, you know, least if there was a set class, that everyone was learning

	<p>about it and everyone felt comfortable asking questions because some people mightnt just like asking other people questions about stuff by college, because you just assume everyone else knows and they don't, but like it would just be good for everyone to you know.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:11:42] Be able to have the Same information.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:11:44] Yeah, a lot of mis knowledge probably as well. Would you agree with that? Do you ever feel you get mis knowledge like false knowledge? You hear half hear things and you don't really.</p> <p>all [00:11:54] Yeah.</p>	
<p>BH: Barriers to being heard</p>	<p>SFG Aisling: [7:32] M...I was excited. Genuinely at the start I wasn't really sure it was going to work or anything because I was like you know these are the principal, like this is the principal of our school listening to students but like that well obviously very quickly changed when you started but yeah, I was kind of... I was</p>	

	<p>really excited, but I don't know if this is actually going to work so.</p> <p>SFG Aisling: [8:05] No. Like, you wouldn't have, you never, obviously it's when students went to her, she would listen, but you would never really, no student would ever be like, oh I'm going to go to the principal and I'm going to tell her my opinion. Like, you know it was just... It was kind of unheard of.</p> <p>SFG Aisling: [24:38] Well, I'd, I think it was pretty good. I think you know obviously it's important, we had a few interruptions you know, people not knowing what was going on and just walking in, into the room and stuff. But like, I think you did a pretty good job [laughs] by organising it.</p>	<p>Barriers to Participation:</p> <p>Some students initially doubted the effectiveness of their input, with Aisling expressing scepticism at first about being</p>
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		<p>heard by school leadership. This changed after positive interactions with leaders.</p>
<p>BS: Barriers to 'what can be said'</p> <p>AL: Act of listening</p>	<p>S2 Brona [00:03:03] I'd be a bit nervous that, like X or X might turn around and be like what.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:03:08] I don't know well I can't say, but you can prepare yourself for that, I suppose. You can be ready for it, but certainly the way they acted the other day, I don't think they would ever say what? But if they do, you can be prepared for that, you can have your answer ready. The thing is that you're passionate about it and you want to get your voice across. You know, that's the important part. And what about the sport and the homework? Can you see anywhere that they could fit in.</p> <p>SFG Rachel: [14:03]I can remember one thing that you said from my notes. You wanted to normalise crying.</p>	<p>Emotional Well-being</p> <p>Discussions: Students, particularly Brona, advocated for normalising emotions like crying, highlighting emotional well-being as a key topic.</p> <p>(Brona</p>

	<p>Brona: [14:31] Yeah.</p> <p>Rachel: [14:31] So, how did you feel, how did you feel the leaders responded to that?</p> <p>Brona: [14:35] I'd say like they were a bit taken aback.</p> <p>Aisling: [14:59] M... It was just you know from experience of being in like situations where you feel like nobody is actually able to hear what you're saying and like, we know what best suits us and what helps us. So, you know it's great to actually be able to be the ones to be like, actually we know what, we know what we need, and this was it.</p>	<p>emphasised the need to normalise crying).</p>
<p>EF: Expectations that students will 'fit'</p>		

FO: Feelings of being 'othered'		
DCC: Developin g a critical counscious ness		

Honouring the lived experience of students		
Code	Data	Reflection
MPE: Modelling and sharing personal experience s		
ES: Enthusias m for sharing and	TFG Ailish: [20:00] But then, that's because it's your initiative but I was going with your initiative as part of a collective. I didn't come up with it. [laughs] You were	

<p>listening</p>	<p>the one behind coming up with it and it was, it was being about something great and collective and knowing that management, students and the middleman like d'you know like we as a regular joe so teacher. We were the ones that were all coming together and as a collective we were going to benefit from it. M... And that is something really important to be part of because it's a really, this doesn't happen in every school and it was going to be something, a really special experience for everyone involved. And the voice of the student was going to be heard in, in, like loud and clear. And it was like I suppose that is my take on that it was going to be, like us a group make progress through this kind of special experience.</p>	
<p>FL: Feelings of being listened to</p>	<p>S1Brona [00:00:51] Mmmm, The fact that they said that it was interesting how mainstream affects some students and that they didn't know. (Brona is amazed at the teachers and leaders response to her experiences)</p> <p>Aisling [00:00:57] Right, thats brilliant</p> <p>Brona [00:00:57] I liked it though.SFG</p>	<p>Enthusiasm for Initiative: Students were excited about the opportunity to share their voices and influence school practices.</p>

	<p>Brona: [17:41] Knowing that m... there was a possibility of real m... helpful changes being made.</p> <p>SFG Ben: [23:34] I think at its core level the most important would be to have everyone equal, everyone heard, everyone, there's no higher, there's no lower. It's all... Everyone's relaxed. Everyone's honest and genuine.</p>	<p>Aisling and Ben were especially enthusiastic about suggesting changes and seeing their impact. (Aisling, Ben were excited about their participation).</p>
<p>FB: Feeling a sense of belonging</p>	<p>SFG Rachel So, what do you think helped you in that?</p> <p>Brona: [18:37] Probably the fact that you were here, that I had a free class last class and that I could be here anyway. And...</p> <p>Rachel: [18:46] And what, what about here? What does here mean?</p> <p>Brona: [18:48] A very safe space.</p>	

	<p>Aisling: [19:29] Yeah, I just... Yeah, I liked that it was here because we all just feel so comfortable in here that like we felt like that we could say whatever we needed to. If it was, like if it was up in the office or something it would be very, like it would feel for us very official that like, you know you're in the principal's office kind of way.</p>	
<p>FA: Feeling a sense of agency</p>		
<p>AL: Act of listening</p>	<p>Saoirse: [18:53] A different insight into what students actually like and what they think. You always get second hand information even speaking for those students, they never speak for themselves. And people say it's how they feel but it's actually how they're given their own opinions is totally different and never really heard that before.</p>	
<p>FO: Feelings of</p>		

<p>being othered</p>		
<p>KS: Information knowledge sharing on on policy and practice</p>		
<p>EPS: Engagement with problem-solving discussions</p>	<p>TFG Roisin: [23:29] D’you know I think that you know if we had actually maybe sat down with the kids beforehand, we could have actually learned a lot more, they would have enjoyed it a little bit better as well because they knew that they were going to be</p> <p>Saoirse: [23:40] I suppose I know from my role as religion teacher that that last week is going to be very busy. And they’re in and out of classes and there’s a lot of flexibility needed. But I think again, that needs to be marked on a calendar. I sound fixated on this calendar, but I think it’s really important maybe in our second last staff meeting that we kind of just prompt everybody that this is happening. And even to prompt the religion department to say,</p>	

ensure that the students in the ASD class if they want to come and why is there an assumption that they know the invite is never noticed, it's really important.

Roisin: [24:17] The assumption is there that they know and actually it's been mentioned afterwards that they didn't know about it.

Elisa: [24:26] Yeah, and that's yeah.

Saoirse: [24:28] So, that's just the planning.

Roisin: [24:39] And but probably again goes back to management. It needs to be in the job description that you ensure to remember. With the best will in the world, you might make an assumption and then not actually have checked it out. And if it's right on the paperwork and the policies that it eventually filters down because that's how you really implement the change. And it's something for somebody even in the, Grainne and Micheal are doing the post

responsibilities reviews. But in the review, I'm wondering is that ever a question. How did you cater for the students in your year that were part of the ASD plan?

Rachel: [25:14] Yeah, I actually don't. Yeah. I've never been asked it.

Roisin: [25:19] So, it's something that and I haven't been asked it as a year head, but it's another area and it's an opportunity just to ensure that there is real inclusion happening again.

Roisin: [26:00] I think the students learning log is something we have started this year and it kind of came through in default or you know a fault, a failure in our previous practice which was, if an SEN teacher was coming in to learning support phase and they started a google classroom and they had 5 students in that google classroom, and because of the nature of SEN and Irish exemption or new reports coming in, that group of 5 could dwindle to 3 or we change teachers and the structure you know remains or it still changes.

So, google classroom wasn't working where the teacher had to tell me over the group. So, we had to flip that. And with good m... collaboration with our IT coordinator, Fiona Noone and our home ec teacher Catriona Connolly and Ms. Lorraine Noone in SEN. We devised, they devised google slide and on that then it had the strategy that the student needed. The area of need for that student so whether it was dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, whatever it was, and then they would take a picture of their work that day. So, there was evidence of their work. So, really the students tracker of learning support.

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<p>FAEP:Feeling affirmation of experiences</p> <p>SU: Shared understand</p>	<p>C3 Facilitator [00:18:30] can you remember any . Do you remember any of the ehm celebrate? The end of year celebrations or end of term celebrations Brona?</p> <p>Brona [00:18:35] No</p> <p>Facilitator [00:18:35] do you not</p>	

<p>ing</p>	<p>remember being involved in them?</p> <p>Roisin [00:18:48] Bonding experience. good what else?.</p> <p>Roisin [00:18:53] community.</p> <p>Roisin [00:18:56] Sense of community building. A community</p> <p>Roisin [00:18:59] sense of community.</p> <p>Aisling [00:19:07] ehm.</p> <p>Roisin [00:19:07] Why else is it good it's a huge achievement.</p> <p>Aisling [00:19:10] Yeah,.</p> <p>Saoirse [00:19:11] yeah acknowledging it even</p>	
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Roisin [00:19:13] And him and his wife.

Facilitator [00:19:16] what do you think about that Aisling ? about You know, acknowledging people's achievements, like , what does that feel like.

Facilitator [00:19:23] When you're there .

Aisling [00:19:25] Yeah, I think that I always really enjoy the awards ceremony. But eh yeah, no I just. I think even everybody just enjoys that. Like, it's a just a great feeling to have.sitting in there I think that, you know, even if you don't get an award, it's just great to just be there and watch your peers get stuff and just like, Yeah, yeah.

Roisin [00:19:47] Embrace the success in the school its lovely.

Grainne [00:19:48] im just , listening to that. That's lovely actually.

Roisin [00:19:52] yeah.

Grainne [00:19:52] Aisling its very nice,
its a joint celebration isnt it

Aisling [00:19:54] a lot of people like ehm
you know, they wouldn't for all the stuff
they did achieve, they wouldn't give
themselves credit for it. And it's a nice way
to see the whole, the whole school actually
giving them credit for things theyve done.

Facilitator [00:20:06] Do you think that
influences younger students in any way?

Aisling [00:20:09] Yeah, definitely.

Facilitator [00:20:10] How?

Aisling [00:20:11] Well, I just, you know,
watching like senior students getting like
get there awards you know, it does push
them like, you know, that actually it would
be a great feeling to get that.

	<p>Facilitator [00:20:21] Or, to celebrate even their friends getting it .</p> <p>Roisin [00:20:23] its lovely. Role models possibly aswel .</p> <p>Roisin [00:20:28] Role models good. anything else . It's a rite of passage isnt it.</p> <p>Aisling [00:20:33] Yeah.</p>	
<p>SH: Sharing honestly</p>		

Co-Constructing Leadership		
Code	Data	Reflection

<p>FA: Feeling a sense of agency</p>	<p>TFG Roisin: [22:45] Yeah. Yeah. From the top down or whatever way. From admin down or just in terms of structuring and organising the year. That you've accomplished all the different varieties of groups, I think it would be really important.</p>	
<p>KS: Informa tion knowled ge sharing on policy and practice</p>	<p>Rachel: [22:56] So, it's more than just access to the classroom? Access to the learning?</p> <p>Roisin: [23:00] Yes. Even the social activities like the grad mass happening and straight away you can think of one change. Well, I can think of one change to make to maybe next year that would help the kids in the autistic class. Like straight away there's stuff that actually if we can prepare a little bit more for this, we could have done that better. Okay. You know.</p>	<p>Autono my and Empow erment:</p> <p>The students appreciat e the</p>
<p>ES: Enthusi asm for sharing and listening</p> <p>MPE:M odelling and sharing personal</p>	<p>TFG Roisin: [27:46] All of this was a new initiative led by a group of teachers where something previously that worked really well was beginning to fail because we were increasing. And we needed more flexibility and adaptability to change circumstances. And now what was going on was that those students port, those students' portfolios were shared with the teachers, their year heads and SEN and then the SEN coordinator.</p> <p>So, if a parent rang and said, the traditional question would be, are they just doing their homework in SEN? And I could</p>	<p>opportun ity to directly commun icate</p> <p>their ideas to school leadershi</p>

<p>experiences</p> <p>FB: Feeling a sense of belonging</p>	<p>say, did you check the student learning log? And they'd say, I didn't know they had a student learning log. What's that? And I could there and then click into it and say, well their last 5 learning support classes, this is what they've done, there's evidence there on what they've done, the teachers' comments there and your Childs' reflection on what they've done, whether it was helpful or not. And what they'd like to do for the next class.</p> <p>So, I said it's really good in terms of, there's accountability for the teacher. It's very obvious which teacher is filling it in or for the student or with the student and who isn't.</p> <p>And then it's also m... student led which means, even when a sub teacher came in, they could say, open your student learning log. And if they came in with no material to fill a class as often might happen with Covid and sick leave and different things, they were able to still get stuck in and start and complete the content.</p> <p>Roisin: [29:19] We were responsible for. And I think again, it was only developed kind of we'll say October November last year but it's something now even with a couple of tweaks that we have improved for September. And then it's also something we need to communicate with parents. So, like that I asked a parent did they check it. But I also had to be reflective there and say, but did I tell them about it? And the reality was no, because it kind of evolved.</p>	<p>p,</p> <p>finding the experience empowering and more genuine than having their thoughts mediated by others.</p> <p>Action Plan Development: The meetings resulted in clear</p>
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		<p>action</p> <p>points for improving mental health support, environmental enhancements (e.g., courtyard spaces), and the transition to college.</p>
<p>PS: Power sharing</p>	<p>SFG Rachel: [9:33] Yeah, well do you know what I thought was amazing and you might comment on this. When we had the first meeting like purely because I go to tons of meetings and at every meeting, they always say introduce yourself and tell us one thing about you know your special class. Or one thing about your school or you know one thing about you know something, something personal. So, I'm well used to saying, hello, my name is</p>	

Rachel Ryan. I am a class lead in a special inclusive class for autism and I teach at Mercy's Secondary School at Ballymahon. And I just automatically said the Same thing at the meeting and did you notice that m...

Aisling: [10:08] Every teacher introduces themselves by their first name.

Rachel: [10:11] By their first name. How did that make you feel?

Aisling: [10:16] It was kind of you know it wasn't as if you were talking to these teachers or principals now. You were talking to people that were nearly like at the Same level as you. You know you weren't talking to someone that was your superior at this stage.

Ben: [10:30] Yeah. You didn't feel lower or anything.

Rachel: [10:33] You didn't feel lower, yeah. Well, isn't that amazing? Isn't it amazing how the use of a person's first name brings everybody onto a level? It takes,

Ben: [10:40] Yeah. It feels official in that.

Ben: [11:13] They were all in the Same boat.

SFG Rachel: [19:51] You know the way you said earlier that there was no power in the room. Everyone was an equal. Do you feel going to the principal's office might add that power really?

Aisling: [20:00] Yeah, it would. Definitely. Yeah.

Rachel: [20:02] Yeah. Because you know when do you go to the principal's office like?

Aisling: [20:05] When you're in trouble. [laughs]

Rachel: [20:08] And then you certainly don't want to be going.

Have you ever had to go to the principal's office?

Aisling: [20:12] No. [laughs]

Rachel: That's true. That's true.

Brona: [20:15] I feel like if you went to the principal's office it would kind of take the meaning of it away because you're, well for me anyway I don't really like changes. So, I kind of feel a bit outside of there and I wouldn't be as comfortable in sharing my ideas than I would be down here.

Rachel: [20:32] Excellent. That's really good.

SFG Ben: [20:36] You would like subconsciously at least feel like you're like, you're in a place where you're a bit lower and there's people of higher power, do you know what I mean?

Rachel: [20:45] Yeah. So, consciously would impact you?

Ben: [20:48] Yeah always your subconscious affects your conscious, but in here

SFG Ben: [23:34] I think at its core level the most important would be to have everyone equal, everyone heard, everyone, there's no higher, there's no lower. It's all... Everyone's relaxed. Everyone's honest and genuine.

<p>CCP: Co- construc ting policies and practice s</p>	<p>S5 Aisling [00:05:31] Yeah, different teachers. will put stuff up in different ways or different like. You know, some would just have that bit more, their classrooms that there a bit more organised that things that little bit easier to find and it just it makes things a lot less stressful when you're trying to find stuff. So I think that would be something that would be good for all teachers to be aware of because they may not even know that it's possible to organise their stuff in such a way.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:05:59] So that could be maybe professional development in the future. You could maybe discuss that with your leader, with the leaders about professional development for the future so that all teachers would be able to put their, present the work on the Google classroom in the Same way.</p> <p>Aisling [00:06:14] Yeah.</p> <p>Facilitator [00:06:14] . anything else there , I know when I was looking at it with you there, one of the days our own classroom, icons on the classroom, do you want to say anything about that.</p>	

	<p>Aisling [00:06:23] Yeah. Well, just like for different students that they're able to eh, you know, like students that may have difficulty reading or something or speak different languages, that they're able to just see the icons clearly and know that okay . This is my notes or , this is my homework. And yeah, just make it that bit more inclusive.</p> <p>atie: [11:40] Yeah. We kind of feeling like, this is going to sound, like people nearly like you know, not as teachers but you seen them as just ordinary people and yeah.</p> <p>SFG Ben: [11:53] You take, you strip away the formality and it just left you</p>	
<p>SP: A sense of partnership</p> <p>EI: Enthusiasm for the initiative</p>	<p>SFG Ben: [12:34] We felt like it was just a group of people talking to a group of people.</p> <p>Brona: [13:48] Yeah, I feel like it went really well. It was very smooth going. There was no kind of start and stops. And it made it feel like you were on the one level with the teachers because you just got along with them all really well.</p>	<p>Problem -</p> <p>Solving: The group</p>

<p>FB:Feeling a sense of belonging</p>	<p>Ben: [16:33] I liked m... suggesting improvements and things.</p> <p>Rachel: [16:36] Very good.</p> <p>Ben: [16:47] Because you got to feel like you were part of the school and not just a student. That you felt like you were actually a part of it.</p> <p>Rachel: [16:44] You were actually, actually influencing?</p> <p>Ben: [16:45] Yeah. Influencing can have a long-term effect and make changes.</p> <p>Action Plan</p> <p>Meeting 2: Mental Health</p> <p>Introduce 2 brain breaks to every class across the school context,</p> <p>Meeting 3: Environment</p>	<p>worked collaboratively to suggest practical improvements, such as brain breaks during classes, enhancing the buddy system, and better management of Google Classroom organisation.</p>
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	<p>Develop the courtyard area for all students/teachers who need a safe space/sensory space.</p> <p>Extend the Buddy System to include all six years in school</p> <p>Meeting 4:</p> <p>Develop and introduce a transition programme in 5th year.</p> <p>Meeting 5:</p> <p>Develop a framework for how work is presented on Google classroom.</p>	
<p>SH: Speaking g honestly</p>		

<p>AL: Act of listening</p>		
<p>BT:Building trusting partnerships FL: Feelings of being listened to</p>	<p>SFG Rachel: [15:27] Section 2 – Question 2: And which activities helped you to get your voice across the best?</p> <p>Aisling: [15:49] M... I feel the advantages and disadvantages was that you could just because we could very clearly see okay well, we are doing this right and everything that we needed to improve on with stuff that wasn't even that big but like could really impact. And just even like sharing that with the teachers who we were working with and then also hearing everybody else's, it was just... I just enjoyed the layout of that one.</p>	
<p>EPS: Engagement with problem solving discussions</p>	<p>Saoirse: [29:48] But do I think it could feed into an SET class? One hundred percent.</p> <p>Rachel: [29:51] Oh yeah. Absolutely.</p> <p>Saoirse: [29:53] But when they do the book creator at the end, maybe to go back to a student voice, why not have a presentation day like in all</p>	

Rachel: [30:00] Absolutely!

Saoirse: [30:01] Where they get up and maybe they pick 5 things that they did and showcase their work. And it could be a huge opportunity to celebrate then.

Rachel: [30:07] Yeah, yeah.

Saoirse: [30:08] And then if we had a whole school setting

Rachel: [30:11] Which is kind of what we do at the end with the two LPs, that's what we do at the end to LPs.

Ailish: [30:17] That's what I would say, a whole school setting and, and I kind of... I find this year especially if they haven't an eye for presentation, and I was saying it to Grainne just the other day like Bláthu have been like out and about, and I mean like they go to the mainstream classes and that's all fine but just in a less structured way. They were out there going up to Attracta, they've be in the staff area going up to John's office. So, the mainstream classroom is great. That is a facility in itself. But that less structured more social side of getting the school environment. That has been brilliant, and people have recognised them, and they say, hello, how are, d'you know?

Appendix Q: Action Plan

Action Plan

Meeting 2: Mental Health

- Introduce two brain breaks to every class across the school context.

Meeting 3: Environment

- Develop the courtyard area for all students/teachers who need a safe space/sensory space.
- Extend the Buddy System to include all six years in school.

Meeting 4:

- Develop and introduce a transition programme in the 5th year.

Meeting 5:

- Develop a framework for how to work consistently across digital platforms.

