

Building a vision for life post-school: Views and  
experiences of students, parents, teachers and  
principals of post-school transition planning in Irish  
Special Schools

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## Declaration

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Signed:

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# List of Publications and Presentations

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# List of Acronyms

AFLS	Assessment of Functional Living Skills
AHEAD	Association for Higher Education Access and Disability
CEF	Career Employment Facilitator
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CES	Comprehensive Employment Strategy
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DCU	Dublin City University
DE	Department of Education
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004
ESCI	Education Support Centres of Ireland
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
FSD	Fund for Students with Disabilities
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HFDS	Health Funded Day Service
HSE	Health Service Executive
ID	Intellectual Disabilities
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (USA)
IEP	Individual Education Plan
IHREC	Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
INHEF	Inclusive National Higher Education Forum
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
ITP	Individual Transition Plan
JCSP	Junior Certificate Schools Programme

L1LP	Level One Learning Programme
L2LP	Level Two Learning Programme
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
NABMSE	The National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education
NASSP	National Association of Special School Principals
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDA	National Disability Authority
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NLN	National Learning Network
OCO	Ombudsman for Children's Office
PASTE	Progressing Accessible Supported Transitions to Employment
PATH-4	Programme for Access to Higher Education
PDST*	Professional Development Service for Teachers *
PSO	Post-School Option
PR	Participatory Research
QDAS	Qualitative Data Analysis Software
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
REC	Research Ethics Committee
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SEN	Special Educational Need
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Co Ordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
TPL	Teacher Professional Learning

UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UPIAS	Union Of The Physically Impaired Against Segregation
USA	United States of America
VPG	Vocational Preparation and Guidance

\*PDST is now operating under the new name of Oide.

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# Building a vision for life post-school: Views and experiences of students, parents, teachers and principals of post-school transition planning in Irish special schools

## Abstract

For decades, post-school transition pathways for students with SEND have been dominated by health funded day services. Despite Ireland's commitments to uphold the rights of people with disabilities under the UNCRPD (2006), ratified in Ireland in 2018, and a subsequent policy drive towards inclusive accessible employment and education by two successive governments, Ireland continues to have the lowest disability employment and post-school education rates in Europe. The primary aim of this research was to explore the experiences of key stakeholders involved in transition preparation and transition planning for students leaving Special schools in the Republic of Ireland and identify the Teacher Professional Learning needs of teachers to enable them to support transition preparation & transition planning.

The overarching research questions were:

- A) What are the views and experiences of students, parents, teachers, and principals in Irish Special schools of transition preparation and transition planning?
- B) How can the teacher support the development of autonomous post-school choices?

This research was contextualised within the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of human rights (UNCRPD, 2006) and social participation (Simplican et al., 2015). The voices and perspectives of a number of stakeholders (students, parents, teachers and principals) were harnessed through a participatory social justice explanatory sequential mixed method design. The Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) was used to specifically situate the students as the expert in their own lives and aimed to capture their experience of preparation for transition through mapping their vision for life post-school.

This research demonstrates that while students and their parents hold high aspirations for life post-school, schools continue to face significant challenges in implementing effective transition planning practices, without adequate policy guidance, legislation and resources. This research highlights the specific policy issues that need to be addressed if Ireland is to realise its commitment under the UNCRPD (2006).



# 1 Chapter One: Introduction

This study explores the experiences of key stakeholders involved in transition preparation and transition planning for students leaving Special schools in the Republic of Ireland (hereafter referred to as Ireland). The research is situated in a developing policy and legislation context for the provision of education for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This chapter sets out the key constructs underpinning the study, framed through a statement on positionality and motivation for the study. The background and context of special schools in the Irish education system is discussed, and the theoretical framework presented.

## 1.1 Key Constructs

This study is underpinned by three key constructs: transition, inclusion and participatory research. Definitions for the three core constructs have been developed with support from the literature.

### **Transition:**

Within this study, transition is defined as two separate, yet interrelated concepts. Having drawn upon the literature, specifically Kohler et al. (2016), O'Brien et al. (2011), transition preparation and transition planning were defined as follows:

#### Transition preparation:

“The curriculum that schools offer and the related activities that support skill development and independence for the students during their time in school. These can include a range of areas including academic skill development, personal and social development, independent living skills and the assessment and profiling of students’ strengths, needs and interests.”

#### Transition planning:

“The process undertaken by schools in planning and supporting their students to leave special school education. Transition planning involves a range of activities which may include consultation on post-school options with students, their families and other professionals; work placements; visits to post-school settings and meeting with relevant personnel.”

## **Inclusion**

This study has adopted the Simpican et al. (2015) definition of social inclusion which is “the interaction between two major life domains: interpersonal relationships and community participation” (p.18). Simpican’s definition makes a distinction between the definition of social inclusion and the actions or processes that may facilitate it. The ecological approach to social inclusion recognises that there are layers through which an individual must navigate and that these ecological conditions can act as enabling or disabling conditions. This was an appropriate definition for social inclusion in the context of this research as there are complex layers and external influences which impact upon transition from special schools in the Irish context.

## **Participatory Research**

Participatory research within this study is situated within a context of viewing participants as capable of seeking answers to their own questions, situating the power with those individuals, with the researcher co-constructing knowledge with them and providing occasional input and expertise (Tandon, 1988). Employing the view adopted by Brown (2022) that participatory research sits on a continuum, within this research it is described as embedded within the research, sitting at a point between individuals participating in the research and participants as co-researchers.

## **1.2 Positionality & Rationale for the Study**

Prior experience as a former teacher in a special school was the motivation for this research. As a teacher holding a primary teaching qualification, I lacked the skills, knowledge and role clarity to support young people and their families through the transition process. This provided the impetus to understand the lived experiences of other teachers in special schools and the families they supported, while providing a social justice and human rights lens through which I sought to enact change in the current transition planning process in Ireland.

These prior experiences resulted in an insider/outsider, or “in-between” (Chhabra, 2020, p.307) positionality being adopted. As someone who shared characteristics with teachers in special schools, I belonged to the community that I was researching. However, I was also an outsider, and not a member of

the group being researched (Braun & Clarke, 2013), in the context of the parent and student participants. While I am also a parent, I am not a parent to children with intellectual disabilities or SEND. While I was a student, I did not attend or experience a special school education.

Subsequently, as teacher educator and now an outsider, both with a large Department of Education (DE) teacher education support service and more recently, as an Assistant Professor in Inclusive and Special Education, my work enables me to understand at a very broad level, the demands of the ever-changing context of inclusive and special education in Ireland. It prompted reflections upon the possible role of Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) in supporting transition planning.

### 1.3 Reflexivity

Acknowledging the potential for bias given the insider/outsider “in-between” positionality, reflexivity was paramount throughout this research. Supports to promote reflexivity included frequent supervision, in person, online and by phone with the primary and secondary supervisors. This supervision challenged my assumptions and bias throughout but specifically when crafting the methodology, research questions for exploration in data generation and throughout the analysis process. Additionally, the role of the critical friend was important to continually promote reflection and challenge bias when it emerged.

A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research process from initial research conception through to data analysis. It included pen and paper records in the form of documented ideas, notes from key literature and policy, training requirements and indicative timelines and tasks.

Reflexivity was demonstrated through the continual revision and evolution of the research sub-questions which has been documented throughout. It is also clear in the pivot from foregrounding the role of the class teacher as central to the research, to re-conceptualising and centralising the voice of the student. Key activities such as continuous professional development, attending research summer schools and presenting this research at various stages of development at national and international conferences allowed for assumptions to be

questioned and challenged and enabled a strong understanding of my positionality within this research.

## 1.4 A Priori Questions

Drawing upon prior experiences teaching in a special school, combined with roles in Teacher Professional Learning (TPL), a priori questions were influenced by experiences teaching students with autism and the central role of the special class teacher. Initial research questions included:

- To what extent does the Level Two Learning Programme (L2LP) prepare students with intellectual disabilities for employment?
- What are the current post-school options for students with autism and intellectual disabilities?
- How well-informed do teachers and guidance counsellors feel in relation to post-school options?

A preliminary review of the literature and consideration of human-rights frameworks, combined with critical reflection on positionality, supported a deeper understanding of inclusion through a rights-based framework. This also supported the reframing of the central stakeholders and highlighted the importance in capturing the voices of students.

Additionally, initial questions conflated the concepts of guidance counselling and transition preparation and planning. This in part, due to the interchangeable language used in Irish policy between “guidance counsellor”, “teacher” and “appropriately trained professional”. Following a review of the literature and consideration of human-rights frameworks, the resulting research question which supported the examination of the policy and legislation as well as the scoping literature review was:

What are the views and experiences of students with SEND, their parents, teachers and principals of transition preparation and transition planning?

The evolution of the research question is documented throughout the thesis including the development of sub-questions which guided the different phases of the study.

## 1.5 Background & Context

### *Inclusive education policy and legislation context*

Special education provision has increasingly become the focus for improvement for various developed countries in recent years following a global drive for equal rights for people with disabilities. Following ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006) in 2018, Ireland is under increasing pressure to meet its various legislative commitments. Under Article 24 of the UNCRPD (2006), State Parties need to ensure that children and adults with disabilities can access education on an equal basis as people without such disabilities.

In Ireland, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) established under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (2004) is the state body with responsibility for special educational needs. Its role is to “improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities with particular emphasis on children” (NCSE, n.d.).

Within their most recent policy advice on special schools and special classes (2024), the NCSE recommends a phased development of the progressive realisation towards a fully inclusive education system which would uphold the rights of people with disabilities under Article 24. However, at a time when Ireland must demonstrate an immediate and progressive drive towards the goal of full inclusion (Broderick & Quinlivan, 2017), it has seen an exponential growth in demand for placements in special classes and special schools.

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the NCSE has noted that there has been a 556% increase in the number of special classes in mainstream schools at primary level and 665% at post-primary level between 2010-2022. In addition to this, despite no new special schools being established in the previous two decades, eleven new special schools were opened in recent years (Kearney, 2023) with a particular focus on opening new special schools with a designation to support students with complex educational needs, despite a lack of an agreed definition of the term.

### *The role of special schools*

Within the broader debate both nationally and internationally regarding the term inclusion (Merrigan & Senior, 2023), considerations continue regarding the future role of special schools, with the Department of Education (DE) identifying that supports will need to be provided to special schools in the “progressive realisation of an inclusive education system” (Department of Education [DE], 2025, p.49).

A feature of this study was to acknowledge the role that special schools play in the Irish education system as they have long been known as “the forgotten sector” (Banks in Ombudsman for Children’s Office [OCO], 2022, p.38). While other research conducted in the Irish context has included perspectives of mainstream and special schools (Aston et al., 2021; O’Brien et al., 2011; McCoy et al., 2025; Carolan & Slattery, 2025), this research focused on the perspectives of staff, students and their parents in special schools exclusively.

As the researcher spent many years teaching in a special school, this inclusion debate is of particular relevance and interest. The rationale for conducting this study exclusively with special schools was driven by prior experiences within both teaching and Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) roles, where the special school context is seen as “other” within the education system (Merrigan & Senior, 2023, p.277).

Similarly to the often-marginalised students with SEND, special schools occupy a unique dual-identity between primary and post-primary schools. On one hand, officially recognised as primary schools catering for students from age 4-18 years of age therefore operating under the Rules for National Schools (1965) (NCSE, 2011). On the other hand, supporting students through their post-primary education journey, with increasing numbers of students transferring from mainstream primary to special schools at post-primary age (McConkey et al., 2016). The DE report that in the 2023/2024 school year, 52% of students attending special schools were of post-primary age (DE, 2025). Therefore, the designation as primary schools is seen to be “hugely problematic” (Banks in OCO, 2022, p. 39).

For many years, the historical designation of special schools as primary schools resulted in the curriculum being taught by primary-trained teachers, and as a

result of barriers to entry for teachers with post-primary qualifications, lead to a “scarcity of teachers with relevant knowledge for the delivery of post-primary programmes in some special schools” (Ware et al., 2009, p. 189). This historical designation continues to impact upon special schools, with principals indicating that they could not offer appropriate curricula due “to a lack of specialist teachers” (McCoy et al., 2025, p.71). These limitations of a predominantly primary-trained teaching population resulted in special schools experiencing high levels of autonomy regarding the curricular programmes on offer at post-primary level (Ware et al., 2009) with education outcomes for students in special schools being worse than those that attend mainstream schools (Banks in OCO report, 2022).

Additionally, the breadth and scope of the categorization of special schools in Ireland are a feature of the Irish special education landscape. Special schools were established “under a particular designation of student need” (DE, 2025, p.49) and range “from mild general learning disabilities (MGLD), through to multiple disabilities” (Ware et al., 2009, p.23). However, there is no governing legislation or policy which set out the definitions for these categories (Ware et al., 2009). In contemporary Ireland, these designations no longer reflect the diversity of student population within special school settings with many schools diversifying to meet the needs of students within their catchment areas (DE, 2025), resulting in varied curricular provision “within and across” special schools (McCoy et al., 2025, p.70).

#### *Policy enactment for post-school transition*

With high levels of curricular autonomy, a “mixed profile of need” within student population in special schools (McCoy et al., 2025, p.70) and recent progressive developments in curricula and certification for students at varying qualification levels, Ireland’s education system has made some progress in facilitating access to second level education for students with SEND. Despite this progressive shift, policy and legislation continually fail to adequately support post-school pathways and transition options from compulsory schooling to further and higher education and employment.

Research continues to demonstrate low participation rates in further and higher education and employment for people with disabilities, with additional barriers

faced by people with intellectual disabilities (National Disability Authority [NDA], 2025). Transition planning and availability of inclusive accessible post-school options (PSOs) are required in order to support students leaving second level education. In order to facilitate transition planning, high quality tailored guidance counselling (McCoy et al., 2025) is essential to support students and their families to make fully informed decisions about PSOs. In Ireland, the health funded day service (HFDS) sector remains the dominant option for students with SEND (Gillan and Coughlan, 2010; McConkey et al., 2017; McCoy et al., 2025)

Without a robust domestic legislative foundation, successive governments have trialled various policies and Programmes for Government aiming to address Ireland's continuing low employment rates and further/higher education rates for people with disabilities. One of the most promising whole-of-government policy initiatives, the Comprehensive Employment Strategy 2015-2024 (CES), had an "overarching purpose to ensure that every person with a disability who was able to and wanted to work was supported and facilitated to do so" (NDA, 2025, p.10).

However, in their final review of the policy, the National Disability Authority (2025) outlined that despite some positive outcomes, persistent disability education and employment gaps were evident. This included a notable increase in numbers in receipt of disability related social welfare payments over the lifetime of the CES 2015-2024 along with "substantial gaps" in the provision of career guidance tailored to students with disabilities in schools (NDA, 2025, p.15).

The drive to uphold our legal obligations for inclusive education and employment under the UNCRPD (2006) has led to continuous policy commitments in Ireland, without the critical domestic legislation to support or enforce it. However, with the clear failure of the CES 2015-2024 policy to translate to significant increases in education and employment rates in Ireland, there is little evidence to demonstrate that any of the policy provisions will experience success.

## 1.6 Theoretical Framework

In selecting a theoretical framework, it is important for researchers to consider how their theory will apply in the context of a mixed method study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). As this study is grounded in a pragmatic constructivist paradigm, an agenda for change and highlighting the voices of marginalised groups was a core requisite which aligns with an emancipatory theory, involving “taking a theoretical stance in favour of underrepresented or marginalised groups” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017, p. 45).

While other well established and widely used frameworks were considered such as the ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), the theoretical framework underpinning this study (as seen in Figure 1) was the ecological model of Simplican et al. (2015). This ecological model of social networks and community participation was designed as a result of their aim to define social inclusion of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Specifically, it explores “how individual, interpersonal, organisational, community and socio-political variables influence interpersonal relationships and community participation” (p.25).

Their framework was particularly suitable for this study as it was grounded in human rights and the UNCPRD (2006). Simplican et al. (2015) describe their concept of enabling and disabling conditions to social inclusion and the complex layers through which an individual must navigate. It understands disability as a product of social, individual and environmental factors, which resonated with the social justice roots of this study.

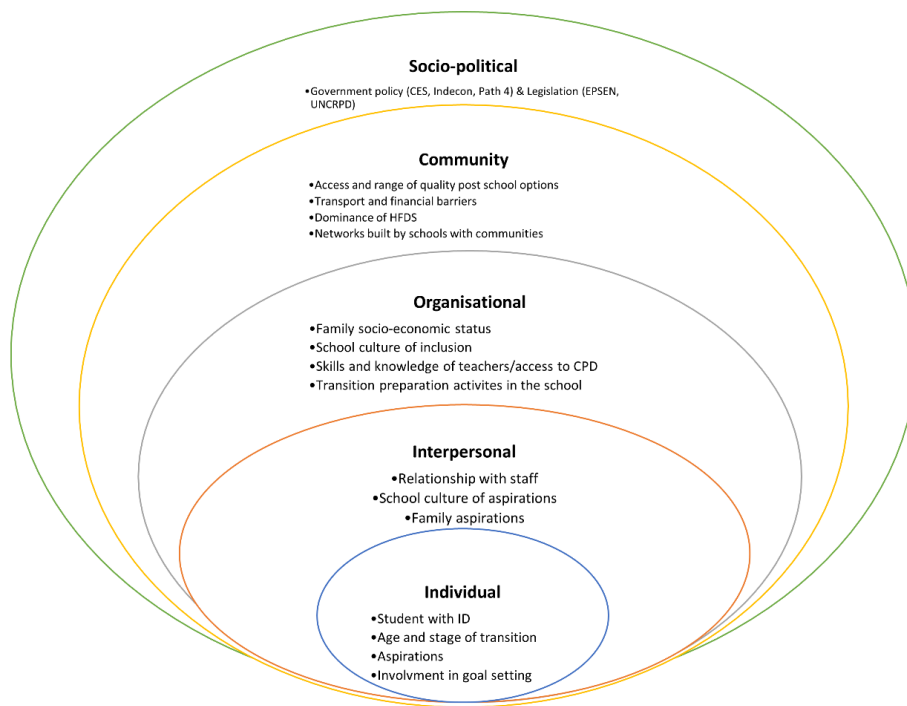


Figure 1 - Theoretical Framework (Simplican et al., 2015)

This study aims to demonstrate how the Simplican et al. (2015) model can be applied within the context of transition (Figure 1). For example, one underpinning principle of this current study, rooted in the UNCRPD (2006) Article 1, was for young people with intellectual disabilities to enjoy full, active participation in society and to be able to make autonomous informed decisions about life post-school. Thereby in using the Simplican et al. (2015) model, the student with intellectual disabilities is placed at the centre, taking into account their age and stage of transition (transition preparation or transition planning), the aspirations they hold for themselves post-school and the level of involvement they have in goal setting.

The second layer of the ecosystem concerns the interpersonal dimension. Transitions are dependent on relationships with various stakeholders, primarily school staff, but also with external partners leading the transition process for example, a HSE Occupational Guidance Officer. It is also influenced by the school culture which may determine the level of self-determination students have, the amount of involvement they have in transition planning but also the culture of inclusion and aspirations held for their student population. In the special school context, this is an interesting dynamic. Aspirations for students from a special school setting may vary depending on the profile of strengths and areas for

development. The degree of the intellectual disability and the extent to which the student can communicate effectively has also been seen as a barrier to participation in their educational meetings (Strnadová et al., 2016) and has influenced aspirations held by professionals for students' PSOs (Skillern & Carter, 2021). Coupled with potentially low aspirations of staff and low levels of student autonomy, family aspirations for the young person have been reported as a significant factor in post-school outcomes (Almalki, 2021; Fullarton & Duquette, 2015; McCall, 2015).

The next layer of the ecosystem is organisational and in the context of transition can be associated with family socio-economic status which can be a contributing factor for young people in deciding on a PSO. Reflecting on the Simplican et al. model (2015), each of the layers in the ecosystem can have positive or negative effects. While special schools will likely have a diverse population of students with various SEND, this does not guarantee that the school is practicing highly effective inclusive practices. Kinsella & Senior (2008) suggest that an inclusive school culture features discussion and collaboration, framed in a context of protected time and opportunities for such discussion with both internal and external partners. Hence, school culture may be an important factor (Banks et al., 2022) and can be observed through the types of transition preparation and transition planning practices, as well as the types of curricula and activities that are offered to students.

This can also be linked with the extent to which schools encourage and facilitate community engagement. Research has shown that having strong links with community and high levels of community engagement are contributing factors to successful post-school transition (Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021; Davies & Beamish, 2009). Placing teachers as key stakeholders in this process, their level of skills and knowledge of the range of PSOs coupled with the provision of and access to Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) in transition planning may also be influencing factors.

Building on these elements of school culture, the next layer of community naturally aligns with post-school transitions. This can include the range of options available to young people depending on geographical location, quality of services and also potential barriers such as transport, loss of access to

supports (both financial and resource based e.g. a Special Needs Assistant). The cultural dominance of Health Funded Day Services in Ireland is situated within the community layer of the ecosystem as a barrier to more progressive PSOs. While schools may have built successful networks within communities to facilitate work sampling and work placement, the dominance of HFDS, lack of suitable alternative options is a concern.

Finally, the socio-political layer, which is increasingly complex in the Irish context was the final aspect of the framework. Domestic policy such as the CES (2015-2024) and Indecon (2019), have placed a new focus on inclusion and social participation. Alongside this, the Ireland's commitment under the UNCRPD (2006) which was only ratified in 2018, transition legislation and practices heavily influence this layer. The innovative and specialised funding of over €12 million for higher education institutions, named PATH-4, which was released in 2023, enabled universities to create inclusive pathways for those with intellectual disabilities and/or autism.

This chapter has outlined the key concepts, a priori research questions and positionality which underpin this study. An overview of current policy and legislative landscape in Ireland was provided, with specific reference to the commitments to provide inclusive accessible education at all levels and equal access to employment. The role of special schools in a drive towards a more inclusive education system was described, emphasising the challenges they experience in supporting an increasingly diverse student population. The rationale for this study, along with a brief overview of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks was presented.

#### *A note on language*

The language used throughout this study reflects a human-rights based approach to viewing the individual, aligning with the language preferences outlined in the UNCRPD (2006). The term special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) has been used throughout this study to broadly represent the range of students that access special schools in Ireland. Person-first language has been used, employing the term "students with SEND". When reporting on the literature, and specifically within the context of Phase Two, student participants were accessing a special school with a specific designation of

intellectual disability and where appropriate, the term “student with intellectual disability” has been used.

## 2 Chapter Two: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction.

This chapter introduces the literature underpinning inclusive education and transition within an international and national context. The first part of this chapter specifically addresses the background and context for the research, as well as key policies and legislation underpinning post-school transitions practices for people with disabilities in Ireland. This is demonstrated firstly through the examination of how inclusive education policy and legislation situates post-school transition planning within a human rights framework in international legislation. Secondly, it explores underpinning policy and legislation for post-school transition in Ireland, as outlined in Table 1. The chapter then offers a critical evaluation of implementation of international and domestic legislation and policy in Ireland. This is followed by a descriptive account of the approach adopted for the scoping literature review. This review examined the literature related specifically to views and experiences of the key stakeholders related to transition programmes for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Table 1 -Irish Education Legislation

1937	Constitution of Ireland (Article 42 - Education)
1965	Report of Enquiry on Mental Handicap
1992	Republic of Ireland ratified UNCRC (1989)
1995	Charting our Educational Future
1996	Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities
1997	Universities Act
1998	Education Act (and subsequent amendments)
2000-2004	Equal Status Acts
2004	Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs Act EPSEN
2005	Disability Act
2018	Republic of Ireland ratified UNCRPD
2022	Education (Provision in respect of children with Special Educational Needs) Act

## 2.2 Part One: Background and Context for the Research

### Situating post-school transitions in international legislation

Until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the medical model of disability was the dominant conceptual model, rooted in viewing the disability “as an impairment that needs to be treated, cured, fixed or at least rehabilitated” (Degener, 2016, p.2). Treatment of the disabled person was a concern for medical professionals rather than educationalists which led to children with disabilities attending workhouses and residential care institutions from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Scanlon & Doyle, 2022), and becoming marginalised and invisible in their

communities (Shevlin et al., 2020). This negative and problematisation view of disability had a significant impact on language used with “defective, deficient and handicapped” becoming the common vernacular seen persistently in Irish policy (Scanlon & Doyle, 2022, p.8).

However, challenges to the medical model emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with movements such as the Fundamental Principles of Disability (Union Of The Physically Impaired Against Segregation [UPIAS], 1976) arguing that it was societal barriers rather than medical impairment that were disabling (Oliver, 2013). This initiated developments in considering the social model of disability, viewing it as “something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (UPIAS, 1976, p. 3)”. This social model made a clear distinction between impairment and disability (Degener, 2016) with the UPIAS (1976) identifying that one could “experience a (mild) impairment with no experiences of disablement and exclusion from society”(Berghs et al., 2019, p.1035).

Influenced by the early work of Oliver e.g. 1984; 1990, the UNCRPD (2006) supported the move away from the medical model of disability, ensuring that upon its ratification by UN Member States, reforms to their existing practices were mandated. This critically changed the landscape for disability and in the first ten years of the existence of the UNCRPD (2006), it was the “the catalyst for many law and policy reforms, which relate to the shift from, medical to the social model of disability” (Degener, 2016, p.2).

However, despite being influenced by the social model, many authors argue that the UNCRPD (2006) adopted a more human rights-based approach, which moves beyond the social model (Degener, 2016; Scanlon & Doyle, 2022; Waddington & Priestley, 2021). This approach views human rights as “fundamental rights” (Degener, 2016, p. 4), meaning they are universal, unconditional and afforded to each human as a birth right. In contrast to the social model, this means that people do not have to possess particular characteristics or health status to access them, therefore “human rights do not require the absence of impairment” (Degener, 2016, p.4).

Decades before Ireland's ratification of the UNCRPD (2006) in 2018, which provided the first legally binding mandate for inclusive education through Article 24, other legislative provisions were in place to scaffold these developments. Conceptualising inclusive education within a human rights framework, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) which Ireland ratified in 1992, cemented rights for children with disabilities.

Article 23 (3) outlined the right to access education which facilitates the "fullest possible social integration" (UNCRC, 1989, p.23). Building on this, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994), stipulated that schools must accommodate all children regardless of the presence or type of SEND, and that a move towards inclusive schools was required. It specifically stated that the allocation of a placement for a child on a permanent basis to a special class or special school would be an exception, rather than the norm and only where a mainstream placement had been unsuccessful (Salamanca Statement, 1994, Section 8).

Framing post-school transition as a human right, the Salamanca Statement (1994) stated that senior students with disabilities should be prepared and supported to enter higher education by engaging in transition preparation programmes, and access subsequent vocational training to prepare them to function as independent, contributing members of society (Salamanca Statement, 1994).

The UNCRPD (2006) was the first legally binding treaty comprehensively addressing disability rights within and beyond compulsory education (Lang et al., 2011) and placed obligations on state parties and education providers, to ensure that the rights to an inclusive education and employment are upheld. Article 1 of the UNCRPD (2006) set out to ensure 'full and equal enjoyment' of the rights that non-disabled people experience and to have all barriers removed so they can experience 'full and effective participation' in society (p.4).

When considering this statement regarding post-school transitions, the basic aspects of 'participation' in society must be taken into account: access to further and higher education; employment or self-employment; access to community

networks and social interactions, and access to healthcare and welfare services. Post-school transitions are viewed even more specifically through the UNCRPD (2006) Article 24(5) and Article 27(d) where the promotion of full access to lifelong learning and employment is emphasised. Therefore, post-school transitions are rooted at the heart of the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UNCRPD (2006).

Following the UNCRPD (2006), another driver for “creating equitable and inclusive societies” (Social Justice Ireland, 2024) was observed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Adopted in 2015 by all 193 United Nation Member States, the 17 goals are an action plan for the people, planet and prosperity. As a signatory, Ireland must track and report its progress in meeting these 17 goals.

Within the context of education, Sustainable Development Goal Four aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2015, p.21). Ireland’s most recent progress report indicates that despite successes in some areas, more work is required in making education more inclusive, with teacher professional learning in inclusive practices identified as an area for improvement (Social Justice Ireland, 2024).

In achieving SDG Four, two specific indicators of success are related to post-school education, aiming by 2030 to ensure equal access to “all levels of education and vocational training” (SGD 4, Target 4.5, p.21) and “quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university” (SDG 4, Target 4.3, p.21). Additionally, post-school employment and relevant skill development are identified in Target 4.3. This further cements Irelands obligations to provide for inclusive post-school pathways for all students, including those with SEND to access and fully participate in society.

The concept of post-school transition planning for people with disabilities has been evident in legislation in other developed countries as early as the 1970’s. Since 1973, America led the way with various iterations of disability legislation: Americans with Disabilities Rehabilitation Act (1973;1990); Education for all Handicapped Children Act (1975), resulting in the current Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) which mandates transition planning as part of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) by the age of 16. Similarly in the United Kingdom (UK), transition planning has been central in the Code of Practice (2015), underpinned by the Children and Families Act (2014) and the Equality Act (2010) which ensures that students with SEND have in place an annually reviewed transition plan from year nine, typically when students are aged 13-14.

Transition planning is also evident in Scottish legislation in the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 as amended (2017). This legal framework provides for education authorities to create co-ordinated support plans which, similarly to IEPs in the USA and Ireland, must identify the educational objectives and additional supports to be made available to ensure that the young person will benefit from school education. More specifically, transition planning legislation requires education authorities to request information from prospective appropriate post-school agencies at least twelve months prior to transition and share information with providers no less than six months before the transition.

Within the European Union, there have also been concerted efforts to support and promote inclusion beyond compulsory education through its policy development. The Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 (henceforth referred to as EU Strategy) focused on three main themes: freedom of movement, personal autonomy, and equal opportunities, aligning specifically with Article 1 of UNCRPD (2006). It recognises that its predecessor (European Disability Strategy 2010-2020) presented many barriers in supporting people with disabilities to access employment, healthcare, education and social inclusion (Union of Equality, 2021-2030).

This revised EU strategy sets out how inclusive accessible education, employment and self-employment are central to the quality of life of people with disabilities, and where education is viewed as a “multiplier” to accessing other rights (Heyer, 2021, p.4). It highlights the role of skill development for employment of people with disabilities. However, with increasing numbers of students with disabilities attending special schools and special classes, the access routes to further and higher education and to the labour market are

more limited than students attending mainstream education (Salamanca Statement, 1994). It also identifies the key role of guidance counselling in supporting young people with disabilities in making the transition from vocational training and skill development programmes to becoming a member of the labour force.

## Inclusive education in Ireland

Internationally, evolutions in the conceptualisation of special education over the past century have influenced policy development and legislation in Ireland. The first formalisation of education was detailed in the Constitution of Ireland (1937), placing obligations on the State to provide free primary education and to ensure children received a minimum education (Article 42). However, this provision did not extend the right to children with disabilities.

The Commission of Inquiry into Reformatory and Industrial Schools (1936) (as cited in Swan, 2000, p.1) stated that it was “in every way undesirable that mentally deficient children, even of the higher grade, should be placed with normal children”. This resulted in segregation becoming embedded in Irish culture, with disabled students attending residential special schools, typically under the auspices of religious orders or hospitals. As a result of this requirement being viewed through the medical model lens, ambiguity developed between the Department of Health and Department of Education in terms of overall responsibility for special needs provision.

Assessment and diagnosis soon became the role of the Health Services with the passing of the Health Act (1953). The Department of Education recognised special schools from 1947 and appointed a school inspector in 1959 exclusively for the sector (Swan, 2000). The principle responsibility “for the medical treatment, care, education, training and even the employment of people with disabilities” remained with the Department of Health until the 1980’s with the introduction of policy initiatives that influenced the educational provision for people with disabilities (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011, p.48) .

Special school provision grew in the decades that followed and special education became conceptualised as 'other', 'different' and 'for the few', even for those that attended mainstream school with the provision of 'remedial'

education (Swan, 2000). Ireland's mainstream education system operated alongside special schools in this multi-track approach similar to that of many western European countries (Kenny et al., 2020).

Despite several special educational provision reports in the 1980's and early 1990's (White Paper on Educational Development, 1980; Programme for Action in Education 1984-1987 (1984); Green Paper on Education, 1992), legislative progress became evident from 1993. The combination of parent litigation against the state and the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) in 1993, laid down a framework for the legislation that followed.

The O'Donoghue case (High Court of Ireland, 1993) challenged the Irish Government's failure to provide for the educational needs of an eight-year-old boy with severe disabilities. The child's mother was successful in the case, and it triggered significant changes to the educational provision for children with SEND in the years and decades that followed, particularly those with severe and complex learning needs. In 1991, the Special Education Review Committee was established and tasked to review the existing educational provision for students with SEND in Ireland. The SERC report (1993) among its many findings, promoted the concept of a continuum of educational provision, supporting access to a range of flexible placements, with full-time and part-time access to special schools, special classes and mainstream classes with support. It also noted that segregation inhibited the realisation of the goal to develop skills to access society and live and work in their own communities.

The Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (1996) (Rose et al., 2010), moved away from the previously dominant medical model of disability, instead aligning its recommendations "within the frame of a human rights perspective, rooted in a social model of disability" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011, p.54). Following its recommendations, the Irish Government gave greater consideration for the concept of inclusion within the legislation that followed. The Education Act (1998) supported the move to inclusion, emphasising that schools needed to adapt to meet the needs of the learner (Swan, 2000), and to ensure that "their educational needs were identified and provided for" (Section 9, a, p.13). However, despite the Commission's recommendations, the

Education Act (1998) employed a “primarily medical definition of disability” (Griffin & Shelvin, 2011, p.58).

Building on the provisions in the Education Act (1998), the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (2004) sought to define inclusive education and became the first piece of legislation concerned specifically with the educational provision of students with SEND (Scanlon & Doyle, 2021). It aimed to provide for the education of students with SEND in inclusive education settings, alongside their neurotypical peers, to ensure that students with SEND enjoy the same rights to education as others.

Among several other provisions, the creation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) was another important feature of the legislation and they were purported to be a “centrepiece of excellence in special educational provision” (NCSE, 2006, p.1). IEPs were mandated under the EPSEN Act (2004) with the responsibility for their creation, monitoring and revision assigned to the principal of the school. However, the Act was never fully legally commenced therefore, there was no legal obligation on schools to create or engage with IEPs. A review of the EPSEN Act (2004) published in June 2025, acknowledged Ireland’s commitments under the UNCRPD (2006) which oblige it to “ensure that Irish legislation and policy regarding inclusive education are consistent with its core features” (DEY, 2025, p.12).

In further and higher education in Ireland, it is only since the 1990s that inclusion has been considered and reflected in policy and practice. The earliest notable piece of legislation actively progressing transitions to third level for those with SEND, Charting our Education Future (1995), outlined a range of supports such as consultation with students on their needs; physical access, facilities and equipment requirements; counselling, and special examination arrangements.

Independent organisations such as the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD), founded in 1988 as a result of Professor John Kelly identifying emerging student needs, were influential in supporting students with disabilities in third level. Starting as a non-profit body, it gained support

from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to create a national organisation in the early 1990s.

The HEA was established in 1971, however formal funding from the Department of Education (DE) was not provided until 1994. This funding supports universities in offering students with disabilities access to supports and services to fully participate in and complete their studies (HEA, n.d.). The Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) proved to be a success, with over 14,000 students benefiting from it in the academic year 2019/2020, compared to only 300 in 1999 (HEA, n.d.). However, limitations of the fund include the limited eligibility criteria (Treanor, 2025) particularly for students with intellectual disabilities wishing to access higher education.

The commencement of the Universities Act (1997) further cemented the rights of people with SEND by solidifying the right to equality of access. Organisations such as AHEAD advocated for funding and encouraged the DE to develop equality of access plans such as the National Access Plan (HEA, 2005;2008). AHEAD continues to provide valuable supports, aiming to create inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities, however their remit does not extend to those with intellectual disabilities.

Subsequent legislation such as the Equal Status Act (2000-2004) and the Disability Act (2005) all emphasised the role that educational institutions must play in providing for reasonable accommodations and promoting equality of access to education. However, these Acts, along with the EPSEN Act (2004) all use varying definitions of disability from adult-centred definitions to medicalised definitions. As a result, current legislation in Ireland is insufficient at preventing discrimination and promoting equality of access for young people with SEND (Moloney et al., 2021, p. 22).

## Implementation Gaps

### *Critique of implementation of inclusive education legislation and policy in Ireland*

Challenges persist for Ireland and other UN Member States to implement inclusive education legislation and policy (Shevlin et al., 2020). In order to fully critique the implementation of legislation and policy, it would be important to firstly examine Ireland's obligations and commitments to an inclusive education system, followed by a critique of the implementation of transition planning policy. Article 24 of the UNCRPD (2006) places an obligation on UN Member States to move towards a fully inclusive education system, with no segregated settings for students with SEND. Despite Ireland's commitments under the UNCRC (1989), UNCRPD (2006) and UN Sustainable Goals (2015), its "continuing failure to implement key legal provisions to ensure the active participation in mainstream education of children with SEN" is apparent (Murphy et al., 2022, p.2).

Ireland still operates a largely segregated system of education, with 2022 figures reporting over 8,400 students attending special schools, over 10,000 students attending special classes in mainstream primary and over 4,000 attending special classes at mainstream post-primary school (DE & DFHERIS, 2024). Additionally for the 2024/2025 school year, 409 special classes were sanctioned, with 400 more new special classes opening in the 2025-2026 school year (DEY, 2025c). It is the view of the UN Committee that the provision of special schools and classes is not compatible with the convention.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE), a statutory body in Ireland set up under the EPSEN Act (2004), set out in 2019 to engage in "consultation to get the public perspective on whether Ireland should move in this direction" (NCSE, n.d.). In contravention of the recommendations of the SERC report (1993), the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UNCRPD (2006), the NCSE's preliminary progress report findings, showed that once a child is placed in a special setting, "placements appear to be only rarely, if ever reviewed" (NCSE, 2019, p.9).

Concerns were also reported that "educating a child in a separate specialised setting can have life-long consequences for a child" (NCSE, 2019, p.6). It stated

that while IEPs were in existence for the students, the post-school outcomes were not gathered or tracked. The progress report indicated that while there was general consensus that theoretically a fully inclusive education system would be beneficial, it was with much less consensus that stakeholders felt this was feasible or desirable in the Irish context, particularly for those with the most complex needs.

In Ireland's report to the implementation committee of the UNCRPD in 2022, the DE stated it was "aware of the recommendations of the UNCRPD in relation to inclusivity and is committed to considering the implications of this in the context of the finalised policy advice on specialised educational placements when this is received in Q2 of 2022" (OCO, 2022, p. 28). This apparent lack of strategic direction and commitment to an inclusive education system continues to be a pervasive problem in the Irish education system. An example of emergency SEND provision was observed in Summer 2022, with the proposed creation of "a network of special education centres" as an emergency response to the acute shortage of "appropriate school places" for children with autism, particularly in the country's capital, Dublin (O'Brien, 2022). These centres, five of which were proposed, would each cater for 24 students with autism and be open by September 2022.

This proposal arose from the government's significant underestimation of the shortage of appropriate school places for almost 270 children with autism (O'Brien, 2022). The disparity between the Government- and parent-reported figures for these shortages caused concern over the accuracy of the data the Government, and particularly the NCSE, maintained regarding children with disabilities. The proposal was met with widespread criticism with the Chief Commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) stating that this is "simply not in line" with either the UNCRPD, or people's rights to appropriate education as set out in the Irish Constitution (Moore, 2022).

While legislation already existed to compel a mainstream school to open a special class for students with SEND, under Section 37(a) of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act (2018), such powers were rarely employed, and at times took up to 18 months to implement (OCO, 2022). Following widespread resistance, the Government paused the plan to open special education centres,

turning its attention to the flaws within the existing Section 37(a) process, with the aim of expediting the process in compelling a mainstream school to open a special class. On 28th June 2022, a resulting Education (Provision in respect of children with Special Educational Needs) Act 2022 was brought before government, aiming to reduce the lengthy 18-month process to six-to-eight weeks, and to enhance the powers of the NCSE to “manage and coordinate the admission of children to a school”. This act came into effect less than a month later, on July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

During the same period and following numerous complaints from parents regarding the lack of availability of appropriate school places within their local community for their children with SEND, the Ombudsman for Children (OCO) published a report titled “Plan for Places – Forward Planning for the Provision of Schools Places for Children with Special Educational Needs: A Children’s Rights Issue” in June 2022. In his general comment, the Ombudsman Dr. Niall Muldoon stated that “if the DE continues to generate solutions that contain some element of separation, then it will become increasingly difficult to unwind them in the future, regardless of what the NCSE’s policy advice recommends” (OCO, 2022, p.6).

Making eight key recommendations, the OCO highlighted the challenges with existing domestic legislation in light of the UNCRPD (2006). The EPSEN Act (2004) Section 2(b) states that children with SEND “shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs, *unless to do so would be inconsistent with the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated*” [emphasis added] (p.7). As the latter part of the sentence could be seen as exclusionary (Kinsella & Senior, 2008), the OCO recommended removing that qualification from Section 2(b), and to either commence or revise Sections 3-13 to ensure IEPs are “rights-based, child centred and inclusive” (OCO, 2022, p. 71). In a concluding comment, he stated that “the segregation of children with SEND who are not able to integrate into the standardised school setting has led to the emergence of a dysfunctional parallel system, which the DE needs to dismantle” (OCO, 2022, p. 66).

The Ombudsman outlined concerns with “oversubscription to special schools, hundreds of children on waiting lists for special classes in mainstream schools,

thousands of children travelling outside of their local school-catchment area...” (OCO, 2022, p.28). In his two-year update on the report (OCO, 2024), he criticised the two-year delay in publication of the NCSE Policy Advice on special schools and Special Classes (2024) and expressed his fears that the slow pace of the review of the EPSEN Act (2004), which commenced in 2022, “will undoubtedly delay the desegregation and inclusion goals at the heart of the NCSE policy advice” (OCO, 2024, p.23).

Despite the revision to the Education (Provision in respect of children with Special Educational Needs) Act (2022) and the new powers of the NCSE to coordinate admission to schools, figures from the DE indicate that at the commencement of the 2024-2025 academic year, 126 children with autism were without a school place. In February 2025, the incoming Minister for Education, Helen McEntee and Minister of State for Special Education and Inclusion, Michael Moynihan contested that all 126 children had now been offered places. However, following a “sleep-out” by parents of children with SEND outside government buildings in March 2025, the NCSE indicated that 130 students were currently in need of a school place (O’Cearbhaill, 2025). The Ministers outlined that over 200 places have already been approved for the next school year and over 400 additional special classes will be added in the coming school year 2025-2026 (DEY, 2025c).

Despite the recommendations from the OCO (2022) to dismantle the segregated multitrack system, the practices of the NCSE and DE appear to demonstrate a commitment to increasing special class provision, with the CEO of NCSE noting that there has been a 556% increase in the number of special classes in mainstream schools at primary level and 665% at post-primary level between 2010-2022 (Kearney, 2023).

### *Critique of implementation of transition planning legislation and policy in Ireland*

The importance of planning for students with disabilities has been identified as critical in supporting transitions (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018). Without dedicated underpinning legislation in Ireland, transition planning is compounded by additional challenges of a segregated system, role ambiguity and lack of appropriate guidance provision identified in mainstream post-primary schools

(Aston et al., 2021). While there are relatively high levels of students with SEND accessing mainstream education at primary level, many students with intellectual disabilities are transferring from mainstream primary school to special schools on reaching post-primary age (McConkey et al., 2016). Recent figures from the DE (2025a) indicate that for the 2023/2024 school year, 52% of the students enrolled in special schools were of post-primary age. This may be attributed to an increase in curricular demands associated with post-primary education (Buchner et al., 2021).

In Ireland, the post-primary education system includes a three-year Junior Cycle and a two-to-three year Senior Cycle, with continuous assessment and terminal examinations at the end of each cycle. Until 2015, there was no recognised formal curriculum designed specifically for students with SEND in Ireland. However, the introduction of the Junior Cycle Framework (DES, 2015a) represented a momentous shift towards inclusion, formalising and recognising achievement at varying levels.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) created specific, dedicated and age-appropriate curricula for students aged 12-15 with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities (Level Two Learning Programme – L2LPs) (DES, 2015b), and a curriculum for those with moderate, severe or profound intellectual disabilities (Level One Learning Programme – L1LPs) (2017), for three years of Junior Cycle. The L1LPs and L2LPs support person-centred curricular planning, allowing students to access learning outcomes relevant to their profile and be awarded formal certification similarly to their neurotypical peers accessing traditional curricula.

Notwithstanding this progressive shift, the lack of a similar curriculum at Senior Cycle continued to be a major barrier (Aston et al., 2021). The existing Senior Cycle had been described as overly focused towards higher education entry and did not provide alternative pathways for those with SEND (Smyth et al., 2019). There were few options available to students to bridge qualification gaps between their Junior Cycle qualification and those needed for entry to further and higher education (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018).

In 2016, the NCCA engaged in a comprehensive review process, aiming to understand and “enhance the educational experience and ensure meaningful learning and achievement in Senior Cycle for all learners” (NCCA, n.d.). The Senior Cycle Advisory Report (2022) outlined the ambitious plan to redevelop the Senior Cycle in three phases. Having engaged in a review of L1LPs and L2LPs at Junior Cycle in 2022, “feedback overwhelmingly highlighted an urgent need for curricular provision in Senior Cycle” (NCCA, 2023, p.18).

Parents identified the need for a curriculum that would support the child in “the world of work” and development of life skills, with a focus on flexible modules that considered the interests of each individual learner (NCCA, 2023, p.18). The need for a Senior Cycle that promoted independent living skills and “pathways into the adult world” (p.19) was echoed by school leaders and external stakeholders across the review. Associated with any new flexibility in pathway provision, is the recognition that “consistent and structured career guidance is...a key element in supporting access to, and understanding the possibilities of, new learning pathways as they are developed” with support for students and their families to make informed decisions a key feature (p.34).

However, despite progress in a redeveloped Senior Cycle and the provision of follow on modules for students with SEND in the form of Senior Cycle Level 1 and Level 2 learning programmes, they continue to be aligned with level one and level two on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and therefore do little to support students in bridging the qualifications gap that exists between current curricula and employment or higher education entry requirements.

Additional barriers prevail for students attending special schools, which are designated as primary schools, yet support students typically aged 4–18 years. As a designated primary school, special schools have one class teacher per group of students. Unlike mainstream post-primary education where students access specialised subject teachers throughout the day, there is a limited curricular offering in special schools as there is little or no access to specialised subject teachers or appropriate Senior Cycle curriculum (McCoy et al., 2025; Smyth et al., 2019).

The absence of mandatory obligations on the Irish Government to provide for transition has a significant and detrimental impact on transition planning in the Irish context. The only Irish legislation which provided for transition planning was the EPSEN Act (2004) and as there was never a full commencement of the act, there was no legal requirement on schools to create or implement them. Irrespective of the lack of commencement, the timing of transition planning described in the Act is in stark contrast to other developed nations such as the UK and USA. Section 15 of the Act stated that transition plan should be developed at “such age as the principal or organiser considers appropriate” (p.20), with the NCSE IEP Guidelines (2006) suggesting that it should occur “one year in advance” of leaving school (p. 51).

The notion of a child’s right to participate in decision-making, as outlined in Article 12 of the UNCRC and Article 7(3) of the UNCRPD (2006), are tentatively referenced within Irish education policy. While the EPSEN Act (2004) outlines that the voice of the student “shall” be captured (p.20), along with the views of the parents, the NCSE Guidelines on the IEP Process (2006) state that, students should “be supported and encouraged to” fully participate in the IEP process (p.55). However, it suggests that this could occur only towards the end of the process and in the final sign off of the plan, therefore limiting meaningful engagement in decision-making.

The combination of the lack of requirement on schools to provide IEPs for their students, and the narrow view of participation and autonomy in decision-making illustrated through the NCSE IEP Guidelines (2006), leads to a ripple effect on participation levels on the ground in terms of student IEP involvement in schools. Research has identified that students with SEND in Irish schools have minimal levels of participation in their IEP meetings, with participation typically being the exception rather than the norm (Ní Bhroin, King & Prunty, 2016; Rose et al., 2012). The 2025 report on the review of the EPSEN Act (2004) highlighted the importance of the rights of the child, indicating that any revisions to the existing Act or new legislation should “now support the child’s participation in the process...and recognise and affirm the natural and imprescriptible rights of children” (p.21).

Access to high quality tailored guidance counselling is required for highly effective transition planning (McCoy et al., 2025; Shevlin et al., 2020). While guidance counsellors are available to students in mainstream post-primary schools, a lack of specific knowledge of post-school pathways for students with SEND (McGuckin et al., 2013), a lack of timely development of transition planning (Shevlin et al., 2020) and role ambiguity (Aston et al., 2021) impact upon its value for the student.

Despite the statutory requirement in the Education Act (1998) placed on all schools to provide “access to appropriate guidance” (p.13) counselling to support post-school transition planning, and unlike mainstream post-primary schools, special schools are not allocated guidance counsellors. A review of guidance provision undertaken on behalf of the Irish Government in 2019, identified that special school teachers often undertake this “as part of their ongoing work” without formal qualifications or access to training and recommended the need for enhanced guidance training and Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) for this cohort of teachers (Indecon, 2019, p. vi).

As a result of the lack of access to guidance counsellors and teachers filling the transition preparation gap, the final transition process from special schools is typically led by an Occupational Guidance Officer appointed by the Health Service Executive (HSE), which results in segregated health-funded services still being the dominant option (Gillan and Coughlan, 2010; McConkey et al., 2017). Transition planning is further compounded by low levels of parental aspiration and awareness of alternative options to health-funded services (Gillan and Coughlan, 2010; McConkey et al., 2017), with a particular fear of loss of financial supports (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018) should students opt for an alternative, i.e., mainstream option. With increasing numbers of students with mild intellectual disabilities attending special schools (McConkey et al., 2016), the access routes to further and higher education and the labour market have been identified as being more limited than for students attending mainstream education (Union of Equality, 2021-2030).

While the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) provides funding to support students with disabilities once admitted to the university, the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme established in 2009 (TCD, 2009) allows

young people experiencing educational/economic disadvantage and/or disability to apply to third level using a reduced points entry system. This aimed to overcome the barrier of the competitive nature of access to third level in Ireland and led to participation rates for those with disabilities generally rising to 12.4% (of new entrants) in 2020/2021 (HEA, 2022).

Despite these achievements generally for people with disabilities, people with intellectual disabilities are still significantly under-represented (HEA, 2022). System-level barriers continue to prevail and the initiatives, funds, and access schemes, e.g. DARE, available to other students with SEND, are not typically available to students with intellectual disabilities. Recent research shows only 6% of those with intellectual disabilities have a third-level qualification (Kelly & Maître, 2021). Acknowledging this, the Irish Government launched the fourth National Access Plan 2022-2028, which aims create an 'inclusive, diverse higher education sector', specifically identifying students with intellectual disabilities as a priority under-represented group (Government of Ireland, 2022, p.3) and aligning with Ireland's commitments under SDG Four.

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) dedicated fund aims to deliver equality of access, providing over €15 million to third-level educational institutions for the creation of accessible courses for people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism across 11 institutions (Dept. of the Taoiseach, 2024). The plan recognises the challenges in bridging the qualifications gap between second level and third level education and aims to increase participation rates of people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism.

However, specific participation rate targets have not been set due to a lack of accurate data gathering processes in Ireland. The NCSE commissioned research in 2022 to map and track students leaving special school. However, the report indicated that due to current models of SEN teaching allocation to schools, administrative school-based data sources do not provide sufficient insight into key drivers for PSOs (McCoy et al.,2025). They recommended that “targeted, longitudinal, qualitative and mixed methods research” could contribute as valuable data sources (McCoy et al., 2025, p.19).

Additionally, the Inclusive National Higher Education Forum (INHEF) Strategic Plan (2022) set out goals which include promoting the awareness of higher education as a realistic destination for those with intellectual disabilities among parents, school staff and individuals themselves, as well as highlighting the contribution that people with intellectual disabilities can make to society through accessing higher education. As education is viewed as a “multiplier” to accessing other rights (Heyer, 2021, p.4), promotion of access to inclusive accessible further and higher education will have positive impacts on participation rates in employment, further supporting the realisation of Article 27 of UNCRPD (2006) and Ireland’s responsibilities under the UN Sustainable Development Goal Four (2015).

## 2.3 Conclusion

The purpose of this background and context was to outline key policies and legislation underpinning post-school transition practices for people with disabilities in Ireland. Through examination of how inclusive education policy and legislation situates post-school transition planning within a human rights framework in international legislation, it is illustrated that transition planning continues to be rooted in international inclusive education legislation and policy. Ireland has been influenced by this international human rights and inclusion movement through development of domestic policy and legislation for post-school transition. While implementation of these policies and legislation have resulted in some progress for people with disabilities generally, individuals with intellectual disabilities continue to be underrepresented and failed by delays to enactment of legislation and undelivered policy goals. As Ireland continues to operate a largely segregated education system at primary and post-primary levels, access routes to post-secondary education and progression to employment are more limiting for those with intellectual disabilities. Without dedicated transition planning legislation, similar to that in the UK and USA, Ireland will continue to have low participation rates in further and higher education and employment, particularly for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

## 2.4 Part Two: Scoping Literature Review

### Systematic Scoping Review Strategy

This scoping literature review aimed to identify existing research on the transition experiences of young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), their families and supporting adults as they prepare to leave compulsory schooling. Through the examination of the literature, the review aimed to explore the range of transition preparation and transition planning practices that occur in upper secondary education systems, either in mainstream or segregated settings, and the role that stakeholders play in the transition processes. Another central aim of this review was to identify the extent to which authentic first-hand student voice is captured regarding their views and experiences of transition planning and what methodologies are used in those cases. This literature review informed the direction and scope of this research project, which explored transition preparation and transition planning in Irish special schools.

Having explored the various types of literature reviews that can be conducted (Grant & Booth, 2009) a systematic scoping review was chosen as the most suitable to meet the research aims, following the methodological framework presented by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). The systematic approach to searching the literature will support further researchers to extend research in this area through the replicability of the documented search strategy. The iterative five-step process which guided this literature review, adhered closely to the Arksey & O'Malley (2005) method (Figure 2).

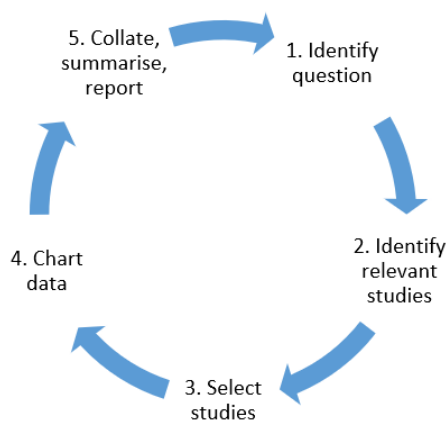


Figure 2 - Five Step Iterative Process

*Step one. Identify the question*

While indicative inclusion and exclusion criteria were drafted at the outset, they remained flexible, in keeping with the nature of a scoping review, allowing for gathering of a broad range of data and applying the criteria post-hoc (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). A scoping review rather than full systematic review was selected, in part, due to the impact that grey literature has on the concept of transition from compulsory education internationally. As this review aimed to capture the views and experiences of a defined population, the research question within this scoping review was designed using the PCO Framework:

***Population = young people with a disability and those involved in their lives (teachers, parents, principals, transition stakeholders)***

***Context = transition from school to post-school setting***

***Outcome = views on; experiences of; practices; facilitators and barriers; process; programmes***

The final resulting question being:

“What are the views and experiences of students with SEND, their parents, teachers and principals of transition preparation and transition planning?”

The inclusion and exclusion criteria which guided the selection of eligible studies are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2 - Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Studies were published in the English language</li> <li>2. Studies were based on empirical research</li> <li>3. Studies reported on at least one stakeholders' experiences of post school transition for students with SEND or engagement with a transition programme</li> <li>4. Studies reported on preparation for or experience of post school transition</li> <li>5. Studies were published between the years of 2000-2022</li> <li>6. Studies related to educational settings</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Studies written in a language other than English (the study was not available in English)</li> <li>2. The study was not empirical research</li> <li>3. Studies reported on other transitions within education systems (e.g. primary to post primary)</li> <li>4. Studies related to transition to a non-education setting (e.g. transitions to/within health services)</li> <li>5. Studies reported earlier than the year 2000.</li> <li>6. Letters, reviews and editorials were excluded</li> </ol>

*Step two and three. Identify relevant studies and select studies.*

Before searches commenced, guidance was sought from the specialised education librarian within the university regarding the selection of appropriate electronic databases, the search string that would yield the most relevant results and the thesaurus vocabulary associated with the search terms. Following consultation with the librarian and numerous initial trial searches, the following search string was identified as yielding the most suitable results and utilised the Title, Abstract and Keyword headings within the databases (Table 3).

Table 3 - Search string

Post-primary <b>OR</b> secondary school <b>OR</b> high school <b>OR</b> middle school <b>OR</b> special school
<b>AND</b>
Intellectual disability <b>OR</b> mental retardation <b>OR</b> developmental disability <b>OR</b> learning disabilit*
<b>AND</b>
Transition program* <b>OR</b> transition plan* <b>OR</b> transition
<b>AND</b>
School leaver <b>OR</b> student <b>OR</b> youth <b>OR</b> teenager

Four databases were selected to produce the most relevant results: Academic Search Complete; Education Research Complete; Scopus; Web of Science and were all accessed via the DCU online library. The final comprehensive searches

were conducted in early 2022 with additional hand searching of reference lists and the utilization of Google Scholar Alerts, which yielded 892 total results prior to application of exclusion criteria to the articles. Following removal of results that were published prior to the year 2000, or not available in English, this was reduced to 746 articles which were then exported into the Zotero software management tool. The results were then de-duplicated, resulting in 356 articles for review. Following the title screening of each article, 173 were excluded as not deemed relevant. The remaining 183 articles were subject to title and abstract review, resulting in the removal of 104 articles. 51 articles were removed at abstract and main body skim reading stage, resulting in 28 articles subjected to full text screening. Two articles were requested via an interlibrary loan. After full text screening, a further eight articles were removed, resulting in 20 articles for inclusion in the review.

Figure 3 outlines the results returned in each database, utilising the flow diagram modified from Mengist et al. (2020) and Moher et al. (2010).

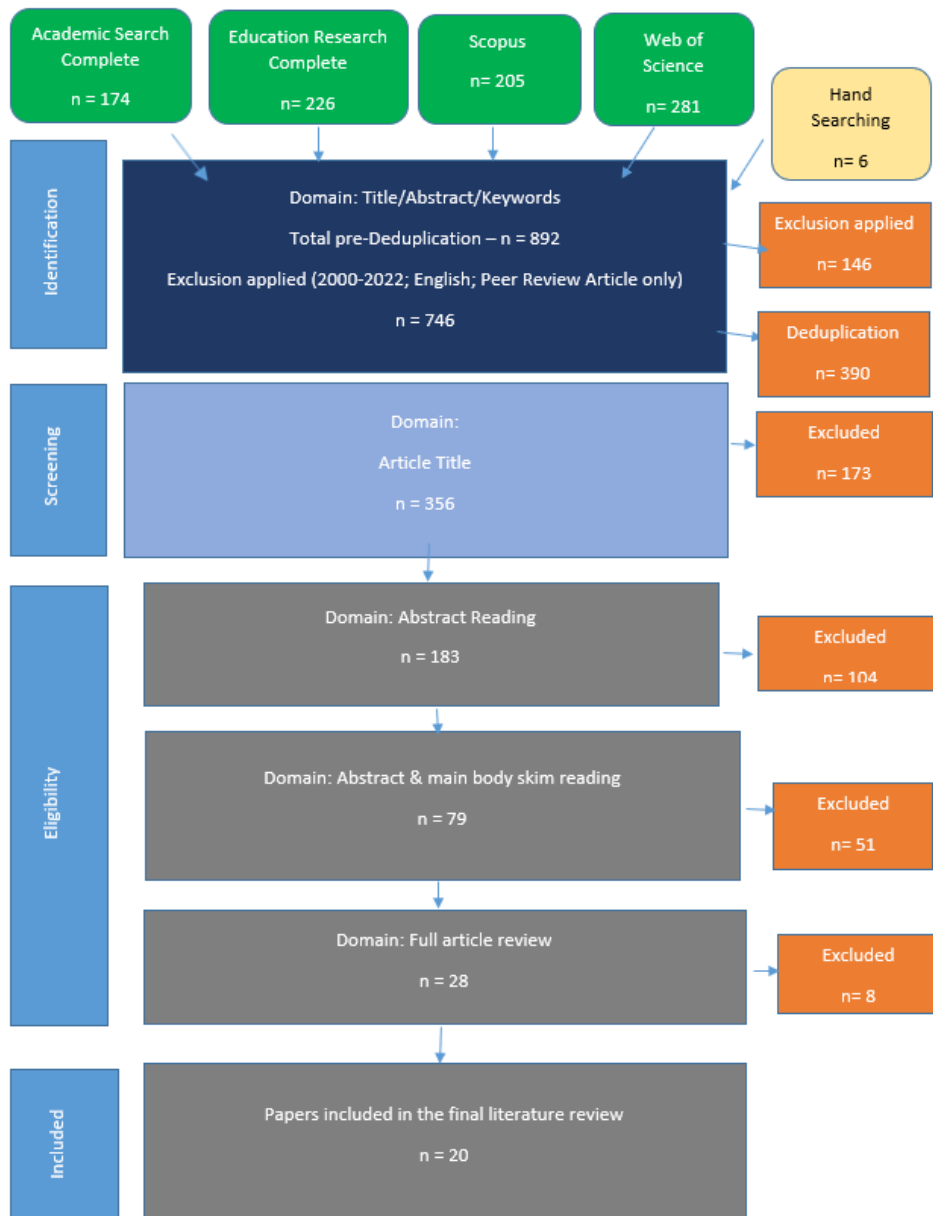


Figure 3 - Systematic Review Flow Diagram. Source: Modified from Moher et al. (2010) and Mengist et al. (2020)

*Step four. Charting the data.*

The final twenty articles were summarised in a data extraction table created in Microsoft Excel. The headings used in the data extraction process were based on examination of existing scoping reviews and systematic reviews in the field along with guidance from the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) guiding article and literature review. The headings were piloted with four articles and discussed with the two supervisors for suggested amendments. The final headings chosen are displayed in Table 4.

*Table 4 - Data reporting headings*

<b>Data extraction headings</b>	<b>Reporting headings</b>
Author, year and region	Geographic location
Number of participants	Year of publication
Participant profile/demographic data	Study participants
Aims	Participant characteristics
Methodology	Methodology
Data Analysis	Data analysis
Key Findings	

In contrast to a traditional systematic review, the articles were not subjected to quality assessment, however, gaps in data reporting were noted in the extraction process. Findings of the 20 articles are presented thematically. Table 5 represents the data extracted from the twenty articles.

Table 5 - Data Extraction Table

Biographical Details		Population		Context			Outcome	
Author, Date and Region	Study participants (age, sex, ethnicity, SEND, other characteristics)	Number of participants	Participant profile	Aims	Methodology	Data Analysis	Key findings	
1	Scanlon & Doyle (2021) Ireland	Students with ID	31	Students with ID, attend/had attended Special School & participated in WALK PEER programme; aged 16-21 yrs.; 27 senior class students across two special schools, 4 school leavers from 2016.	Explores the hypothesis that engaging with a supported model of transition can increase self-awareness, self-determination and autonomy, to enable students to make informed and autonomous decisions about post-school options and pathways as opposed to transitioning to segregated settings	Individual interviews and focus groups (G1 Pre-transition, G2 Transitioning were held twice two months apart, G3 Post transition was held once) Interviews lasted 30-40mins in school. All students (31) attended focus group meetings and subset of 10 participated in individual interviews. Identical questions in both FG and interviews.	phenomenological perspective with thematic analysis	Dreams & Aspirations; Essential skills for transition; Post school pathways and options; access to information re choices/options/pathways; expectations within families and society. Engaging in the supported transition programme provided young people with access to information, options, confidence and some of the hard and soft skills required for successful transition into education and employment contexts.
2	Almalky & Alqahtani (2021) Saudi Arabia	Special Education teachers from middle and high schools	73	61 male, 12 female; 46 middle school, 23 high school, 4 other; 16 Bachelor degree in spec ed, 8 Bachelors plus diploma in special ed, 39 MA, 10 PhD.	aims to investigate special educators' reflections on school practices that support partnerships with businesses to help schools prepare their students for a successful transition to postsecondary employment in Saudi Arabia.	Electronic & paper based survey, 44 Likert Qts in five domain areas to capture SET perspectives on (a) transition planning; (b) transition assessment; (c) types of skills they provide for students during school; (d) currently implemented transition practices; (e) partnerships and collaboration between schools and business.	SPSS	special educators believe their schools have adequate practices that support partnerships with businesses, specifically because they implement the best transition practices in planning, assessment, and needed skills provisions and work together to facilitate the transition to employment for students with disabilities. Most stated that these partnerships allow their students to participate in volunteering, employment training, career exposure, and internships. Students also learn social, communication, and personal skills (e.g., self-advocacy, self-determination, and self management) that help them become successful in their personal and professional lives
3	Fullarton & Duquette (2015) Canada	student with LD and their families	13	13 participants from 5 families; 5 students age 16-22, 3 pre-transition, 2 post-transition; 8 parents	examine the transition process from the perspectives of students with learning disabilities (LDs) and of their parents, in order to understand the interplay between their involvement and the actions of the school	Qualitative in-depth case study of five families - demographic data questionnaire & three 90min interviews - 2 families in person; 3 via phone -parents and students with LD interviewed separately -	inductive analysis	Roles identified for three stakeholders: <b>Parents</b> - to set expectations for post school life (many reflected parents own career path); mothers primarily modelled advocacy with some transferring responsibility to students; <b>Students</b> - Select a career or postsecondary program • Develop self-advocacy and self-determinations skills • Develop a mentoring or supportive relationship with a teacher; <b>Teachers</b> - Provide mentoring or support for the adolescent • Collaborate with the adolescent and parents • Know the requirements to meet transition goals;
4	Banks, Aston & Shevlin (2022) Ireland	Mainstream second level school principals; SENCOs & Guidance Counsellors	119	110 Principals of mainstream second level schools, 4 Guidance Counsellors, 5 SENCOs	examine typical transition support/guidance provided to students with ID as they prepare to complete their post-primary education in a mainstream setting	Mixed method study - Quant survey (postal & online) to 722 secondary school principals followed by nine qual semi-structured interviews via Zoom with GCs & SENCOs (nominated by the responding school principal)	unspecified	Guidance limited for students with ID; lack of clarity as to the personnel responsibility for transition planning (GC vs SENCO); managing expectations for life post-school with less supports; importance of inclusive school ethos

5	Cumming, Strnadova & Danker (2020) Australia	Parents & teachers from four primary and four high schools	21	8 Parents; 13 teachers ; 7 mothers & 1 father; one male teacher & 12 female teachers. Child diagnosis: 1 ID/ASD/ADHD/Epilepsy; 2 Down Syndrome; 1 ASD, 1 ASD/ADHD, 1 ASD/Global DD; 1 ASD/Mod-Sev ID, 1 motor skill delay/global skill delay	aimed to identify the transition programming practices for students with ASD & ID in mainstream inclusive schools in NSW Australia and how they align with best practice (Kohlers Taxonomy)	Two semi-structured interviews (one for parents; one for teachers) based on Kohlers Taxonomy with between 16-17 qts. Interviews lasted average 29minutes in person, phone or Skype.	inductive analysis for interviews and deductive analysis to answer the research question.	Most of the transition planning practices in the Taxonomy pillars were represented. However, one key pillar, Student focused development was absent with participants citing students not being present at IEP meetings in most cases. This also impacted on interagency collaboration as students were not involved. Transition assessment was not mentioned by participants while family engagement was noted as critical by teachers and parents. Both parents and teachers noted the need for funded supports access through a centralised system for identifying such students.
6	Beamish, Meadows and Davies (2012) Australia	Teachers and other influential staff in transition	104	65 teachers, 21 Head of Special Education services, 5 Principals, 6 School transition officers from 10 secondary schools, 42 special education units, 47 special schools and 6 across schools. 53 male, 51 female. 44% had a special education qualification	To benchmark the current practice of teachers and other influential staff involved in school to post school transition for students with ID, ASD and a dual diagnosis in state, independent or Catholic education sectors. RQ1 - To what extent did transition staff in Queensland agree that the transition practices drawn from Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming were indicators of program quality? RQ2 - To what extent did staff implement these transition practices?	Quantitative survey, online and paper based, in three parts - 1. Demographic data, 2. 46 practice items related to the 5 Kohler pillars using a 6 point Likert scale to indicate level of agreement, 3. Likert rating of which practices were implemented in their school. Some additional open ended questions at the end.	Quantitative - SPSS collapsing two lowest, middle and highest categories of agreement. Descriptive statistics	Overall, findings show that the Kohler Taxonomy is applicable to and valid in the Australian context in terms of quality indicators of transition practices. Family-School Relationships was rated as a strength with high agreement and high implementation but parental empowerment in decision making was less so. there were higher levels of agreement and low levels of implementation indicated in the five pillars, with the biggest discrepancy in Interagency Collaboration and Program Structure.
7	Strnadová, Cumming and Danker (2016) Australia	Carers and teachers of students with ID/ASD attending Special schools in New South Wales.	27	14 carers and 13 teachers ; Carers: 11 mothers, 2 fathers, 1 grandmother; 12 female, 2 male; average age 49.57yrs; children aged between 9-18yrs, 5 female, 9 male. Children had ID (5), ID & ASD (3), ID, ASD & Epilepsy (4), ID & Cerebral Palsy (1), ID, CP & Epilepsy (1). Teachers 9 female, 4 male; average age 39.77yrs, 10.15yrs average special ed teaching experience; 7 Bachelors, 5 Masters, 1 Diploma, 10 teachers trained in Special Education.	To investigate the experiences of parents and teachers with transitions for students with ID/ASD attending special schools, with a specific focus on the supports that both groups felt were needed in order for successful transition from primary to secondary and into post school.	A qualitative design using semi-structured interviews; a 17 qt interview for the parents and 16 qt interview for the teachers, including some demographic qtc. Interviews were held individually and lasted average 29minutes, via Skype, phone or in person. Participants were recruited from four randomly selected special schools in Sydney.	Content analysis	Overall key theme from teachers and parents was Transitions for students with ID/ASD - Primary to Secondary described as "seamless" within special schools, transition from special to mainstream not easy, with ambiguity of responsibility. Transition to Post school Life theme highlighted limited post school options; lack of information about the options; preparation of student which included life skills, community integration and work skills. However, teachers excluded students from IEP process due to the perceived nature of their ID
8	Davies and Beamish (2009) Australia	Parents of student with an ID, ASD or dual diagnosis who graduated within the previous 5 years from special schools, secondary schools, secondary education classes from government and non government sectors	218	N= 218 parents of 218 young adults (27% response rate); YAs 60%Male; 40%female, 72% ID, 13%ASD, 14% dual; 69% special school, 23% special class; 6% high school; 2% Independent/catholic, 70% living at home,	Study sought to better understand the actual experiences of families with a YA recently transitioned to post-school life and obtain in depth information and reflections from parents, in particular those with high support needs in Queensland AUS.	A paper based 50 qtn survey, with fixed response, Likert/yes/no qts and open ended. 3 sections; demographic data; parental comments on transition focused educational program for their YA; outcomes (post school activities; life satisfaction; post-school adjustments). 800 surveys issued - n=218 (27%).	Quant: SPSS, descriptive stats using frequency counts and percentages of responses undertaken. Qual: comments automatically analysed using Leximancer 2.2 in order to provide a framework. 2. Manual analysis of comments in order to extract real life transition experiences and outcomes.	1. Preparation for post-school life: Preparation for employment rated negatively (work experience not available to all); community activities, daily living and family involvement in transition planning were all rated positively and a high level of involvement on part of parent, but low levels of student involvement. 2. Post school outcomes for young adults and families: Almost a quarter had paid employment in 35 types of work; however even those in employment were heavily reliant on state disability pension as earnings were minimal. Most YA lived at home with parents or near parents. Most attended part time day programs, but lack of full time services available. Parents cited adjustments to family due to increased supervision, surrendering their own employment/career to look after child.

9	Almalki (2021) Saudi Arabia	teachers of students with ID in public high schools that only support students with ID in Saudi Arabia; no data on gender or age of participants	11	8 teachers had a Bachelors of Education, 3 had a Masters degree and had between 5-13 years experience.	"What issues and concerns prevent teachers of students with ID from delivering appropriate transition services to students with ID?" aimed to investigate issues and concerns related to TS for Saudi public high school students with ID.	Phenomenological approach - 1. observation of transition services for students with ID in 22 special education programs in researchers role as researcher but also as supervisor of pre-service teachers in their academic role. 2. Interviews	Thematic analysis using NVIVO 10 software	4 themes: Teacher Preparation Programs - no ITE transition prep classes - limited at Masters level and very limited access to CPD/workshops on transition; Transition Services Law - teachers had no specific knowledge of such laws, only that students need vocational training in final semester of school; Individualised Transition Plans - No teacher had written an ITP nor include transition goals in IEP, nor see the benefits due to lack of system support post school; Collaborative Practices - lack of connection between family, school. community. No autonomy of schools to set up business partnerships and only two companies involved in Government led partnership (Panda and McDonalds). Parents lack of aspiration of children an issue.
10	Kester, Flanagan & Stella (2021) USA	Youth/young adults with disabilities (aged 14-25); family members; transition stakeholders. Disability type intentionally not gathered; majority white middle class; then African American middle class and low SES; then Latin/Hispanic middle class and low SES; then Asian middle class.	503	Phase 1 - n =88 (40 youth/young adults with disabilities; 48 family members); Phase 2 - n=415 (79 youth/young adults with disabilities; 44 parents; 292 transition stakeholders) Stakeholders were secondary educators, higher education professionals, OT's, state ID program staff, job coaches, independent living staff, employers, Career teachers.	Employ Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) and qualitative methods with families, youth and stakeholders to co-define post school outcomes and the effective transition practices, programs and services that led to those outcomes. Aimed to co-create a framework that describes high quality transition. RQ1 - How do youth and young adults with disabilities and families describe their dreams & goals for a successful transition to life after high school? RQ2 - How do youth and young adults with disabilities, families and transition stakeholders across schools, agencies, and community partners describe successful practices, supports, services and programs for transition to adulthood?	Two phase qualitative study using Focus Groups for youth; family; stakeholders. FG's were facilitated by people trained by the university staff; youth from Pennsylvania Youth Leadership Network (aged 20-35 with a physical/psychosocial disability) facilitated the eight youth FG's; family members ran the eight family FG's in Phase 1 "Dreams and Goals". In Phase 2 "What's working", stakeholders from the university ran the stakeholder FG's and 6 regional FG's for each participant group were held.	Framework analysis method	RQ1 - 9 categories of high-quality transition identified: transition planning; youth development; person and family directed planning; family engagement; relationships; independent living and community engagement; cross-agency collaboration; employment; post-secondary education. RQ2 - 54 themes of Quality Sub indicators were identified. These 54 sub indicators from the 9 main themes, formed a Transition Discoveries Quality Indicator Framework. Lack of knowledge of transition practices, programs, services was a major theme. Knowledge of transition planning process, commonly available transition services/programs, and adult services were all significant themes.
11	Ellman, Sunday and Buchanan (2020) South Africa	Parents of a child (aged 18-35) with severe ID	5	3 mothers; 2 fathers, aged between 47-67; with a child with Severe ID that had attended a Special School; aged between 18-35 yrs.; had experienced transition; and the parent could communicate clearly in English or Afrikaans	Describe parents experiences of transition from special school to post-school of their child with Severe Intellectual Disability in a small town (150km from the nearest city) - describe parents personal responses linked to transition; describe the strategies parents used to cope with the transition; identify contextual factors that influenced their experience.	Qualitative descriptive study using in-depth semi-structured interviews; two key questions - Tell me about your experience with the transition of your child from school and what contexts or situations have influences or affected your experiences of transition for your child? Participants were interviewed individually, twice for approx. 45-60minutes.	Inductive analysis with a content analysis approach to develop themes and categories	Two themes and three subcategories in each: "It really hit us hard" - feeling uncertain and confused - managing without peer support - mixed feelings; Adjustment to post-transition life - setting up a routine - negotiating everyday occupations - accessing resources and a support system. Lack of communication from the school re transition; lack of knowledge about transition and limited post-school options locally were key features of the first sub category. Isolation and loneliness in navigating the transition was evident. Positive feelings were experienced but most were negative and attributed to the awareness of the lack of post-school options and the added carer responsibilities now that the child was at home. Parents felt unprepared and experienced stress, worry, anxiety and frustration.

12	Lo and Bui (2020) USA	25 parents (13 Chinese American; 12 Vietnamese American) of youth with disabilities (10 ASD; 15 ID) aged 14-21 attending special education classes in urban public schools in eastern USA	25	13 parents were non-English speaking; 10 limited English speaking; 2 fluent English speaking. Families were between 0 and 15 years in the USA. 20 mothers and 5 fathers participated	To investigate the experiences of Chinese and Vietnamese parents of youth with autism and intellectual disabilities towards transition planning. RQ1 - Which transition planning activities did schools discuss with Vietnamese and Chinese parents of youth with disabilities? RQ2 - Which transition planning activities did Vietnamese and Chinese parents of youth with disabilities perceive as important for schools to discuss with them? Did this perception vary by cultural subgroup? RQ3 - What experiences did Vietnamese and Chinese parents of youth with disabilities have regarding transition planning?	Quantitative and Qualitative data collection. Quantitative survey asking parents to indicate whether the school discussed the items with a Yes/no answer and rate the level of importance for schools to discuss the activities with them using the Likert scale (1-5 - not at all important - very important) of 18 transition planning activities. Qualitative open-ended interviews with each parent immediately after they completed the survey using 5 guiding questions. Interviews were conducted in preferred language and lasted 1-2 hrs.	Quantitative data was analysed using ANOVA. Qualitative data was analysed using open coding, axial coding and selective coding.	RQ1 - Transition planning activities - almost all parents felt it was crucial for schools to discuss all the transition planning activities with them, and specifically highlighted the importance of 10 of the 18 (items 1-7; 9-11). Qual findings: Four themes: Level of understanding of transition planning - parents overwhelmingly indicated that they were eager to be involved but lacked information with n=22 stating they didn't know what it was; communication between school and family - families felt that the school were not interested in dedicating time to speak to them re transition and the language barrier posed significant challenges; community support - majority sought community support but not always aware of what was available; expectations for school support and resources -all had concerns re care of the youth once the parents passed away .
13	Skilern and Carter (2021) USA	Latino parents of children with IDD aged between 14-22	6	First generation immigrant Latino parents of child with IDD between age of 14-22. 5 female and 1 male parent participated. Children aged from 14-18yrs, 6 were in high school, 1 in a higher ed programme. 1 child ID, 2 ASD, 2 ASD & ADHD, 1 Multiple Disability, 1 Cerebral Palsy and complex communication needs	Aimed to explore the perspectives of Latino immigrant parents of their child's transition to adulthood. RQ1 - How do parents characterize success for their child after graduation? RQ2 - What are the barriers to their child's successful transition? RQ3 - What recommendations do parents have for strengthening school and transition services?	Qualitative design, in-depth in-person interviews, five in English, 1 in Spanish, lasting approx. 1 hour. Participants received a gratuity and a list of transition services.	Constant comparison method; independent coding; open coding; axial coding.	RQ1 - Six indicators of success: obtaining employment; continued learning; forming relationships; moving out of family home; establishing independence skills; being involved in the community. RQ2- Barriers: Quality transition planning; utilizing varied support levels; ensuring adequate interpreter service. Three key findings: The success indicators showed parents had high aspirations for their children; barriers exist such as communication skills of child, language barrier, community exclusion and professional perspectives hindering success; Recommendations for improvements include parent advocacy, expanding adult programmes, increasing services and reducing segregated placements.
14	Raghavan, Pawson and Small (2013) England	Family carers of young people aged 14-22 with an ID	43	16 White British, 24 Pakistani, 2 Bangladeshi, 1 Black African family carers	Explore family carers' views and experiences on transition from school to college or to adult life and identify the impact of ethnicity on transition experiences.	Qualitative design, semi-structured interviews focusing on carers' perception of young person's social world and future options. Interviews were held in person, in English with the assistance of an interpreter where needed and lasted 1-2hrs. Interviews were held twice, one year apart and all interview themes remained the same for both. By the time of the second interview, 10 young people had transitioned from school and college.	Framework analysis	Six themes: Transition; formal support; family involvement, expectations and coping; culture, language and acculturation; religion; ethnicity and socio-economic status. Lack of adequate understanding of transition planning process, limited child engagement, lack of detailed and timely planning evident. Graduates waited months for placements, limited and inappropriate day care services. Carers and young persons aspirations did not match. Carers with English as additional language faced additional confusion and lack of awareness of options. Degree of ID dictated the placement. Families want a single point of contact to liaise and coordinate.
15	Wilcox, McQuay and Jones (2019) Canada	Mothers of students with ID who transitioned from high school within 1 year of the interview	2	Parents (only mothers responded) of children with ID who had just undergone transition. Students experienced primarily segregated learning when in school.	Investigate factors that contributed to mothers' perceptions of the process of supporting their child's transition from high school to adult life.	Exploratory Case study design informed by the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT) to help identify factors that supported and hindered the transition process. Semi-structured individual interviews	ECIT analysis steps taken to identify themes	Perceived supports: Parental advocacy, institutional supports, serendipity, placement fit and continuity of care. Perceived Hindrances: Burden of parental advocacy, poor communication, limited transition planning/program, poor placement fit, paperwork stress, system strain. Parents suggested supports: Better communication (including what is involved and where to get information), training and resources (for parents and staff), playful transitions (both for the new demands on the young person after they leave e.g. transport, and for the transition to the new setting itself (familiarization).

16	Cavendish, Connor, Olander and Hallaran (2020) USA	High school students with LD in receipt of special education	40	Students were in 10th (31%), 11th (31%), 12th(38%) grade; 48% male, 52% female; 55% Latino, 30% Black, 14% White, 2% Asian; All attended mainstream classes and availed of co-teaching or withdrawal resource teaching.	Examine high school students perspectives to inform change in practice to facilitate greater involvement of students in the transition process. RQ1 - What do high school students with disabilities identify as effective supports for their personal transition from high school?	Qualitative - Individual semi-structured interviews , lasting 45mins-1hr, on site in school. Interview guide adapted from Student Involvement Survey (SIS) and consisted of 16 open ended questions which specifically probed into student choice, involvement in IEP and transition planning.	Grounded theory - constant comparison method	Three themes identified: 1. Diploma options and choice, 2. Meaningful IEP/transition plan involvement, 3. Opportunities to explore transition domains of career and college preparation. Students generally were unaware of the types of diploma options available in their region and most expressed a desire for greater options. Most students were not meaningfully engaged in IEP/transition meetings or plan development and not aware of the transition section in their IEP. Career prep was limited and linked to in-class activities. Financial strain a factor in accessing college visits.
17	Strnadová, & Cumming (2014) Australia	Teachers/Principals in government primary and high schools with special education units	75	37 Primary respondents, 38 high school respondents; 23 male, 52 female; 20 classroom teachers, 1 itinerant support teacher, 64 executive staff (Principal), 1 acting head teacher; 36 primary support unit, 1 regular class; 35 secondary support unit, 2 regular class, 1 nonteaching principal.	Investigate the current state of transitions for students with developmental disabilities form government mainstream primary schools to secondary schools with a particular focus on home-school collaboration in New South Wales. RQ1 - What supports do teachers and schools provide to prepare students for transitions? RQ2 - What are teachers' perceptions for transitions? RQ3 - What are the teachers' perceptions in regard to home-school collaboration?	Qualitative survey consisting of 8 demographic qts, 5 open-ended qts, 4 of which were aimed to gather teachers experiences with facilitating successful transition from primary to secondary and from secondary to post school. The fifth qt was about collaboration between home and school. Paper based and online version used.	Inductive content analysis	Transition from primary to secondary supports included school visits and orientation but the practice varied in length of visits. Increased sharing of information was required. Post school transition supports included visiting work settings, and arranging work experience. Limited support for self-determination, independence and development of ITPs. More plentiful and better structured work placements were suggested as improvements alongside increased funding. No schools mentioned transition assessment, few mentioned a structured transition process and no school recognised students as primary stakeholders in the transition process.
18	McCall (2015) USA	Students that completed high school after 1997; had a diagnosed disability in high school or before; currently enrolled in college or university	4	2 female, 2 male. 2 White, 1 Asian with White family, 1 African American. Three had completed Bachelors degree; all had disclosed disability to college; three had IEPs, 1 had 504 plan; 1 blind, 1 hearing impaired, 1 ADHD, 1 LD.	Examine the experiences of successful college students with various disabilities to document how they drew on resources in their pre-college lives in navigating the demands of college. RQ1 - How do successful college students with disabilities describe their transition to college? RQ2 - What formal and informal transition supports and resources did they receive? RQ3 - How did they draw on those supports in college?	Phenomenological interviewing - 3 participants had three in-depth interviews over 15mths, lasting 60-90mins. 1 participant was interviewed twice for 90mins. First interview unstructured with open ended qts. Later interview qts were linked to prior responses and linked to Kohlers Taxonomy domains and other supports experienced.	Phenomenological approach, with open coding and then analytic induction.	Three themes: 1. Planned and coordinated transition programming 2. Informal supports and resources, 3. College practices. Only 1 student experienced formal student development; all were involved in student focused planning but participation varied, with 1 experiencing student led IEPs. Common factors in successful transition included self-advocacy skills, inclusive education and supportive family. Reliance on informal supports for 3 of 4 students (family, community, extra-curricular). Parents were strong advocates and had high expectations of students.
19	Mogensen, Drake, McDonald and Sharp (2022) Australia	young people with ID aged between 18-25	27	15 female, 12 male; aged 19-33; Mild or moderate ID; 20 lived at home, 2 with other family, 2 in group homes, 2 on own, 1 no stable accommodation.	Explore young people's experiences of transition and post-school options and whether experiences were influenced by the "choice and control" impetus in current disability policy in Australia.	A co-designed qualitative multi-stage mixed methods design, using surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Codesigned with an Advisory panel of 5 young people with ID aged 18-25. 6 individual interviews, 2 FGs, 8 survey responses. Interviews were in person and some had accompanying adults (parent or support worker) in attendance.	Reflexive thematic analysis	1 overarching theme - Searching for meaning and purpose: Most felt they had not reached a purposeful destination and stuck in a perpetual state of transition with services. 3 Subthemes - 1. Transition planning; policy vs reality - lack of choice, autonomy and control in planning; limited opportunities for employment 2. Experiences of Freedom and Loss - some enjoyed the freedom from school constraints, most felt lost and struggled with loss of and gaining new friendships 3. Navigating Adult roles and responsibilities - parental advocacy to access funds and services necessary, tension of still living at home, longing for intimate relationships and own family
20	O'Brien et al. (2011) Ireland	Student with ID aged 16-18 leaving Post Primary/Special Schools in Ireland, parents/carers, school staff	(Phase 1 - 74 Phase 2 - 310) 384	37 students with ID (22male;15female); 17 parents/carers; 20 teachers; 310 relevant transition staff from 223 mainstream; 32 mainstream schools with special classes; 55 special schools	to identify existing practices for preparing student with ID between ages of 16-18 for transition from post-primary to post school settings	Mixed method - focus groups in Phase 1; national survey in Phase 2	Thematic analysis of qual comments, followed by an expert panel verification of themes; SPSS for the 7 quantitative survey questions	Eight key findings: 1. students not familiar with transition concept with limited transition planning in place; 2. Transition planning occurring in final 2 years but planning "ad-hoc"; 3. Guidance, work experience and visits most common practices; 4. Post school options were commonly NLN, FETAC, 3rd level - very few access employment; 5. Student held employment aspirations but unfamiliar with transition concepts; 6. Lack of resources, funding, staffing, SEN training and guidance were main barriers; 7. Students should have an IEP and staff require more training; 8. interagency links would be a support

## Step Five. Collate, summarise, report

### Geographic location

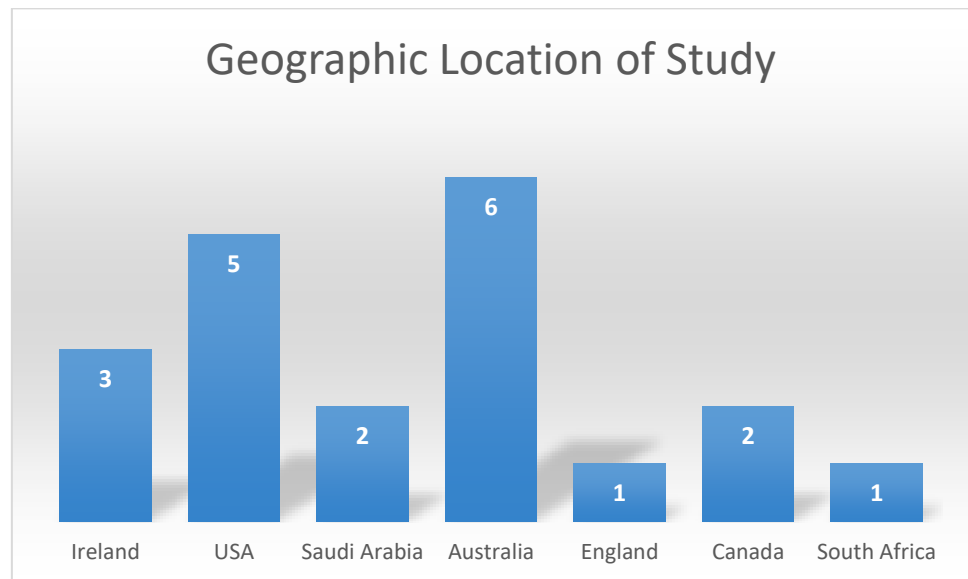


Figure 4 - Geographic Location

Figure four illustrates that the majority of studies were based in Australia and North America, with six in Australia (Beamish et al., 2012; Cumming et al., 2020; Davies & Beamish, 2009; Mogensen et al., 2022; Strnadová et al., 2016; Strnadová & Cumming, 2014), five in the USA (Cavendish et al., 2020; Kester et al., 2022; Lo & Bui, 2020; McCall, 2015; Skillern & Carter, 2021) and two in Canada (Fullarton & Duquette, 2015; Wilcox et al., 2019). A smaller number of studies represented Europe, Asia and Africa with three in Ireland (Banks et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2011; Scanlon & Doyle, 2021), two in Saudi Arabia (Almalki, 2021; Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021), one in England (Raghavan et al., 2013) and one in South Africa (Ellman et al., 2020).

### Year of publication

Most of the studies were published between 2020-2022, with eleven of the twenty published in those years. This represents a global shift in progressing inclusive education and employment for people with disabilities in legislation and policy at an international and national level (UNCRPD, 2006; Union of Equality, 2021-2030). The subsequent increase in research conducted on transition planning and transition experiences is demonstrated by the upward trend (Figure 5).

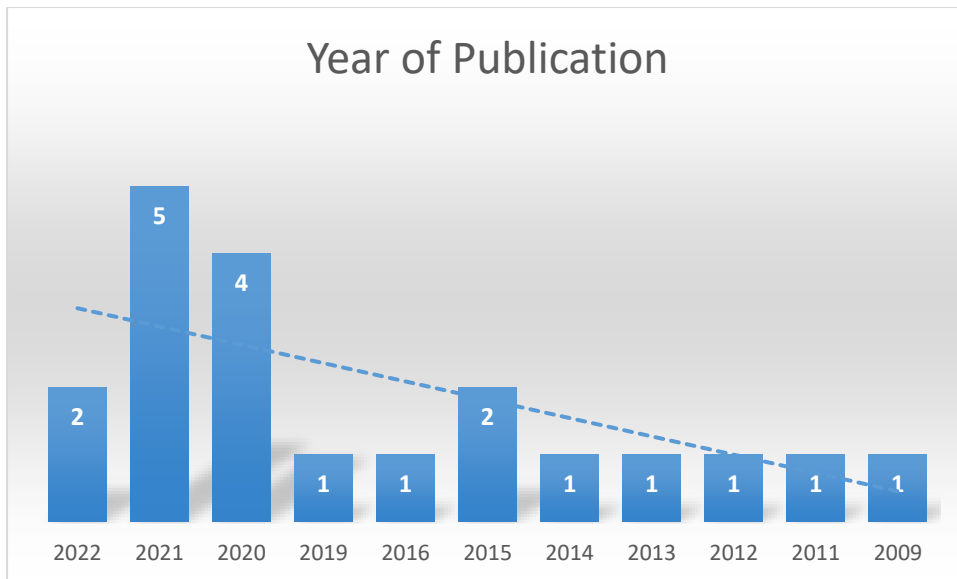


Figure 5 - Year of Publication

### Study participants

As this scoping review included articles that captured the experiences of multiple stakeholders involved in the post-school transition process, the study participants varied (Figure 6). Some studies were multi-informant employing a variety of stakeholder perspectives while others focused solely on one key stakeholder. The majority of studies captured the voice of the parent/carer exclusively (n=6) (Davies & Beamish, 2009; Ellman et al., 2020; Lo & Bui, 2020; Raghavan et al., 2013; Skillern & Carter, 2021; Wilcox et al., 2019). Three studies exclusively captured the voice of the student (Cavendish et al., 2020; McCall, 2015; Mogensen et al., 2022). Only two studies engaged teachers as the sole participants (Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021; Almalki, 2021). The remainder of the studies were multi-informant, employing a combination of young person and their family (Fullarton & Duquette, 2015), parent/carer and a teacher (Cumming et al., 2020; Strnadová et al., 2016), multiple school staff (Banks et al., 2022; Beamish et al., 2012; Strnadová & Cumming, 2014) and three studies captured the perspectives of the young person, their family and their relevant transition stakeholders (Kester et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2011; Scanlon & Doyle, 2021).

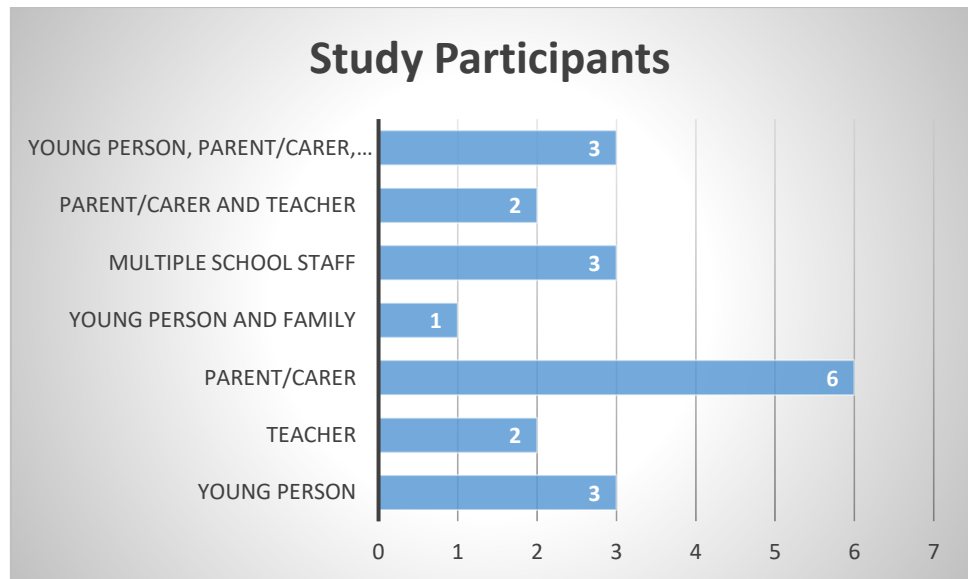


Figure 6 - Study Participants

#### Number of study participants

A total of 1781 participants were included in the twenty studies, with the smallest number of participants being two and the largest number of participants being 503 (Figure 7). Four studies had less than ten participants (Ellman et al., 2020; McCall, 2015; Skillern & Carter, 2021; Wilcox et al., 2019); six had between 11-30 participants (Almalki, 2021; Cumming et al., 2020; Fullarton & Duquette, 2015; Lo and Bui, 2020; Mogensen et al., 2022; Strnadová et al., 2016). Five had between 50-75 participants (Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021; Cavendish et al., 2020; Raghavan et al., 2013; Scanlon & Doyle, 2021; Strnadová & Cumming, 2014); three had between 100-220 participants (Banks et al., 2022; Beamish et al., 2012; Davies & Beamish, 2009), one had over 300 participants (O'Brien et al., 2011) and only one had greater than 500 participants (Kester et al., 2022).

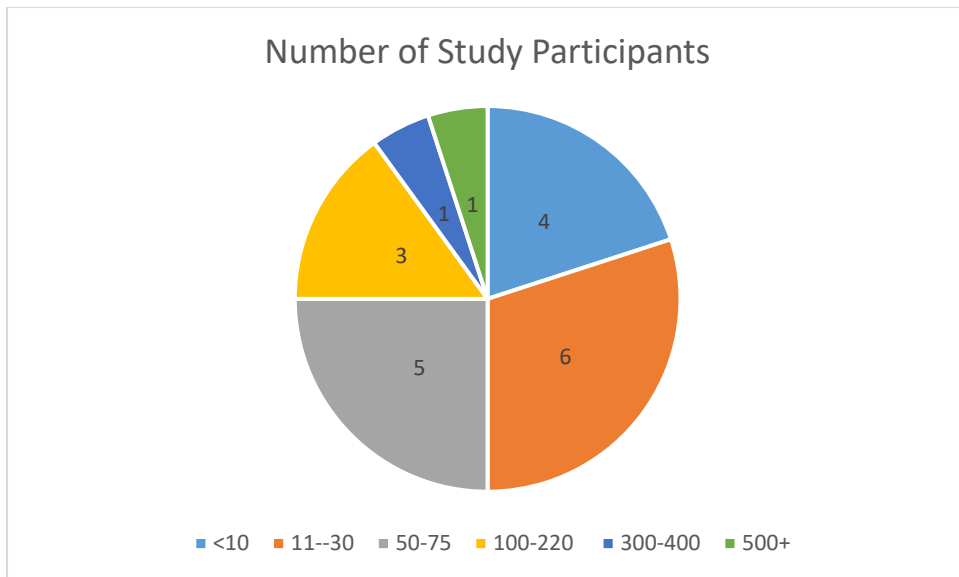


Figure 7 - Number of Study Participants

### Participant gender

Eight studies did not report gender of the participants or did not report gender for all categories of participants in the study. One study reported gender for only one of the two phases of the study (O'Brien et al., 2011). Of the twelve studies that did indicate gender, there were a total of 223 male and 273 female participants (Figure 8). More female than male respondents were noted in the transition stakeholders, parent/carer and marginally so for the young person categories with more male than female in the teacher category of respondent. It was noted in one study (Wilcox et al., 2019) that while parents were invited to respond, only mothers did in that case. Overall, only one study had higher response rate from males than females and this was in the Saudi Arabia study of special education teachers in middle and high schools (Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021).

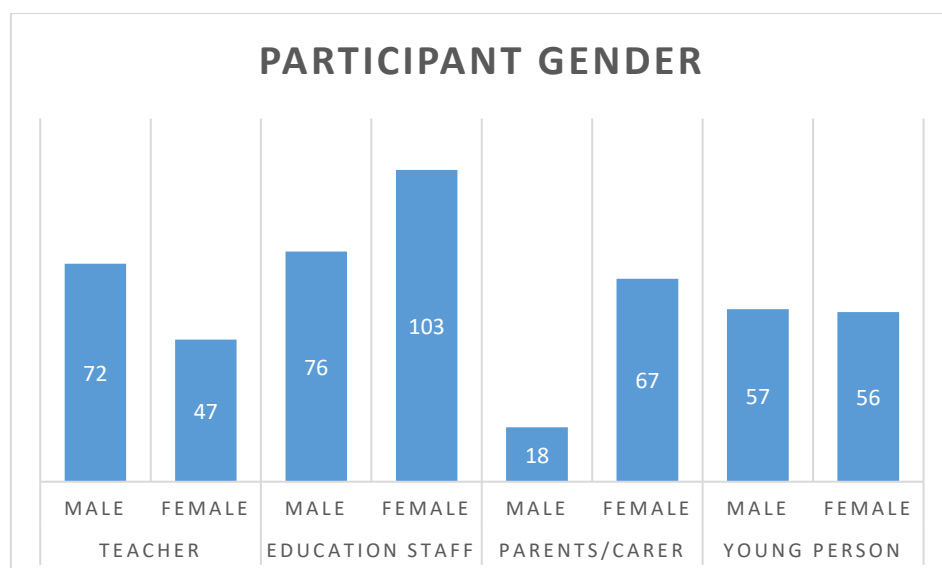


Figure 8 - Participant Gender

### Characteristics of the young person

In the seven studies that included the voice of the young person, their disability was indicated in six of the seven studies, however the level of detail varied. The types of disabilities were predominantly learning/intellectual disabilities (Table 6).

Table 6 - Reported Disability

Study Number	Reported Disability
Study 1	Intellectual Disabilities
Study 3	Learning disabilities; auditory processing difficulty; non-verbal learning disabilities and giftedness; learning disabilities and mental health difficulties
Study 10	Not reported for respondents but the members of study advisory board included the following: Autism, Down Syndrome, Physical Disability, Developmental disability
Study 16	Learning Disabilities
Study 18	Visual impairment, hearing impairment, ADHD, learning disabilities
Study 19	Mild to moderate learning disabilities
Study 20	Mild to moderate learning disabilities

Of the studies that reported the voice of the parent, the profiles indicated that their children had the following diagnoses: Intellectual disability (Mild-Severe), Autism, ADHD, Epilepsy, Global Developmental Delay, Global skill delay, cerebral palsy, complex communication needs, multiple disabilities. One study intentionally did not gather information on disability category (Kester et al., 2022)

**Age profile of young person reporting or being reported on:**

Of the seven studies that directly included the voice of the young person, the age ranges of participants were between 14 – 25 with two studies not reporting the participant ages. However, of these two studies, one study (Cavendish et al., 2020) participants were in 10<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade and in the second study (McCall, 2015) participants were currently enrolled in college or university, which implies they are also with the 14-25 age category (Table 7).

Of the ten studies that included the voice of the parent, the participants' children with SEND in eight of the studies were between the ages of 9-35, and two further studies indicated that the children had graduated within the previous five years (Davies & Beamish, 2009) or transitioned within one year of the interview taking place (Wilcox et al., 2019) (Table 8).

*Table 7 - Age of Young Person as Reported by the Individual*

<b>Study Number</b>	<b>Reported Age Range</b>
<b>Study 1</b>	16-25
<b>Study 3</b>	16-22
<b>Study 10</b>	14-25
<b>Study 19</b>	18-25
<b>Study 20</b>	15-19

*Table 8 - Age of Young Person as Reported by a Parent*

<b>Study Number</b>	<b>Reported Age Range by Parent</b>
<b>Study 3</b>	16-22
<b>Study 7</b>	9-18
<b>Study 10</b>	14-25
<b>Study 11</b>	18-35
<b>Study 12</b>	14-21
<b>Study 13</b>	14-22
<b>Study 14</b>	14-22

### Educational settings

All twenty studies reported on transition from compulsory education settings, as stipulated in the inclusion criteria (Figure 9). Three studies did not report specific details of the settings, but the research was related to post-school transition (Fullarton & Duquette, 2015; Mogensen et al., 2022; Raghavan et al., 2013).

Four studies reported on transition from high school (Almalki, 2021; Cumming et al., 2020; Cavendish et al., 2020; Wilcox et al., 2019) which was the more widely used term for adolescent education. Four additional studies referred to secondary school; one special class in a secondary school (Lo & Bui, 2020), one in mainstream secondary education (Banks et al., 2022), two studies reporting on participants from secondary and higher education settings (Kester et al., 2022; Skillern & Cater, 2021).

Three studies focused on transition from special schools (Ellman et al., 2020; Scanlon & Doyle, 2021; Strnadová et al., 2016) with the remainder of the studies reporting on views of participants in primary and high school with special classes (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014), middle and high school settings (Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021), higher education settings (McCall, 2015) and participants from multiple settings (Beamish et al, 2012; Davies & Beamish, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2011).

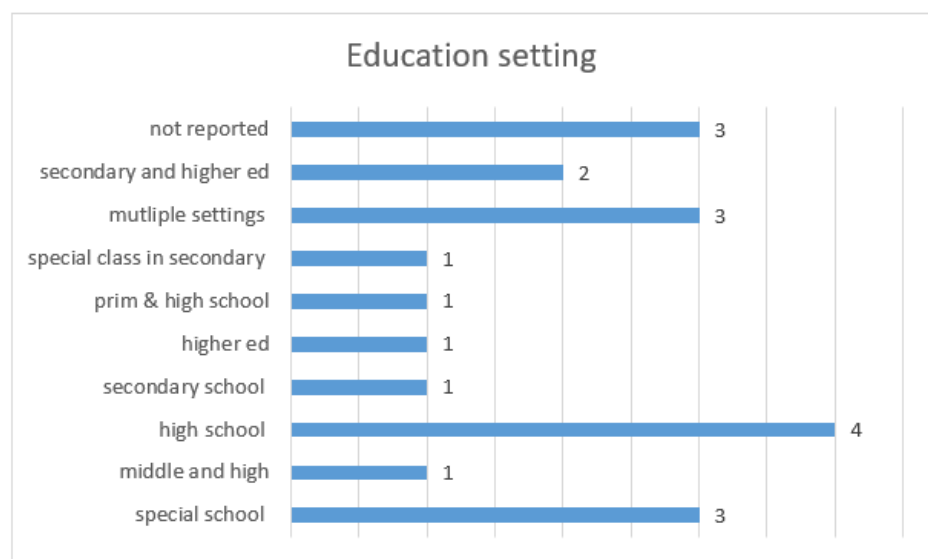


Figure 9 - Education Setting

### Teachers and educational stakeholders

Of the nine studies that captured the voice of the teacher or other educational stakeholders, one study reported on teachers/stakeholders from secondary school (Banks et al., 2022), two from primary and high schools (Strnadová et al., 2020; Strnadová & Cumming, 2014), three studies reported on high school staff (Almalki, 2021), special school staff (Strnadová et al., 2016), middle and high school staff (Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021), and three studies recorded views of stakeholders across multiple settings (Beamish et al., 2021; Kester et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2011).

Of those nine studies, four reported on the teachers' levels of qualification, with qualifications ranging from Bachelor of Education, Special Education diplomas, Masters degrees in Special Education and PhDs in a relevant discipline (Almalki, 2021; Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021; Beamish et al., 2012; Strnadová et al., 2016).

### Research aims

As per the inclusion criteria, the research aims of the articles needed to capture stakeholder views or experiences, transition practices, processes or programmes, or facilitators and barriers to post-school transition. Seven articles had as a primary aim, to examine or capture the views and/or experiences of a stakeholder towards transition/transition planning, either before, during or after the transition had taken place (Davies & Beamish, 2009; Ellman et al., 2020; Lo & Bui, 2020; McCall, 2015; Mogensen et al., 2022; Raghavan et al., 2013; Strnadová et al., 2016). An additional four studies examined perspectives and perceptions of transition from the point of view of students themselves (Cavendish et al., 2020), students and their families and the interplay between home and school (Fullarton & Duquette, 2015), the views of the mother in supporting the child through the transition (Wilcox et al., 2019) and from the point of view of immigrant Latino parents of transition to adulthood, including what characterised success for their child (Skillern & Carter, 2021).

Six studies examined transition practices, programmes or supports. Two of these examined the schools transition programme practices and the extent to which they aligned with Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming (Kohler et al., 2016) (Beamish et al., 2012; Cumming et al., 2020). Two explored the current state of transition supports provided, one specifically focusing on links developed with business to facilitate post-school pathways (Almalky &

Alqahtani, 2021) and one focusing on supports provided to students and the teachers perceptions on the transition process with specific regard to home school collaboration (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014). A third study explored the typical transition support and guidance provided to students with intellectual disabilities in a mainstream school (Banks et al., 2022) with one final study aiming to identify practices for preparing students in mainstream, special classes and special schools to post-school settings (O'Brien et al., 2011).

One study examined the issues and concerns that prevented the delivery of appropriate transition services to young people with disabilities in public high schools (Almalki, 2021). One study evaluated the implementation of a supported model of transition on students' sense of self-determination, self-awareness and autonomy in decision making for PSOs (Scanlon & Doyle, 2021). One study aimed to co-create a framework that described high quality transition through co-defining PSOs, and the transition practices and processes that resulted in successful outcomes (Kester et al., 2022).

### Methodology

The twenty studies employed a range of methodologies including qualitative, case studies, quantitative, mixed method, phenomenological and participatory. Three studies employed a mixed method approach of quantitative surveys followed by qualitative interviews (Banks et al., 2022; Lo & Bui, 2020) and focus groups followed by a quantitative survey (O'Brien et al., 2011). Three studies used a purely quantitative method, using a predominantly quantitative survey of Likert and yes/no questions with some open-ended responses taken (Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021; Beamish et al., 2012; Davies and Beamish, 2009).

Fourteen studies were qualitative in nature, seven employing semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Cavendish et al., 2020; Cumming et al., 2020; Ellman et al., 2020; Raghavan et al., 2013; Skillern & Carter, 2021; Strnadová et al., 2016; Strnadová & Cumming, 2014). Two studies employed a qualitative case study approach (Fullarton & Duquette, 2015; Wilcox et al., 2019) with a further three utilising a phenomenological approach (Almalki, 2021; McCall, 2015; Scanlon & Doyle, 2021).

Only two of the fourteen qualitative studies employed a participatory method. Mogensen et al. (2022) co-designed their research with an advisory panel of five young people with intellectual disabilities and used a qualitative multi-stage study utilising survey, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with young people aged 18-25. A second study (Kester et al., 2022) used a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) approach with families, young people, and transition stakeholders to co-define post-school outcomes and effective transition practices through a two-stage process using focus groups.

### Data analysis

The twenty studies in this review utilised a variety of analysis methods, depending on the design of their research study. Three studies used different analysis for each phase of the data as they employed mixed methods (O'Brien et al., 2011; Lou & Bui, 2020; Davies & Beamish, 2009) and a further two studies solely used SPSS (Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021; Beamish et al., 2012). Six studies used a combination of inductive, deductive, and content analysis (Cumming et al., 2020; Ellman et al., 2020; Fullarton & Duquette, 2015; McCall, 2015; Strnadová et al., 2016; Strnadová & Cumming, 2014). Three studies used framework analysis for their qualitative data (Banks et al., 2022; Kester et al., 2022; Raghavan et al., 2013). A further three studies employed thematic/reflexive thematic analysis (Almalky, 2021; Mogensen et al., 2022; Scanlon & Doyle, 2021). Two studies used constant comparison (Skillern & Carter, 2021) with Cavendish et al. (2020) utilising constant comparison with grounded theory. One study used an Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT) to identify themes (Wilcox et al., 2019).

### Key Findings

Using a thematic approach, the key findings of the twenty articles were handwritten onto a large flipchart page, with data being taken from the data extraction table. It was then manually organised into themes, using colour coding and post-it notes to organise the findings of each study. Initially seven themes were identified. Following an iterative process, this was refined to four main themes, with eight subthemes, represented in Image 1. The four main themes are Transition Planning and Practices; Collaboration; Post-school

Options and Aspirations and Outcomes. Five subthemes were identified. Three subthemes within Transition planning and practices were: quality transition planning; evidence of transition planning; transition related activities. Two subthemes were identified within Aspirations and Outcomes: alignment of aspirations; reality of post-school outcomes (Figure 10).

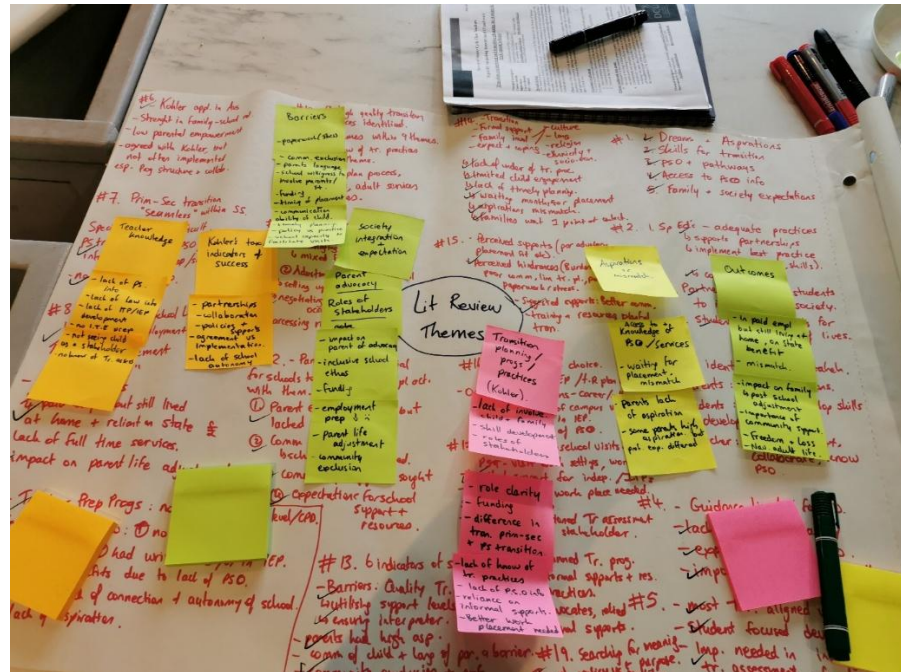


Image 1 - Literature Review Analysis

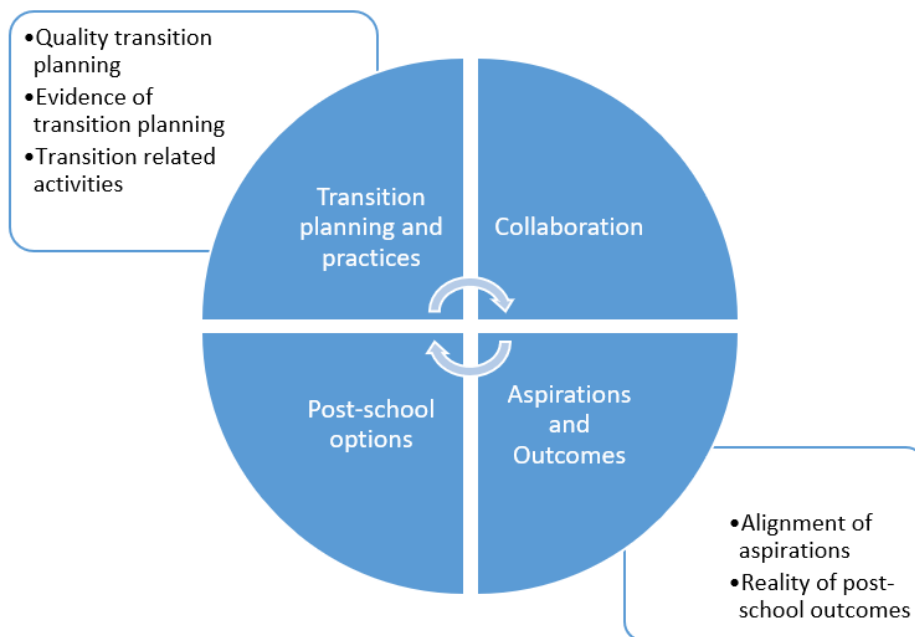


Figure 10 - Overview of Literature Review Themes

### *Transition planning and practices*

Eighteen of the twenty studies referenced transition planning, transition practices or transition programmes (Almalki, 2021; Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021; Banks et al., 2022; Cavendish et al., 2020; Cumming et al., 2020; Beamish et al., 2012; Davies & Beamish, 2009; Fullarton & Duquette, 2015; Kester et al., 2021; McCall, 2015; Mogensen et al., 2022; O’Brien et al., 2011; Raghavan et al., 2013; Scanlon & Doyle, 2021; Skillern & Carter, 2021; Strnadová et al., 2016; Strnadová & Cumming, 2014; Wilcox et al., 2019).

### *Quality transition planning*

Three studies explored quality indicators of successful transition planning, processes or programmes for young people with disabilities. Two of the studies measured transition practices within school settings against Kohler’s Taxonomy of Transition Programming 2.0 (2016) (Beamish et al., 2012; Cumming et al., 2020). Beamish et al. (2012) employed Kohler’s five pillars of transition programming; family engagement; program structures; interagency collaboration; student development; student-focused planning to establish if transition staff agreed that Kohler’s Taxonomy (2016) were indicators of program quality, and if so what level of implementation was evident in their settings. Overall, there was high levels of agreement that the Taxonomy was applicable in their context (Australia) and that there was overall high levels of

agreement with each pillar, with lower levels of implementation, with the most notable discrepancies between agreement and implementation in interagency collaboration and program structure.

Similarly, the Cumming et al. (2020) research, also conducted in Australia, examined transition practices in eight school settings and considered how they aligned with Kohler's five pillars. They found that four of the five pillars were evident, however, student focused planning was absent as students were not included in transition related or individual planning meetings. Assessment was also absent within the student development pillar.

Employing a similar approach, Kester et al. (2022) aimed to co-define post-school outcomes and identify the specific transition practices, programmes and services that were most effective in meeting those post-school outcomes. Through their findings, they created a Transition Discoveries Quality Indicator Framework which identified nine key categories of high-quality transition with a further 54 quality sub-indicators; transition planning; youth development; person and family directed planning; family engagement; relationships; independent living and community engagement; cross agency collaboration; employment; post-secondary education. Overall, there was clear overlap in the quality indicators observed in their research to Kohler's Taxonomy (2016) with eight of the categories observed within Kohler's Taxonomy (2016) main headings or sub-headings except for post-secondary education which was not observed in the taxonomy.

The effectiveness of the use of a supported transition programme with students in a special school found that it provided young people with access to information on a range of PSOs and increased their confidence, hard and soft skills (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018). It demonstrated that supported transition activities can lead to more positive post-school outcomes when examined from a person-centred programme.

#### Evidence of transition planning

Another issue that emerged in the literature was the lack of use of Individual Education Plans or Individual Transition Plans by schools and therefore was an ad-hoc nature of transition planning. For teachers in Saudi Arabia, participants

had no knowledge of specific transition related legislation, and no teacher had written an ITP or included transition related goals in the students' IEP (Almalky, 2021). Additionally, they did not see the value in doing so due to the lack of system level transition supports for life post-school for their students.

In research capturing the voice of family carers/parents, there was generally a sense of dissatisfaction with the transition planning process. Parents felt that they were not meaningfully included in the process (Ellman et al., 2020; Lo and Bui, 2020) or that the transition plans were limited, therefore hindering their child's access and progression into adult life (Wilcox et al., 2019; Raghavan et al., 2013). Interestingly, other research shows parents did not recall collaborating with teachers to create formal transition plans and instead, took the initiative to develop informal transition plans with their adolescent children with learning disabilities (Fullarton & Duquette, 2015).

One study described the ad-hoc nature of transition planning and that there was no evidence of a standardised transition programme or planning system across schools in Ireland (O'Brien et al., 2011). They found that only 4% of mainstream schools had developed specific transition plans while 86% of special schools reported developing such plans. The plans ranged from fully developed programmes for students to one off meetings and visits to post-school settings. Mirroring these findings, a second Irish study showed that while transition planning was robust for those in the mainstream, such planning and guidance for students with intellectual disabilities attending mainstream schools was inadequate, citing a lack of clarity of which staff member was responsible for creating these plans (Banks et al., 2022).

The timing of the transition planning was also noted in the research with parents stating that if it occurred at all, it was right before the transition (Raghavan et al., 2013). Parents in an Irish study stated that while it occurred typically in the final two years, they had been thinking about it well in advance of this (O'Brien et al., 2011).

Another study indicated that while there was transition plans created for young people with intellectual disabilities, there was a significant difference between having a plan and the implementation of the plan in reality (Mogensen et al., 2022). They cited the lack of choice, autonomy or control in the planning process

with assumptions being made by staff members about future life directions. They also described how the plan that was in place did not assist them in working towards their goals or developing desired skillsets. Contrastingly, teachers in Saudi Arabia believed their schools demonstrated best practice in transition specifically in planning, assessment and developed partnerships with businesses in order to facilitate transition to employment for their students with disabilities (Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021).

#### Transition related activities

While transition plans or transition related goals within individual education plans was not common practice in the literature reviewed, many of the articles described transition related activities that occurred within the school settings. These ranged from activities to foster independence and functional living skills to activities to support the student in making the final transition to the post-school setting.

Evident in much of the research were work placements or work experiences, situated either within the community or within the school itself. Beamish and Davies (2009) reported that two thirds of students accessed work experience, however lower levels were observed in those attending special schools than mainstream schools or mainstream schools with special education units. They also noted high levels of community preparation activities and daily living activities.

The contrast between work experience availability to students with SEND in mainstream schools versus special schools was also noted in the Irish context (O'Brien et al., 2011). They observed that while career guidance and work experience was the most prevalent forms of post-school preparation in mainstream, it was seldom observed in special schools, with visits to potential post-school settings being the dominant activity.

Other literature demonstrated that daily living skills and work-related skills were noted by all participating teachers and some parents as common practice (Strnadová et al., 2016). Transition assessment, skill development in personal, social, academic and other areas were all noted as having high levels of implementation by special education teachers. Combined with work specific skill development such as work training, internships, work experience,

volunteering and career exposure, these practices led teachers to report that they demonstrate best practice in transition preparation and transition planning to support students in gaining post-school employment (Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021).

This focus on preparation for employment was also very evident where students with developmental disabilities had many opportunities to gain work experience, with some participants explaining that many students receive one day per week over a three-year period prior to transition. This work experience was supplemented with development of functional academic skills, social and practical skills (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014).

Students in another study reported knowledge of school organised career exploration activities involving pre-arranged visits to colleges. However, they often did not access them as they felt they were for “upperclassmen” and either didn’t attend or were not invited. Yet the students rated in-class preparation activities and availability of internships highly in supporting career development and exploration (Cavendish et al., 2019, p.355).

### *Collaboration*

Sixteen of the twenty studies referenced collaboration (Scanlon & Doyle, 2021; Almalki, 2021; Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021; Banks et al., 2022; Beamish et al., 2012; Cavendish et al., 2020; Cumming et al., 2020; Davies and Beamish, 2009; Fullarton & Duquette, 2015; Lo and Bui, 2020; O’Brien et al., 2011; Raghavan et al., 2013; Skillern & Carter, 2021; Strnadová et al., 2016; Strnadová & Cumming, 2014; Wilcox et al., 2019).

Within the theme of collaboration, the inclusion of the student and parent voice in the process was noted in the literature, as well as barriers to effective collaboration. The value of collaboration was observed in many of the studies with the articles describing some highly effective collaborative practices, while others identified significant gaps in collaborating with the various stakeholders in the transition process. Key stakeholders identified in the literature were students, parents, teachers and other professionals, community and business representatives.

Identified barriers to effective engagement of stakeholders included parents of young people with SEND that had English as an additional language. In a study

carried out in the USA, Chinese and Vietnamese parents felt that the school expressed no desire nor displayed an effort to overcome any potential language barriers to meaningfully include parents in the transition planning process (Lou & Bui, 2020). Language barriers were also noted by Raghavan et al. in their 2013 research of Pakistani, Black African and Bangladeshi families as a limitation of effective home-school collaboration and in research of Latino families' experiences of transition by Skillern and Carter (2021). Ellman et al. (2020) also found that parents expressed a lack of communication from the school in the process.

Despite this, much of the research confirmed that family engagement and collaboration was essential to successful transition planning. Participants in Kester et al. (2022) identified family engagement and cross-agency collaboration as a high-quality indicator, while Beamish et al. (2012) research showed high levels of agreement and high levels of implementation of Family-School Relationships within Kohler's Taxonomy (2016), yet high levels of agreement with lower levels of implementation of interagency -collaboration. Community links and collaborations were cited as an indicator of strength by Almalky and Alqahtani (2021) in their study of business partnerships for students with SEND, with Almalki (2021) noting that the lack of connection between family, school and community was a barrier in their study of students with intellectual disabilities.

A recurring feature of the literature was the lack of value placed on the role of the student in their transition planning process. Many studies cited that students, and in some cases parents, were not involved in their Individual Education Plan/Individual Transition Plan meetings or processes (Cumming et al., 2020; Fullarton & Duquette, 2015; Raghavan et al., 2013; Strnadová et al., 2016). O'Brien et al. (2011) indicated that neither parents nor students reported having been involved in preparing an ITP and that student involvement generally was extremely lacking. Strnadová et al. (2016) stated that teachers excluded students from transition meetings due to the perceived nature of their intellectual disability. Their 2020 research highlighted that while family engagement was critical to successful transitions, students were not present in IEP meetings in most cases.

In the articles where students were invited to partake in the process, it appears students were passive participants in most cases. Students in Cavendish et al. (2020) research outlined how they were present at the meetings but expressed a feeling of being “talked to” rather than having their goals and ideas meaningfully included (p.354). McCall (2015) also found that participants in the study had varying degrees of involvement from leading meetings to being passive observers, with students not making any substantive contributions. Davies and Beamish (2009) noted a high level of involvement of the parents in their study but a lower level of involvement by students.

### *Aspirations and outcomes*

Thirteen of the twenty studies referred to aspirations and outcomes for life post-school (Almalki, 2021; Banks et al., 2022; Beamish et al. 2012; Davies & Beamish, 2009; Ellman et al., 2020; Fullarton & Duquette, 2015; McCall, 2015; Mogensen et al., 2022; O’Brien et al., 2011; Raghavan et al., 2013; Scanlon & Doyle, 2021; Skillern and Carter, 2021; Wilcox et al., 2019).

### *Alignment of aspirations*

Much of the literature identified the aspirations held for life post-school by the students and their families. However, in many cases, a mismatch of aspirations was observed between the parent and the student. Studies where high parental expectations were found for the student with SEND primarily viewed it as a predictor or contributor to successful post-school outcomes. McCall (2015) observed that for students that had successfully transitioned to college in the USA, parent advocacy and high expectations of the individual were contributing factors. Similarly, Fullarton and Duquette (2015) identified that a key role of parents as stakeholders in transition is to set high expectations, with them often setting expectations of careers mirroring their own. Students’ aspirations reflecting their strengths and interests was apparent in research by Scanlon and Doyle (2021) where students understood the value of planning, accessing further education and training along with work experience.

High aspirations for their children were observed for Latino parents of children with SEND, however, community exclusion and low aspirations and perspectives in terms of continuous skill acquisition and development held by supporting professionals was seen to be a barrier (Skillern & Carter, 2021). Examples of low levels of parent aspirations or a mismatch of aspirations were observed by

Almalki (2021), Raghavan et al. (2013) and Banks et al. (2022) where high expectations had to be balanced with the lower levels of support that would be available to students in future settings. In the study by O'Brien et al. (2011), the mismatch was described as between the students' aspirations and the "reality of the limited post-school options available" (p.132).

#### Reality of post-school outcomes

Contrastingly to those holding pre-transition aspirations, individuals and their families that had already experienced post-school transition, reflected upon the real-life challenges that remained. Students that had transitioned into further education explained how fearful they were when undergoing the transition into the unfamiliar setting of further education and stated that the support of the Careers Employment Facilitator, as utilised in that study, would be essential in making a successful transition (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018). Young people in the Mogensen et al. (2022) study who had made the post-school transition described how they were still searching for meaning and purpose, having not fully reached their post-school destination. They describe the challenges presented by experiencing new roles of navigating adult life, responsibilities and dealing with the new sense of freedom, while acknowledging the loss of the familiarity they once had. They also described the tensions of wanting independence and a life beyond their parent's home and the desire to have an intimate relationship, with the reality of being reliant upon continued parental advocacy to access services and funds.

Similarly, other research illustrated that despite almost one quarter of the young people in paid employment, they were still heavily reliant on supplementary income from the Government as earnings were minimal (Davies & Beamish, 2009). Combined with this, many were still living at home with parents or nearby in supported living. They noted that the transition from compulsory education brought a new phase in the life of the family, requiring a new structure to their own employment and weekly/daily life schedule. This adjustment and restructuring of family life was also noted by Ellman et al. (2020) where parents described the transition as "it hit us really hard", reflecting the lack of post-school services available in their rural town and the new caring responsibilities that they now faced (p.4). Raghavan et al. (2013) also describe how young people with an ID waited months for a post-school placement, with

often limited and inappropriate day care options the only service available. This poor placement fit was also documented by Wilcox et al. (2019) with mothers of students with intellectual disabilities that had recently transitioned.

### *Post-school options*

Ten of the twenty studies referenced post-school options (Almalki, 2021; Banks et al., 2022; Cavendish et al., 2020; Fullarton & Duquette, 2015; Kester et al., 2022; Lo & Bui, 2020; O'Brien et al., 2011; Scanlon & Doyle, 2021; Strnadová et al., 2016; Strnadová & Cumming, 2014).

The first subtheme that featured frequently was the lack of knowledge of PSOs on the part of the school staff, parents, and students. The studies demonstrated a similar pattern of lack of awareness of the options available and a lack of knowledge of how to access information regarding PSOs. This was apparent in the literature regardless of the school setting (special school or mainstream) or geographic location and was experienced by teachers, parents, and students themselves.

Studies indicated that parents and students were largely unaware of PSOs available to them, relying on the school or community supports to provide information. One article outlined the lack of teacher preparation for transition planning and related awareness of PSOs within initial teacher education (ITE) and a limited offering of information at Masters level or TPL (Almalki, 2021). In two studies, both the parents and students indicated a desire to know more and to be actively involved in transition planning but lacked knowledge of the process and PSOs (Cavendish et al., 2020; Lo & Bui, 2020). Strnadová et al. (2016) found that lack of access to information about services and PSOs was a major “missing piece” (p.153) and that a centralised system should be created, which was also noted in Scanlon and Doyle’s (2021) research.

The literature also identified a lack of availability of suitable PSOs for students. References to the lack of guidance available for students with intellectual disability within the mainstream post-primary setting (Banks et al., 2022) also featured, with neither guidance counsellors nor SENCO’s fulfilling that role. Scanlon and Doyle (2021) noted that the HSE day services were the least favourable options of parents but that it was an option for their children as a

by-product of a lack of choice, with vague and insufficient information provided by the HSE to support them in making an informed decision. Strnadová et al. (2016) also identified parents' dissatisfaction with health funded day services being the most common option, citing a significant decline in the progression in their child's educational goals in such settings. Students themselves also expressed an understanding of the reasons for limited Diploma options (structural constraints on course choices) but indicated a desire for a broader range of options (Cavendish et al., 2020). O'Brien et al. (2011) emphasise the need for improved PSOs, particularly for students living in rural areas of Ireland with some schools describing the current options as "extremely limited" (p.123). The lack of available options to students with severe ID living rurally in South Africa was also observed in research conducted by Ellman et al. (2020).

Almalki (2021) noted that the lack of variety of available PSOs had a knock-on impact on teachers' willingness to create transition plans for their students. Teachers in that study wondered "what is the point" in writing transition plans as there were only one or two realistic options for the student to access (p.6).

## 2.5 Discussion

This scoping literature review aimed to identify existing research on the transition experiences of young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), their families and supporting adults as they prepare to leave compulsory schooling. Through the examination of the literature, the review aimed to explore the range of transition preparation and transition planning practices that occur in upper secondary education systems, either in mainstream or segregated settings, and the role that stakeholders play in the transition processes. A further aim of this review was to identify the extent to which authentic first-hand student voice captured their views and experiences of transition planning and what methodologies were used in those cases.

Key themes that were identified through this scoping review were: (i) transition planning and practices; (ii) collaboration; (iii) aspirations and outcomes; and (iv) PSOs. Across the four themes and related sub themes was a general picture of variation in approaches and inconsistency of application of best practice in transition planning internationally. Despite provisions for individual education planning and planning for transition within the EPSEN Act (2004), the results of this scoping review illustrated that there was a significant lack of planning for life after school in Ireland and internationally. Teachers cited a lack of knowledge of transition planning, or a lack of value being placed on it due to the limited and often unsuitable post-school settings available to the young people with disabilities (Almalky, 2021).

Without transition planning legislation or the full enactment of the EPSEN Act (2004), as outlined in part one of this chapter, schools can use their discretion in the creation of such plans. While it is clear in this review that some elements of best practice in transition planning are occurring in some jurisdictions, in the main it is ad-hoc and lacks any form of standardised approach.

Only two studies reported positive evidence of best practice; Almalki and Alqahtani (2021) reported examples of successful planning and partnerships with businesses for post-school employment, and Scanlon and Doyle (2021) demonstrated the success of a supported transition programme in developing autonomous PSOs. However, in the case of Scanlon and Doyle (2021) research, this was the evaluation of a programme that was available to a very small

number of schools and run by a charitable organisation (Walk Peer) with funding from the Government's Dormant Accounts Fund. While there has been some expansion in funding by the Department of Education since 2022/2023 to allow Walk Peer to expand into a larger number of mainstream and special schools, significant and strategic investment in policy and programmes such as Walk Peer are required to support the development of autonomous PSOs.

Seven of the studies in this review included the voice of the young person with only two studies employing participatory approaches (Mogensen et al., 2022; Kester et al., 2022). The main stakeholder captured in the research was the voice of the parent. Furthermore, many studies reported the lack of invitation and engagement of parents and more commonly lack of involvement of students in their IEP or transition planning process.

Within a human rights framework of the UNCRPD (2006) and UNCRC (1989) Article 12, young people should and must have a voice in decision making regarding their lives. Post-school transition is a significant and often tumultuous time for even neuro-typical peers who have far greater levels of autonomy over decision making for post-school life. In Ireland the access routes to third level education include a competitive points entry system, perpetuating an elitist view and additional barriers to higher education (Shevlin et al., 2020).

Students engage in continuous and terminal assessment aiming to achieve a specific number of points to gain entry to their desired course. Neuro-typical students have a range of options, back up options and alternative entry routes to achieve their post-school goals. They do this with access to, and support of, the guidance counselling team in their mainstream post-primary schools as well as guidance from the DE through sample examination papers from the State Examinations Commission. Alternative access routes with lower entry requirement are available to certain often marginalised groups of students through State supports, however access routes for students with intellectual disabilities continue to be underdeveloped (Shevlin et al., 2020).

As depicted in this literature review, the same level of choice and range of PSOs simply is not available to the young people with SEND, nationally and internationally. Students with SEND who did transition to employment or further education reported fear and a tension between wanting full

independence and the reality of still being dependent on family and government for financial and living supports.

The current Senior Cycle curriculum and assessment is not inclusive or suitable of students with SEND (McCoy et al., 2025; Smyth et al. 2019). A history of natural progression from special schools to health funded day services has become embedded in Ireland and is also internationally recognised. The intertwined nature of education and health systems in Ireland, stemming from a medical model of educational provision continues to create barriers to autonomous post-school progression.

Despite government initiatives and policy, such as the Comprehensive Employment Strategy 2015-2024, implementation reports by the National Disability Authority demonstrate the slow and unsuccessful progress the policy had on progressing rights of people with disabilities. In their 2025 report, the NDA cited the “substantial gaps” in career guidance provision that remain for students with disabilities (NDA, 2025, p.15).

While the DE continue to publish policy documents such as the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024-2030) aiming to increase post-school transition planning and guidance provision in special schools, the NDA commented that based on the failed implementation of the CES 2015-2024, that this new strategy will take “several years to have an impact” (p.15). Without robust and comprehensive national legislation on both children’s and human rights, as per Ireland’s commitment under UNCRPD (2006) and specific legislation on transition planning in Ireland, it is difficult to foresee a substantial change to the current ad-hoc transition practice.

## 2.6 Conclusion

The basis of this current study is rooted in the clear gaps in the evidence base at present internationally. This review aided the development of the research questions from the initial a priori questions and allowed for the further refinement of the question that framed the literature review. The review illustrated the lack of implementation of best practice despite the UNCRPD (2006) and the availability of evidence-based transition frameworks. It demonstrated the lack of transition planning occurring for students with SEND and the lack of parental and student consultation for those that are engaging in

such planning. It also highlighted the lack of student voice captured through participatory research methods and the lack of triangulation in capturing the experiences of the parent, the student and a relevant transition key worker such as a teacher.

Therefore, the questions that framed the development of the research methodology were refined to include:

*A) What are the views and experiences of students, parents, teachers, and principals in Irish special schools of transition preparation and transition planning*

*B) How can the teacher support the development of autonomous post-school choices?*

In order to address these questions, a number of sub-questions were constructed to guide the study development. The initial iteration of these sub-questions were:

1. What are the aspirations of Senior Cycle students with an intellectual disability in a special school for life post-school?
2. How informed are parents on the range of post-school options?
3. How do Senior Cycle class teachers in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and what do teachers need in order to fulfill that role?
4. How do Principals in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and how do they view the role of the special class teacher?
5. How do students, parents and teachers experience preparation for transition?

These questions were revisited throughout the research and refined at various timepoints.

In summary, this chapter described the results of the scoping literature review examining the views, experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders in transition preparation and transition planning for students with SEND. It also outlined the international context, historical provision for those with SEND in Ireland and current evidence of transition planning with international and national legislation.

## 3 Chapter Three: Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the research aims, overarching research question and embedded questions are presented for this study. The rationale for the selection of two theoretical paradigms is outlined and the development of the conceptual framework explained. The selection of all research tools is outlined, beginning with the rationale for selection of the quantitative surveys, their design, piloting, recruitment. Analysis of the results using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software and Microsoft Excel is described. The design of the qualitative phase, Phase Two, is outlined in detail with discussion and rationale for the selection of the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) and use of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) for analysing the data generated (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Following a review of the methodological literature, it was determined that pragmatic constructivism was the most appropriate paradigm for this study (Haas & Haas, 2002) as it brings together the key elements of mixed method and qualitative research which scaffolded the development of the research design and methodology. Aligning first with the pragmatic paradigm, a mixed method design was employed as the overarching design due to neither singular method being in itself adequate to understand the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A complex application of the explanatory sequential design was selected for this research, to facilitate the use of quantitative surveys in order to capture a national perspective in terms of current transition practices. The analysis of the survey supported the development of the qualitative phases, underpinned by the constructivist paradigm, which are described in detail.

This study employed the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) as a participatory method to capture the voice of the student as the central focus, with contributions from the parent and the teacher. It aimed to use the views and experiences of the students, parents and teachers to identify the TPL needs of teachers to enable them to support families making more autonomous post-school decisions.

## 3.2 Research Aims

The primary aim of this research was to explore the experiences of key stakeholders involved in transition preparation and transition planning for students leaving special schools in Ireland and identify the Teacher Professional Learning needs of teachers to enable them to support effective transition for these students. It also aimed to build on existing literature and policy in the Irish context such as the PASTE report (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018), Indecon Report (2019), Comprehensive Employment Strategy (CES) 2015-2024, and research exploring experiences of transition from Irish schools by Aston et al. (2021) and O'Brien et al. (2011).

## 3.3 Research Questions

The research centred around gathering perspectives of the key stakeholders involved in post-school transition. For the purposes of this study, the key stakeholders were Senior Cycle students in special schools in Ireland, their parents, teachers, and principals. The overarching aim of this research was to answer the following questions:

*A) What are the views and experiences of students, parents, teachers, and principals in Irish special schools of transition preparation and transition planning*

*B) How can the teacher support the development of autonomous post-school choices?*

In order to address these questions, a number of sub-questions were constructed to guide the study development:

1. What are the aspirations of Senior Cycle students with an intellectual disability in a special school for life post-school?
2. How informed are parents on the range of post-school options?
3. How do Senior Cycle class teachers in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and what factors impact on their role?
4. How do Principals in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and how do they view the role of the special class teacher?

5. How do students, parents and teachers experience preparation for transition?

For the purpose of clarity, Figure 11 identifies the key theoretical and conceptual frameworks that underpin this research, as well as the key principles and paradigms that informed the research approach.

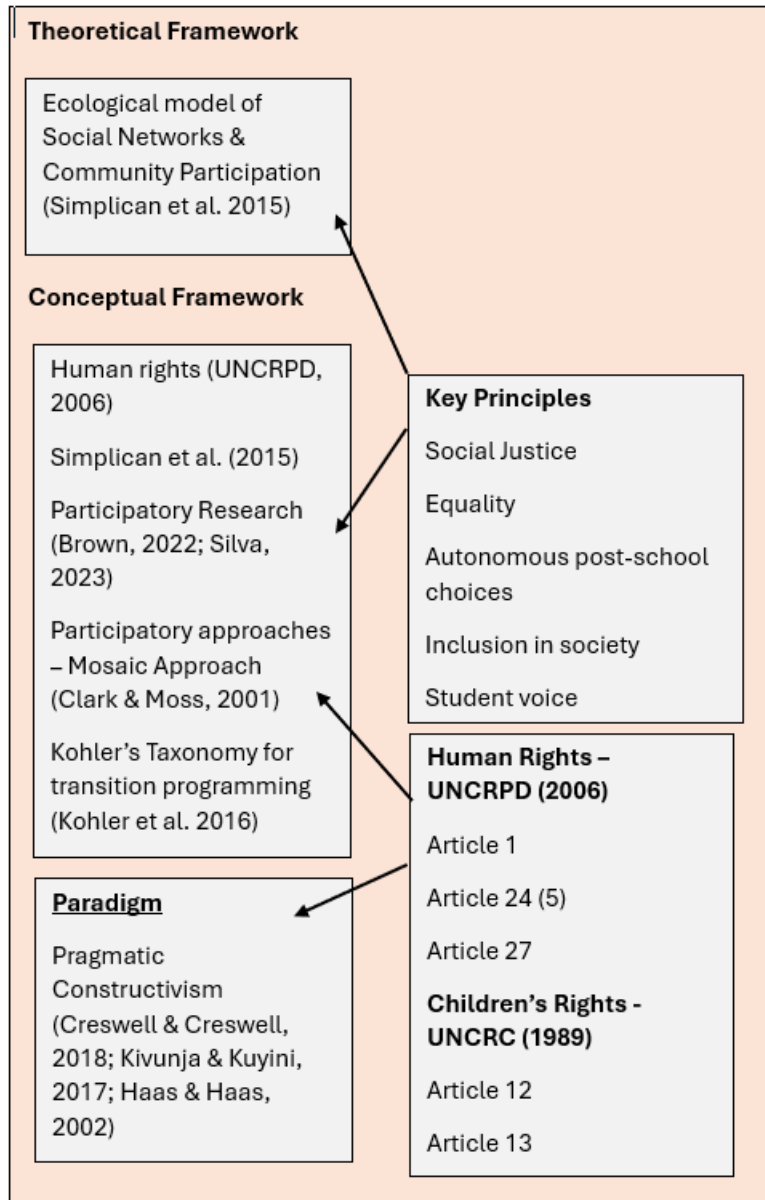


Figure 11 - Overview of Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

### 3.4 Paradigm

Much literature has been published on the interaction of paradigms and methodologies in research since the early publications of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Their work explored the four main elements of paradigms; epistemologies; ontologies; methodologies; and axiology. In selecting a paradigm or worldview for this research, axiology and positionality were given careful consideration. Building on the literature of Anthias (2002) and Sensoy & DiAngelo (2009), Bettez (2015) purports that positionality is “paramount to the production and understanding of knowledge” (p.934). Bettez (2015) defines it as “how we see ourselves, how we are perceived by others, and our experiences – influence how we approach knowledge, what we know and what we believe we know” (p. 934).

Informed by my positionality and recognising that my lived experiences are unique to me, my worldview is that individuals seek to understand the world they live in and have developed meanings based on their lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this case, that transition from special school is a unique experience for each student, their teacher and their family member as they experience it from their own perspective. The aims of the research and the worldview adopted, aligned with the constructivist paradigm which places an emphasis on the “individual and their interpretation of the world around them” (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p.33), comparatively to constructionism which refers to the meaning formed by groups (Robson, 2011).

Using this paradigm, this research sought to describe individuals’ perspectives, experiences, and meaning-making processes on transition preparation and transition planning. In aiming to empower students and families to make more informed autonomous decisions about life post-school, at the heart of this research was an agenda for change and reform (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As students with SEND are often marginalised and their voice oppressed, I felt that change could not occur without a student-centred approach, which informed the selection of human rights and participatory frameworks within this study.

However, to fully meet the aims of the research, another paradigm had to be considered as the use of qualitative data alone in the constructivist paradigm would be insufficient at fully understanding the research problem. Thus, the

pragmatic paradigm provided the flexibility to consider a “what works” approach (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p.36) and supported employing mixed methods in the study.

The purpose of employing the pragmatic paradigm was because I believed that there was a clear problem to be solved in the lack of autonomy of post-school transition. The utilisation of mixed methods in the pragmatic paradigm allowed me to utilise “every methodology that helps that knowledge discovery” (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p.36). This held its roots in social justice and inequality, which led to a human rights framework being developed as part of the conceptual framework for the study. Therefore, the overarching paradigm informing this research was a pragmatic constructivist paradigm (Haas & Haas, 2002).

The research study was predominantly qualitatively driven and while acknowledging the mixed method research design chosen, I also acknowledge the use of questionnaires in a predominantly constructivist stance. Informed by Romm and Litt (2013), questions in Phase One of the research were framed in such a way as to promote reflection on the problem being investigated, which in this case was current transition practices, student voice and participation in decision making.

Table 9 describes how each of Grix (2010) paradigmatic building blocks were considered in the context of constructivism and pragmatism within this research.

Table 9 - Paradigm Building Blocks

	<i>Constructivism</i>	<i>In this study</i>	<i>Pragmatism</i>	<i>In this study</i>
<i>Ontology</i>	Multiple realities	Quotes were used to illustrate the individual meaning and perspective (both in survey and phase two)	Singular & multiple realities	Broadening from the survey, the voice of students and parents were included
<i>Epistemology</i>	Closeness & subjectivity	Approx. 30 hours over 11 days on site, across 2 months	Practicality	Aimed to find workable solutions within the special school context
<i>Axiology</i>	Biased	Being open about positionality as a former insider	Multiple stances	Awareness of insider/outsider positionality
<i>Methodology</i>	Inductive	All participants views were built upon in each session	Combining	Mixed method of predominantly quantitative phase 1 with qualitative phase 2
<i>Rhetoric</i>	Informal Style	Employed a professionally informal style during data generation	Formal or informal	Informal data generation combined with formal presentation in written literature

Table 9. Adapted from Creswell (2013) in Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) p.38.

### 3.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework underpinning this research combines several core concepts. Firstly, this research is underpinned by a human rights approach, framed by the UNCRPD (2006). This approach supports the concept that all people should have equal access to opportunities in life, including opportunities for education (Article 24 (5)), employment (Article 27) and enjoy full and equal participation in society (Article 1).

Following this, the Simplican et al. (2015) definition of social inclusion frames this research. Through defining the concept of social inclusion as “the interaction between two major life domains: interpersonal relationships and community participation” (p.18), this model supports the development of pathways into and through communities.

Intersecting with this human rights approach and social model of inclusion is a focus on utilising participatory research methods. These methods allow the voice of often marginalised groups to be captured in research. The scoping literature review demonstrated that of the twenty studies, only six captured the voice of the student and of those, only two used participatory methodologies. Rogers and Boyd's (2020) framework is built upon the foundations of the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001), a participatory research method that has its roots in valuing the voice of the child, thereby increasing child agency. The adapted version includes the voice of a known adult to add to the understanding of the variety of data generated with the child and supports theme verification.

Finally, the Kohler et al. (2016) Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 (henceforth referred to as Kohler's Taxonomy) was selected as being a suitable guide to transition planning within this research. Kohler et al. (2016) assert that this planning is "the fundamental basis of education" that supports the creation and development of students' educational programmes (p.2). It stipulates that it should not merely be seen as "add-on activities for students with disabilities when they turn age 14 or 16" (p.2).

An early research activity was mapping the O'Brien et al. (2011) study and the Morningstar et al. (2010) onto Kohler's Taxonomy (2016) to ensure that their framework was robust and supported by a wide range of literature. There was a high degree of overlap of the key quality indicators of effective secondary transition programmes between the three studies.

Kohler's Taxonomy (2016) informed the definition of transition preparation in this study, as an action or actions that occur in a special school that support independence and autonomy throughout the student's enrolment.

For the purposes of this study a definition of transition preparation and planning practices were developed drawing from a range of transitions literature (Kohler et al., 2016; Morningstar et al. 2010; O'Brien et al. 2011) and were defined as:

Transition preparation:

"The curriculum that schools offer and the related activities that support skill development and independence for the students during their time in school. These can include a range of areas including academic skill development, personal and social development,

independent living skills and the assessment and profiling of students' strengths, needs and interests.”

Transition planning:

“The process undertaken by schools in planning and supporting their students to leave special school education. Transition planning involves a range of activities which may include consultation on post-school options with students, their families and other professionals; work placements; visits to post-school settings and meeting with relevant personnel.”

The updated Taxonomy 2.0 (Figure 12) illustrates practical and concrete examples of evidence-based and promising practices consistently cited in the literature which promote successful post-school outcomes for young people with SEND.

#### TAXONOMY FOR TRANSITION PROGRAMMING 2.0



Figure 12 - Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 Kohler et al. (2016)

The scoping literature review in this study also highlighted the lack of engagement with students and the varying transition practices that are currently in place in Irish special schools. Appropriate transition frameworks, programmes, legislation and access to professional learning and development are all key requirements in order to support them in engaging in more effective transition planning.

It is the interaction of these four key influences in the conceptual framework which allows the research to be underpinned by a core value of full and meaningful inclusion and participation in society (Figure 13).

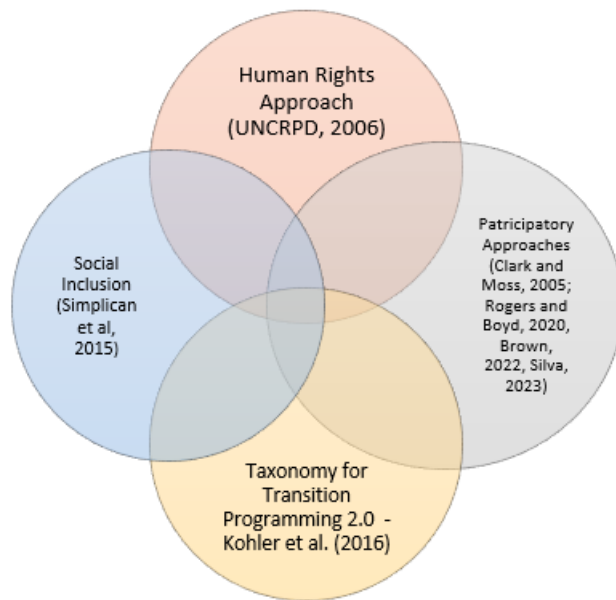


Figure 13 - Conceptual Framework

### 3.6 Research Design

Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that different types of social research questions will necessitate specific research design approaches. Aligning with the pragmatic constructivist paradigm, a mixed method approach can be particularly supportive when neither quantitative nor qualitative alone would be adequate to answer the research questions. Its inherent flexibility allows for a “more holistic and accurate understanding of the phenomena under study” (Ponterotto et al., 2013, p.47).

This research aimed to capture the views of teachers and principals from a broad national perspective, then sought to explore these views in more detail with a representative smaller number of participants. It also aimed to broaden and facilitate a range of participant voices that are less often included, by capturing experiences of students and their parents in transition preparation and transition planning and by exploring the questions examined in the survey in more detail.

Given the diversity of perspectives to be captured from school principals, teachers, students and parents, a range of data generation tools would also have to be employed. Paying particular attention to amplifying the voice of the often oppressed and marginalised in society (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), a combination of quantitative, traditional qualitative and creative arts based qualitative approaches were adopted.

The scoping literature review informed the research approach, particularly due to the gaps in literature capturing the voice of the student or employing participatory methods. Figure 14 outlines the interaction between the scoping literature review, Phase One and Phase Two design and analysis. In order to address these research aims and questions and aligning with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of human rights and social participation, the mixed methods participatory-social justice design framed this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) (Appendix A).

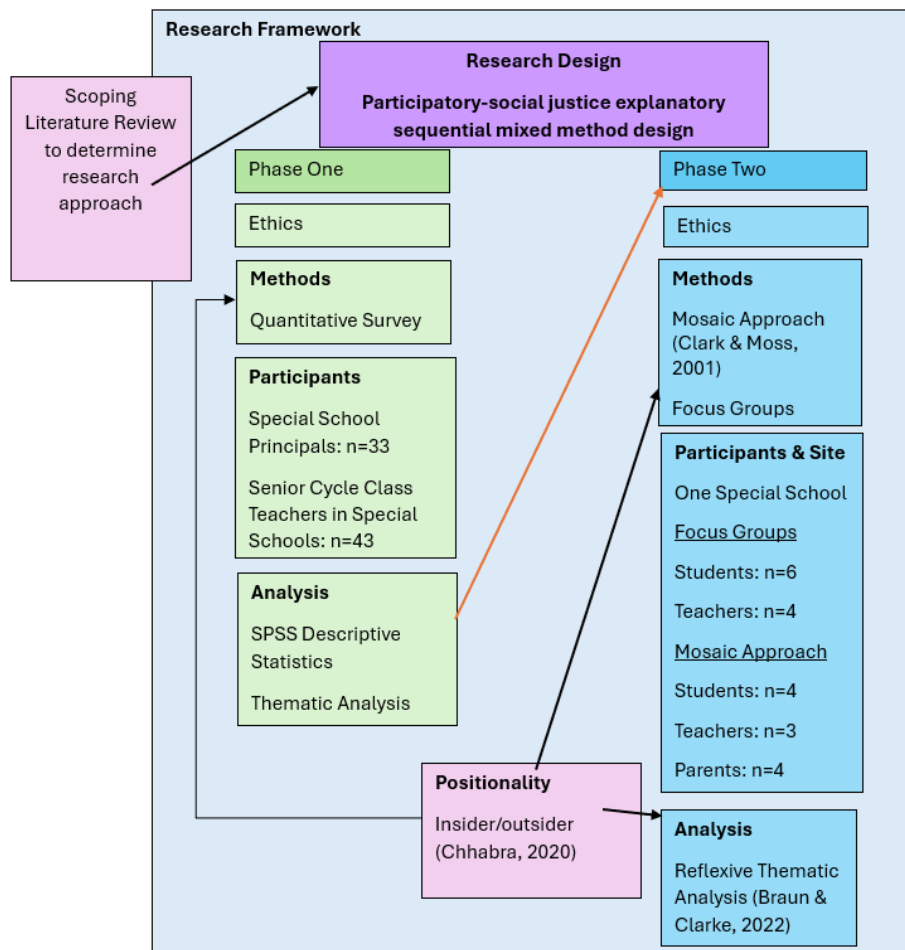
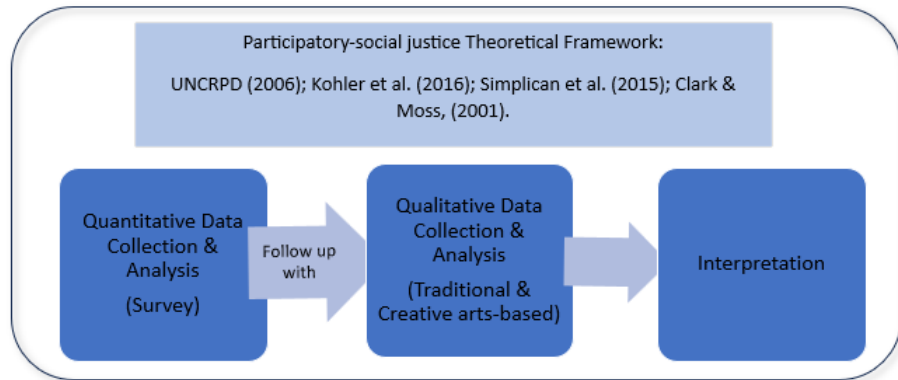


Figure 14 - Overview of Research Design

This approach is particularly suitable when seeking to “address issues of social justice; calls for change; wants to address the needs of underrepresented or marginalised populations; actively involves individuals or community stakeholders throughout the research process; has a good working knowledge of social justice perspectives used to study underrepresented populations; wants to impact communities” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017, p.125).

The purpose of participatory-social justice mixed methods research is to promote human development and common good through addressing challenges to individuals and society using the integration of quantitative and qualitative research (Ponterotto et al., 2013). The intent of this research project is to promote action amongst the under-represented special school community to advocate for more autonomy in post-school decision making and to equip teachers and school leaders to empower families to make more autonomous decisions.

In choosing the complex application of the participatory-social justice design, consideration must also be given to the most suitable core mixed methods design to add to the study. Having reviewed a broad range of methodological approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Mertens, 2014), the explanatory sequential mixed method was chosen (Figure 15).



*Figure 15 - Participatory Social Justice Theoretical Framework*

When choosing a complex application of a mixed method design, the literature advises researchers to ensure they are threading the participatory social justice framework throughout the research procedures of the study (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). The following diagram (adapted from Mertens, 2003 and Creswell, 2009 in Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017) outlines the thread from identification of the research problem through to the recommendations (Figure 16).

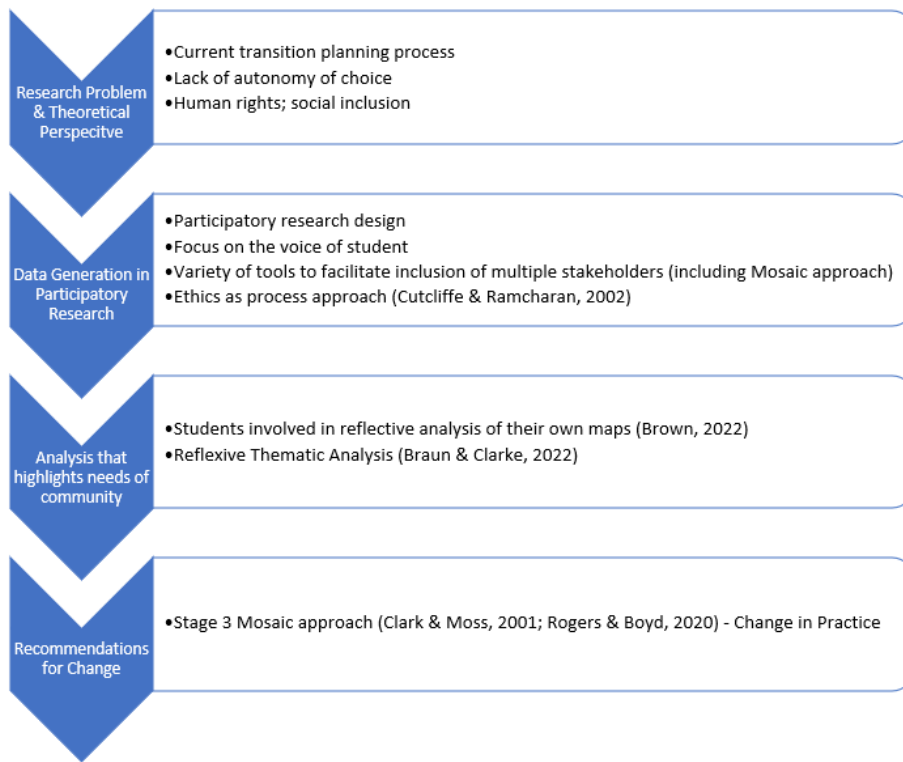


Figure 16 - Threading of Research Problem

## Considerations when employing an explanatory sequential design

Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) outline several considerations for researchers when adopting an explanatory sequential design which are addressed in Table 10.

Table 10 - Explanatory Sequential Design in this Research

Questions	Recommendations	Response in context of this research design
1. Same or different individuals in both samples?	<b>Recommendation:</b> Subset of individuals from Phase 1	<u>Same individuals:</u> the school volunteered to be part of Phase 2 following their individual anonymous engagement in Phase 1 <u>Different individuals:</u> it is not known if the participating teachers in Phase 2 completed the survey. Additional voices were added such as parent and student who were not captured in Phase 1
2. Sample sizes?	<b>Recommendation:</b> Much smaller sample than initial quantitative phase	This recommendation was adopted – Sample sizes in Phase 1: Teachers: n=43    Principals: n=33 Samples sizes in Phase 2: Teachers: n=4 Parents: n=5 Students: n=10
3. What quantitative results needed to be explained?	<b>Recommendation:</b> Researchers should assess the range of options to identify which will yield best information about the problem	Phase 1 results were examined using the Theoretical framework of the study (Simplican et al. 2015) and the scoping literature review. This aided in the identification of areas requiring further enquiry by identifying the data that supported or contested existing literature in the area.
4. Selecting the best participants for Phase 2?	<b>Recommendation:</b> Choose voluntary participation or quantitative statistical results to direct follow up sample	Aligning with the participatory social justice design, the participants volunteered based on their own interest in the research area. The school volunteered based on their participation in Phase 1 but it is not known if the teachers participating in Phase 2, responded in Phase 1. For parents and students, purposive sampling was employed.

Additional considerations when employing explanatory sequential mixed methods designs are the length of time that is involved in data generation, due to the two distinct phases (Creswell, 2009). Each phase required separate ethical approval, design considerations and separate forms of analysis. This type of research also required a broad skill set from the researcher, with the employment of quantitative and qualitative research methods and appropriate analysis. As a novice researcher, several steps were taken to support the use of the two methods, for example, a Qualitative Research Methods module and additional support in data analysis software packages of SPSS and NVIVO.

## Participatory Tools for Inclusive Research or Participatory research?

As researchers, it is important to have a critical lens when selecting a methodology (Silva, 2023). The popularity of certain methodologies may appear to fluctuate in different periods of time, influenced by many factors such as political agendas. With the adoption of the UNCRC (1989), particularly Article 12, and the UNCRPD (2006) in many European and Western countries, participatory research is becoming increasingly popular in the field of education and social research in order to ensure stronger engagement of children (Johnson, 2021). With recent growing interest in participatory research (Brown, 2022), researchers have a responsibility to have a reflexive attitude to their methodological choices and ensure that they truly are an appropriate choice to answer their research questions within the specific research context (Silva, 2023) while understanding the distinction between participatory tools and participatory research.

Brown (2022) and Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) argue that any research tool can be used in a participatory way but that in itself, does not mean that the research is truly participatory. Similarly, Johnson (2021) suggests that “whether ‘methods’ can be referred to as participatory, depends therefore on the extent to which the process or methodology in which they are applied is participatory and whether the social norms of childhood, children and youth can be navigated and understood so that they are taken seriously” (p.302).

Researchers must distinguish between employing participatory tools which allow participants to be included in the research, versus participatory research designs which situate the participants as co-researchers from the outset of the project. While it may be desirable for some to have egalitarian participation in all aspects of the research, from concept through to dissemination, many researchers contest that this is not feasible, nor desirable (Brown, 2023). The broad spectrum of participation must be considered:

“During the process of research, participation is located somewhere on the continuum between fully egalitarian work with participants as co-researchers and the limited involvement of participants as supporters or advisors” (Brown, 2022, p. 3).

In the work of Tandon (1988) three core features of a truly participative project are described, where participants; 1. “(have a) role in setting the agenda of inquiry; 2. (participate) in data collection and analysis; and 3. (have) control over the use of outcome and the whole process” (p.213).

This view of participatory research situates research subjects as capable of seeking answers to questions that affect their daily lives. It recognises the need for partnership and guidance with a professional for occasional input and expertise but situates the power to answer those challenging questions themselves (Tandon, 1988).

Similarly, Hart (1992) explains the core features of participatory research as; “carried out by or with people concerned; researcher feels a commitment to the people and to their control of the analysis; research begins with a concrete problem identified by the participants themselves; it proceeds to investigate the underlying causes of the problem so that the participants can themselves go about addressing the issue” (p.16).

In this context, Hart (1992) urges caution over labelling research as participatory when in fact it may more closely align with manipulation, decoration, and tokenism. Instead, he advocates for participants being informed, consulted, and sharing in decision making. Since these early iterations of the distinguishing features of participatory research, many other authors (Brown, 2022; Silva, 2023; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020) have contested that there are multiple layers and possibilities for participation within participatory research.

In particular, Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) explore the participation choice points in the research process, which describe the varying degrees at which participation can occur within participatory research. Similarly, Silva (2023) described three ways in which PR can be within a project: a) embedded within a project; b) a segment of a project; c) the driving force behind a project. This view by Silva (2023) aligns with the approach taken by Brown (2022) in her description of participatory research as a continuum as seen in Figure 17.

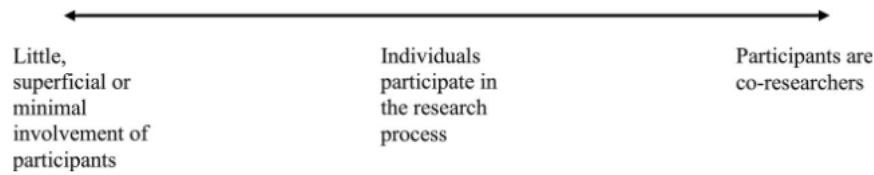


Figure 17 - Brown (2022) Continuum

Employing Silva’s (2023) and Brown’s (2022) perspectives, participatory research in this study is described as embedded within the research, sitting at a point between *individuals participating in the research* and *participants as co-researchers* (Figure 18).

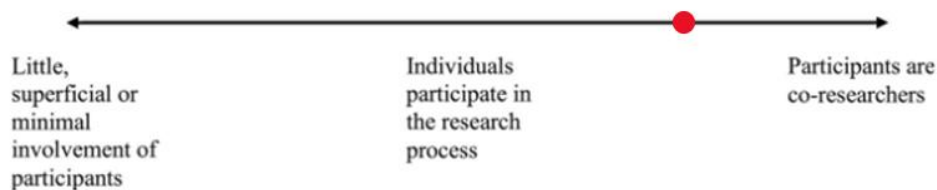


Figure 18 - Participatory Choice Point in this Research

Creative arts-based methods such as the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) align with participatory research as they typically have an emphasis on minimising hierarchy, reducing the power imbalance between researcher and subject, indicate a call for action and have their roots in social justice (Brown, 2022, 2023). Within this research, the Mosaic approach is a participatory tool. However, it is used in such a way that promotes and facilitates participatory research. The context of this research was special schools, within an education system that continues to perpetuate segregation (Connolly, 2023). The voices of parents and their children with intellectual disabilities are often not captured nor heard. There is little autonomy over decision making regarding PSOs. Currently in Ireland, an Occupational Guidance Officer will support a family in deciding on a post-school placement and typically health funded day services are only option presented to families (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018). Therefore, within this context of family voices not being listened to, it was important to choose participatory tools to facilitate listening to these key stakeholders in the post-school transition process.

Across the two phases of this research, participatory choice points were carefully considered throughout. Table 11 outlines how the participation was

woven into Phase One, a quantitative online survey and Phase Two, qualitative data generation in one special school.

Table 11 - Overview of Participatory Choice Points

**Overview of the Participatory Points in this research**

<i>Research Design</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Principal and teachers that responded to the Phase one survey, were aware through the Plain Language Statement that their views would frame the questions explored in Phase two of the research</li> </ul>
<i>Data collection &amp; generation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Employing participatory and creative arts-based methods with the students through the Mosaic approach (Clark &amp; Moss, 2001; Rogers &amp; Boyd, 2020)</li> <li>- Including the voice of the teacher and parent in reflecting on the completed "Maps" created in order to identify their needs</li> <li>- An "ethics-as-process" approach was employed throughout the research with all stakeholders in all interactions (Cutcliffe &amp; Ramcharan, 2002)– handing over of choice and control to participants in as much decision making as possible.</li> </ul>
<i>Analysis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students looked at/ reflected upon the artefacts created/selected and the use of the thought journal in the initial stage of the process was the first stage of participatory analysis. Students reflected on these artefacts before creating the final map.</li> <li>- At the end of the creation of the map, students were invited to reflect upon their creation and its meaning in a process of metacognition (Robson, 2012).</li> <li>- Participating parents and the class teachers consulted on the final map and added their thoughts and context to the images created</li> <li>- The teachers focus group, held at the end of data collection, allowed Mosaic participating teachers time to reflect on the process and identify what their own needs were to progress transition preparation and transition planning</li> </ul>
<i>Dissemination</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dissemination within the school community occurred with students showcasing/displaying their posters to their chosen audience. This allowed them to share their vision for their post school goals.</li> </ul>

Informed by the participatory approach taken in this research and considering the language of co-construction employed in the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) and viewing participants as co-researchers (Brown, 2022), the term data generation has been adopted for Phase Two of the research.

### 3.7 Phase One: Data Collection Instrument – Survey

Following the explanatory sequential mixed-method approach, quantitative surveys were the first research tool employed in this study. Two surveys were designed and built in the licensed DCU Qualtrics Account. The aim of the surveys was to capture the current practices in Irish special schools in relation to transition preparation and transition planning and the views of teachers and principals on their role in its provision.

The surveys were designed for two cohorts of participants: Principals and Senior Cycle teachers from special schools in Ireland. Principals were selected as an important group to be surveyed due to the significant impact that leadership can play in creating an inclusive school environment (Aston et al., 2021; Kinsella & Senior, 2008) Indeed a review of the literature identified that their voices are rarely captured on transition preparation and transition planning.

Senior Cycle class teachers were defined as those typically supporting students aged 15 to 19. The rationale for this definition was that best practice in international literature suggests that transition planning should commence from mid post-primary schooling. In Ireland there is no such legislation guiding the transition planning process therefore international best practice and legislation is used in this context (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018; 2021).

#### Online surveys in educational research

With technological advances in education and society in recent decades, internet-based surveys are becoming increasingly popular in research. The low cost, high speed of data collection, access to a large population sample (Blair et al., 2014) and ease of use on mobile devices makes internet-based surveys appealing to modern day researchers. The ability to include skip-logic allows participants to only access relevant questions and having readily accessible data to analyse as soon as it is completed are advantages to researchers (Robson, 2011).

Access to the desired participants can be a challenge when using internet-based surveys, as it often requires an email address to email the survey directly. In the case of this study, direct participant email addresses were not available for the teacher cohort so additional methods of social media recruitment using Twitter™/X™, aimed to overcome this challenge.

With a variety of internet-based platforms available to researchers for survey design, the Qualtrics Platform was chosen for this study as it is preferred option for DCU researchers, with access to a DCU Licensed account available to research students. This survey was designed to ensure ease of access on a mobile device and included a QR code which allowed participants to scan using their device to directly access the survey. Additional security features enabled within Qualtrics prevented the survey being found on an open internet search, prevented BOT completion of the survey and allowed participants to part complete the survey and return at a later point in time. Data analysis for internet-based surveys is aided by the instant export of data to programmes, such as the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (Cohen et al., 2018).

### Rationale for survey

Surveys were deemed the most suitable form of data collection to answer the research questions and questionnaires can be employed within predominantly qualitative driven methods from a constructivist epistemological standpoint (Romm & Litt, 2013). The sub-questions that were specifically driving the design of the survey were:

- How do Senior Cycle class teachers in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and what do teachers need in order to fulfill that role?
- How do Principals in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and how do they view the role of the special class teacher?
- How do students, parents and teachers experience preparation for transition?

At the time of Phase One of the research, there were 136 special schools across Ireland. Conducting focus groups or interviews with representatives from that volume and geographic dispersion of schools would not have been possible in the context of PhD research.

Therefore, in an effort to capture the national landscape, two predominantly quantitative surveys were chosen as the most appropriate methodological choice, while also including some open-ended questions to allow participants to

reflect and engage with the research problem (Romm & Litt, 2013). Acknowledging that surveys may not yield as rich data as in-person data generation methods, the utilisation of the explanatory sequential mixed method design, allowed key themes and findings from the survey analysis to be identified and to explain those findings in more detail in the second phase.

## Survey design

Design of survey questions requires careful consideration to ensure that they achieve the goals of the research and specifically, that they enable the research questions to be answered (Robson, 2011). The surveys designed for this study built upon previous surveys by O'Brien et al. (2011), conducted in Ireland and Almalky and Alqahtani (2021) conducted in Saudi Arabia.

The O'Brien et al. (2011) study was an important reference point as one of the few studies that captured the voices of special schools in the Irish context. However, their study focused specifically on students with an intellectual disability. This research captured a broader demographic of student, surveying all Irish special schools regardless of designation, which ensured the voices of students with various SEND were represented.

Both Almalky and Alqahtani (2021) & O'Brien et al. (2011) informed the structure of the survey question types. The O'Brien et al. (2011) survey used mainly closed questions with fixed multiple-choice options, whereas the Almalky and Alqahtani (2021) survey employed a range of Likert scale questions.

Blair et al. (2014) explain how questionnaires “must be a valid measure of factors of interest” meaning that the question “must measure attitudes, behaviours or attributes” that we require of our guiding research question (p.184). Secondly, it must be designed in such a way that participants are willing and motivated to answer it in an accurate manner. This places an obligation on researchers to ensure the wording of the question allows for absolute clarity on the part of the participant of the information that is being sought, which will in turn, enable a factually correct response. In the case of these surveys, definitions and descriptions of the type of information being sought was highlighted at the beginning of each section of questions to aid understanding and clarity.

Both the principal and teacher surveys began by gathering basic demographic data in order to better understand their working context. The main survey items were predominantly Likert scale questions, which was appropriate due to the desire to capture views and attitudes towards transition practices. A bipolar five-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree was used and included a neutral midpoint. This was deemed appropriate for this research as it avoids a forced-choice and can increase reliability and validity (O’Muircheartaigh et al., 2000). A small number of open-text questions facilitated participants to expand on their answers and provide supporting qualitative data to further explain the quantitative data. The surveys also included some context to situate the questions, aligning with Romm and Litt (2013), in order to raise awareness of the issue of the lack of legislation for transition planning. An example taken from two sections of the teachers’ survey (Figures 19 & 20) demonstrate how the context was presented before asking teachers to respond to the questions.

**Section 3– Post school options**

Key international legislation states that people with disabilities are entitled to full and equal access to further education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning, and to employment and self-employment.

In this section, we are interested in learning more about your recent graduates and what educational settings and employment services are available locally when they leave your school.

*Figure 19 - Post-school Options - Extract from Teachers’ survey*

**Section 6 – Your role in transition planning**

In this section, we are interested in understanding your role in **transition planning**. As part of their ongoing work, it is acknowledged that special schools engage in transition preparation and transition planning activities, without any formal training or supports.

We would like to capture your views and experiences of the role you play as a teacher in supporting students and their families in planning for the final transition from your school to a post school setting.

*Figure 20 - Role in Transition Planning – Extract from Teachers’ survey*

The structure of the surveys included eight sections in the teachers’ survey and seven sections in the principals’ survey (Appendix B).

### 3.8 Phase One - Data Collection: Survey

The DE publicly available database of schools was accessed in March 2022 and a complete list of special schools obtained. Data on teacher allocation to class levels or the number of students per year group is not available for special schools within the DE publicly accessible statistics. Therefore, the estimated total population sample size was based on the number of teachers allocated to

special schools, which stood at 1241 according to the NCSE annual report (2018). Examining the DE list of special schools, 124 schools of the 136 in the database were selected as the survey population. The rationale for excluding twelve schools was due to the nature of the school and explained below:

- Two were recently established schools (2020-2022) and therefore did not have existing transition practices to evaluate.
- Two were schools that catered for children for Early Intervention and therefore did not have a cohort of students transitioning beyond compulsory education
- Eight were schools that typically catered for students in a transient nature e.g. Hospital schools.

Following the issuing of the survey, a further two schools self-identified via return email as not being suitable participants due to enrolment of only primary school age children at that time. Therefore, the total number of schools eligible for participation was 122 and can be observed in Appendix C.

## Ethical considerations

DCU's ethical approval process was undertaken for this phase with approval granted in March 2022 (Appendix D). This included a detailed ethics application along with the submission of the survey questions. The surveys were gathered anonymously, therefore no corresponding email or IP addresses were collected. School location was indicated as "Urban" or "rural" to ensure no geographical location data was gathered and no identifying information about teachers or principals was gathered. The survey questions were examined by the research supervisors and redrafted to ensure the questions would sufficiently answer the research questions (Robson, 2011) and maintain ethical standards.

At the beginning of the online survey, the participants were shown the plain language statement and then directed to the informed consent form. The plain language statement was created based on DCU approved templates provided to researchers. Limitations were placed within the software to prevent participants from accessing the survey if they had not indicated YES to all informed consent statements. This included acknowledging their right to withdraw and to contact the researcher or member of the supervisory team with any additional concerns.

## Piloting

Following ethical approval in March 2022 (Appendix D), an invitation to pilot the survey was issued to graduate teachers of two postgraduate programmes in DCU as they were deemed a suitable cohort as they shared characteristics within the final sample i.e., teaching Senior Cycle students in a special school in Ireland. Three teachers and two principals from special schools piloted the plain language statements and surveys. Feedback was captured via email regarding survey length, ease of use (on mobile device and desktop), readability of the questions and any other comments.

Feedback included for example, increasing the size of the text boxes for qualitative questions, general usability e.g. adding a “back” button to view previous answers, adding an option for “Autism and Complex Needs” to capture the school designation more accurately and reducing the length of some Likert based questions. The surveys were amended considering this feedback and issued to 122 schools by email on 16th May 2022.

## Recruitment

With no available database of Senior Cycle class teachers in special schools, both surveys were issued directly to the publicly available school email address. The body of the email was for the attention of the principal and explained the context for the study and directed them to the two letters of information (Appendices E and F) for the Senior Cycle class teachers and for the principal. The email requested that they circulate the teachers’ letter of information to the relevant staff in the school with responsibility for Senior Cycle students.

However, this posed a potential challenge relying solely on the principal as gatekeeper. As a result, secondary recruitment strategies were employed to increase the visibility of the survey. The Education Support Centres of Ireland (ESCI) and The National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE) were emailed a letter of information and invited to circulate to their principal members and teachers working in Senior Cycle classes in special schools. However, no replies were received from either organisation.

A link to the survey and letters of information were also promoted on the researcher’s personal Twitter™/X™ account to maximise visibility. Two

participation reminders were also issued via email to the school email address after two weeks and four weeks of the survey being issued, as recommended by Couper (2008) (as cited in Blair et al., 2014). As a result of low response rates, in person visits were made to eight special schools in the West of Ireland, with a paper-based version of the survey, which yielded approximately 15 more results. The paper-based versions of the surveys, along with plain language statements and informed consent forms, were left with the school for one week before collection. The data from the 15 paper-based surveys was manually input into Qualtrics in June 2022.

### Phase one: Data analysis

The Qualtrics survey links were closed on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2022 and the data exported to SPSS version 27 as licensed with the DCU SPSS account. Codebooks were prepared for both surveys, itemising the variable number, variable name, variable label, and value label of each question (Appendix G). Closed questions were coded with a simple 1= yes, 2= no and all questions were coded with the number 99 for missing/invalid response. Questions that yielded a numeric response, such as the number of years in the role, were coded with a -99 to indicate missing/invalid responses.

Any multiple-choice questions from the survey were translated into individual questions in SPSS. For example, when asked to identify which curricula were being offered in the school, participants selected each relevant box with a tick. In SPSS, each curricula type listed was input as a separate value with the yes/no/missing-invalid response answer.

The data was analysed using descriptive statistics. As most of the questions were yes/no or Likert scale questions, frequency charts were generated within SPSS. This allowed for clear identification of the percentage agreement to Likert and responses to yes/no questions and other multiple-choice questions. In each occurrence, the valid percent was reported, and these percentages were then represented in a table and the number of responses to each question identified. This ensured an accurate representation of the response to each question and mitigated against missing responses skewing the data.

Table 12 - Extract of Qualitative Data within Excel

What do you think teachers need to support them in engaging with transition preparation and transition planning? N=25	
1	I feel more information on further services is needed to prepare pupils
2	Knowledge of the range of post-school options. More engagement with the staff of post school settings. Visits to the post school option, where the programmes delivered there are discussed. Visual aids e.g. photograph booklet that pupils can look at and discuss pictures with parents/teacher - keep referring back to this over a few months, to be done in conjunction with staff of post-school setting.
3	Planning time.
4	Information Time
5	A career guidance counsellor would very much benefit - while it may not be an option to have full time access to this but perhaps a career guidance week could be facilitated where a career guidance counsellor would be available to the students. CPD for teacher would also be a benefit.
6	Special schools do not have access to Career Guidance unlike mainstream schools. A career guidance counsellor would benefit this cohort and support class teachers with the process. Access to CPD would also benefit teachers engaged with the transition process

Qualitative responses to the open-ended questions within the survey were imported into SPSS and then exported to Microsoft Excel for qualitative analysis separately. Firstly, all comments were organised into each corresponding question (Table 12).

Table 13 - Identification of Themes within Excel

What do you think teachers need to support them in engaging with transition preparation and transition planning?						
Substitution	CPD/Training	Dedicated Personnel (GC/SW)	Communication between setting & school	Time	Information and Knowledge	Responses
						1 I feel more information on further services is needed to prepare pupils
					1	Planning time.
					1	Information Time
		1	1			A career guidance counsellor would very much benefit - while it may not be an option to have full time access to this but perhaps a career guidance week could be facilitated where a career guidance counsellor would be available to the students. CPD for teacher would also be a benefit.
		1	1			Special schools do not have access to Career Guidance unlike mainstream schools. A career guidance counsellor would benefit this cohort and support class teachers with the process. Access to CPD would also benefit teachers engaged with the transition process
		1			1	Adequate planning and preparation time. Training.

Each comment was read in full within the context of the question posed and headings were created in Excel which captured the common themes of the responses. Using frequency tallying, the comments were coded to themes (Table 13). Finally, the coded themes were tallied for frequency and percentage and then graphed in a bar chart for ease of presentation. This allowed the dominant themes to be clearly identified in both surveys.

It was important to be aware of the impact of quantifying qualitative data in this phase of the study. While the comments were coded to main themes that were consistent across the data, any outlier comments or comments that contrasted with the themes were noted and reported on also. This was done through the

inclusion of direct quotes from participants which supported, challenged or further qualified quantitative answers given. As the study followed an explanatory sequential design, it also supported the identification of key themes for enquiry during the qualitative interviews and focus group and to identify where outlier comments were present, if they were replicated within a smaller population in one special school.

### 3.9 Research Design – Phase Two

Following the mixed method design, Phase Two was qualitative in nature, aligning with the constructivist paradigm and employed three main data generation strategies: focus groups, semi-structured interviews and the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001). This phase of the research utilised a multi-informant approach which supported the constructivist paradigm through collaborating with participants to capture meanings and experiences. The participants in this phase were students with an intellectual disability in a special school in Ireland, their participating parent/s and their teacher.

This phase aimed to address the overall research question, while also gathering insight into the views and experiences of particular stakeholders. Unlike Phase One, the voice of the parent and student were being captured in this phase, along with the class teacher. Phase Two aimed to answer each of the five original sub-questions:

1. What are the aspirations of Senior Cycle students with an intellectual disability in a special school for life post-school?
2. How informed are parents and their teachers on the range of post-school options?
3. How do Senior Cycle class teachers in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and what do teachers need in order to fulfill that role?
4. How do Principals in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and how do they view the role of the special class teacher?
5. How do students, parents and teachers experience preparation for transition?

As the intention of Phase Two was to further explain the results of Phase One in more detail, it employed both traditional and creative arts-based tools to explain them. This included focus groups, semi-structured interviews and in-depth data generation as part of the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001).

## The Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001)

The Mosaic approach is a framework for listening to children and young people. It is a “multi-method, polyvocal approach” which combines a variety of perspectives using both traditional and participatory tools, which are brought together “create *with* children an image of their worlds” (Moss in Clark, 2017, p.9). The combination of tools allows researchers “construct a composite picture or ‘mosaic’ of children’s lives” (Clark, 2011, p.117).

The Mosaic approach is based upon four fundamental principles which are enshrined in the URCRC (1989). Viewing children as rights-holders; meaning-makers; skilful communicators and experts in their own lives specifically align with Article 12 and Article 13 of the UNCRC (1989). Within the context of transition planning, the application of the Mosaic approach in this research informed by Article 12 of UNCRC (1989) support the right to have students’ post-school goals captured and listened to. Similarly, the flexibility of the tools employed in the Mosaic approach support Article 13 (UNCRC, 1989) through supporting students in receiving or expressing information in a media of their choice (p.4).

However, theoretical and methodological barriers have limited the appeal (Clark, 2017) of capturing and giving status to those whose voice is seldom heard (Tangen, 2008). Students with SEND are often excluded from decision making processes (Ní Bhroin et al., 2016), often based on adult perceptions of their intellectual disability (Strnadová et al., 2016). In the context of transitions research internationally, only six of the studies in the literature review captured the voice of the student with SEND and of those, only two used participatory methodologies. However, key transitions frameworks identify that student participation is a necessary and important element of effective transition planning (Kohler et al., 2016).

As a participatory research methodology, the Mosaic approach views children as meaning makers and employs methods “that facilitate the process of knowledge production as opposed to knowledge ‘gathering’” (Veale, 2005, p. 254 as cited in Clark, 2011). It promotes the hundred languages of children and acknowledges that children communicate using a variety of methods and thus it demands creativity on the part of the adults to support children with SEND to

find a medium to communicate and express themselves. Clark (2017) sums it up clearly when stating that “the question is not whether children have any knowledge to convey but how hard we work to made sure every child has the opportunity to share their point of view” (p.21). The Mosaic approach puts an onus on educators and practitioners to be more creative in the methods employed in researching with children.

*A framework for listening*

The Mosaic approach is described as a framework for listening by its creators, Clark and Moss (2001). The flexibility within the framework has led to it adoption by many researchers (Rogers & Boyd, 2020). The aim is to “conceptualise ‘listening’ to children and the relationships and processes involved” (p.27) and through the careful consideration of methods in which the child is positioned as a holder of insights into their own worlds, researchers are free to employ many tools that support children to communicate in a multitude of ways (Clark, 2017). Table 14 outlines how each element of the framework was applied in Phase Two.

*Table 14 - A Framework for Listening in this Research*

Features of Framework		In the context of this research:
<b>Multi-method</b>	Recognises the variety of voices or languages used by children	Range of data generation tools; talking, drawing, annotation, digital imagery
<b>Participatory</b>	Views children as agentic experts in their own lives	Students controlled the narrative across the data generation sessions to create their maps
<b>Reflexive</b>	Includes multi stakeholder reflection on meanings	Teachers and parents were interviewed to gather perspective and then consulted on the completed maps
<b>Adaptable</b>	Applicable and adaptable to many contexts including early education and SEND contexts	Was able to be successfully adapted to suit the context of a special school and with a teenage population
<b>Focused on children’s lived experiences</b>	Suitable for examining children’s lives lived	Allowed for a unique insight into how students understand post school transition, what their aspirations were for life post school, what their own strengths and interest were.
<b>Embedded into practice</b>	The framework can be an evaluative tool or embedded into practice	Teachers expressed a desire to embed this into practice if resources such as time and personnel allowed

Clark (2017) provides some guidance to researchers who wish to use this reflexive, adaptable and participatory framework with other populations, including those with SEND. This includes considerations such as:

- Child or adult must be viewed as experts in their own lives.

- Selection of tools must be aligned to participants strengths and preferences.
- Necessity to create a mechanism for communication between participant and researcher to discuss meanings jointly.

As this study was interested in capturing the voice of parents and teachers as well as the students, the Rogers and Boyd (2020) adaptation of the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) was selected. In this adaptation, the inclusion of the adult voice in the interpretation of the children’s data would enhance “the richness” of the child’s intended meaning (Rogers & Boyd, p.643).

Of particular interest to this research was their comments that “children’s lives are situated within the context of their community, education and care services, and their family. Therefore, the adults in children’s lives can provide nuanced insights into children’s ways of thinking and being and offer assistance with theme verification during data analysis” (p.648). This aligns with the theoretical framework adopted in this study.

The Simpican model (2015) takes an ecological approach to social inclusion, meaning that it is the interaction of the individual with certain ecological conditions which can enable or disable social inclusion. The interpersonal condition of family relationships and those with staff in educational settings, play an important role in enabling people with SEND in accessing and participating in communities.

Within the context of this research, the Rogers and Boyd’s conceptual framework (2020) as outlined in Table 15, was deemed most suitable.

*Table 15 - Rogers & Boyd (2020) Revised Framework*

<b>Revised framework used for data collection</b>
- Adults in children’s lives offer additional sources of understanding and have rights to be heard
- Mosaic research, using both children’s and adults’ voices can assist decision makers
- It can be supportive to both children and the adults to have their voice heard
- Power in research needs to be acknowledged and utilised for good by those who use it

## Application of Rogers and Boyd (2020) framework

At the heart of this research was an agenda of empowerment and change for students, their parents and their teachers. Combining the voices of those key stakeholders required a unique application of the Rogers and Boyd (2020) framework which is outlined in the Figure 21. Illustrated in the blue circles is the revised Mosaic approach (Clark, 2017) which includes the voice of known adults in Stage one of the framework.

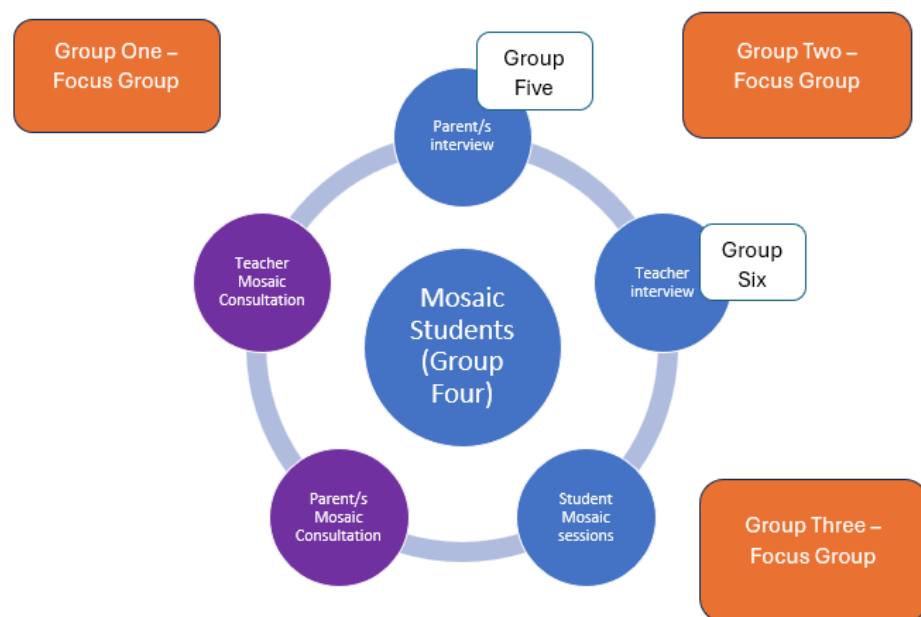


Figure 21 - Application of Rogers & Boyd (2020) Framework

The unique application of the Rogers and Boyd (2020) framework, highlighted in purple, is the addition of the parent/s and teacher voice for two distinct purposes. Firstly, they were interviewed to gather their current knowledge and views of transition preparation and transition planning. This interview also asked them questions about their aspirations for the child and what they believe the child's aspirations are for life post-school. The second purpose was then to show them their child's complete Mosaic map, depicting their views and aspirations of life post-school. This was an opportunity for the adults to add another layer of meaning to the completed Mosaic map but also acted as an opportunity for reflection and listening to their child. It aided in the process of challenging assumptions and highlighting perhaps where there was a mismatch in

aspirations held by the adults versus those held by the student, therefore it amplified the voice of the student.

### 3.10 Ethical Approval

DCU's ethical approval process was undertaken for Phase Two of the research with approval granted in August 2023 (Appendix H). This included a detailed ethics application along with the submission of a data protection impact assessment, plain language and informed consent/assent forms and the semi-structured interview schedules.

The plain language statements and informed consent/assent forms were generated based on DCU approved templates provided to researchers for research with children and adults. They were piloted with the critical friend and feedback was also provided from the DCU Research Ethics Committee on the documents as part of the ethical approval process.

The plain language statements provided details of the overall aims of the study, the research questions, the specific aspect of the research that the participant or their child were invited to contribute to as well as details of data protection, retention and anonymity and confidentiality. This included acknowledging their right to withdraw and to contact the researcher or member of the supervisory team with any additional concerns.

In line with GDPR Regulations which sets out that researchers should have robust justification for gathering special categories of data such as health and disability data, a conscious decision was taken not to gather this information in this study, as it was not deemed necessary to answer the research questions. The students represented in Phase Two of this study attended a special school for students with an intellectual disability that fell within a designated intelligence quotient (IQ) range. They presented as individuals with a range of communication profiles, preferences, abilities, strengths and talents. Consciously choosing not to gather health and disability data ensured that the onus was on the researcher to select data generation tools that were flexible, adaptable and applicable with students with varying profiles of communication. Further examples of ethical considerations for this phase are discussed later in the chapter.

### 3.11 Phase Two Sampling and Recruitment:

Purposive sampling or non-probability sampling involves targeting a specific group of participants, with the full understanding that this selected group only represents itself, and not the wider population (Cohen et al., 2007). Purposive sampling was used in Phase Two of this study to mitigate against validity threats in this type of complex design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). It acted as a support in identifying participants in Phase Two that were best placed to explain the results of Phase One. In this case, Senior Cycle teachers in special schools; Senior Cycle students in special schools and their parents.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) recommend that in explanatory sequential designs, a smaller sample size is used in the qualitative phase. As the research involved multiple participants within the qualitative phase, using a variety of data generation techniques, and spending a significant amount of time getting to know the setting and the participants, one school site was deemed appropriate to explain the results of the quantitative phase sufficiently.

Following the anonymous online survey in Phase One, a small number of schools expressed their interest by email in being involved in further phases in June 2022. In June 2023, one school was contacted to enquire if they would be interested in progressing to Phase Two of the research. Following a phone call with the principal, an invitation was extended by the school to give a presentation to the whole school staff during an after school TPL session. A presentation was made to the staff and Board of Management approval was granted in late June 2023.

The school participating in the research was a large co-educational special school for students with an intellectual disability that fell within a designated intelligence quotient (IQ) range. Located in an urban area, it served children and young people with an intellectual disability within the locality and as well as children travelling up to ninety minutes from their homes daily. The school catered for children of primary and secondary school age and offered curricula at both primary and second level. The school offered the following curricula: NCCA Primary school curriculum; Junior Cycle Level 3, Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and QQI at levels one, two, three.

## Recruitment of study participants

Phase Two of this study included data generation with six groups of participants. Data generation included focus groups and the Mosaic approach. In order to participate in the research, participants needed to meet specific inclusion criteria which is outlined when describing the groups.

In September 2023, a visit to the school was scheduled and meeting with a link teacher, nominated by the principal was held. The link teacher was provided with copies of the relevant information packs for parents and teachers which contained the plain language statement and informed consent forms (Appendices I-M). Following receipt of the parent consent forms, a visit to the school was scheduled to meet the relevant students.

## Focus groups

Two student focus groups were conducted in order to capture student perspectives from different transition timepoints (Group one and Group two). A focus group was held with the Senior Cycle class teachers (Group three) within the school to provide a broader school context. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

### *Group One*

Group one included three students with an intellectual disability; two males (Sam, Kit) and one female student (Ally), who were accessing LCA or QQI Level One curricula. They had a mean age of 16, were currently in full time enrolment in the participating special school and were due to graduate in 2025 or 2026 with at least two academic years of schooling remaining. The students communicated or understood communication through the English language and provided assent to participate in the study.

### *Group Two*

Group two included three students with an intellectual disability: two male students (Will, Luke) and one female student (Fiadh), accessing LCA or QQI Level Two curricula. They had a mean age of 17, were in full time enrolment in the participating special school and were due to graduate in 2024 and in their final year of schooling. The students communicated or understood communication through the English language and provided assent to participate in the study.

### *Group Three*

Group three included four Senior Cycle teachers, teaching students aged 15 or above in the participating special school; two male teachers (Mr. Dean and Tim's teacher) and two female teachers (Ms. Taylor and Lisa's teacher), teaching QQI or LCA programmes. Teachers in Group three were invited to partake in one focus group session and all provided consent.

## Mosaic Approach

The Mosaic approach included gathering the perspectives of three stakeholder groups – students, parents and teachers. A criterion for participation in this phase of the research was that collective assent to participate was required. That is assent/consent must have been provided by the student; their teacher; and their parent in order to participate. Four students, their parent/s, and their class teacher agreed to participate in the Mosaic approach (Table 16.)

*Table 16 - Mosaic Participants*

<b>Student</b>	<b>Parent</b>	<b>Teacher</b>
Lisa	Lisa's Mother Lisa's Father	Lisa's Teacher
Tim	Tim's Mother	Tim's Teacher
Sally	Sally's Mother	Sally's Teacher
Ben	Ben's Mother	Ben's Teacher

### *Group Four – Mosaic students*

Group four included four students with an intellectual disability; two male (Tim, Ben) and two female (Sally, Lisa) students, accessing LCA or QQI curricula. They had a mean age of 16, were in full time enrolment in the participating special school and were due to graduate in 2025 or 2026. The students communicated or understood communication through the English language and provided assent to participate in the study.

### *Group Five – Mosaic parents*

Group five included five parents of students with an intellectual disability in Group four: four mothers and one father (Table 17). They communicated or

understood communication through the English language. Parents in Group five were invited to engage in one semi-structured interview and one Mosaic map consultation and all provided consent.

#### *Group Six – Mosaic teachers*

Group six included three teachers of the students with an intellectual disability in Group four: one male teacher (Tim's teacher) and two female teachers (Lisa's teacher, Sally and Ben's teacher). Sally and Ben were in the same class, therefore their participating teacher is referred to as "Sally and Ben's teacher". Two of these teachers were also members of Group three (Focus Group). Teachers in Group six were invited to engage in one semi-structured interview and one Mosaic map consultation and all provided consent.

### 3.12 Ethical Considerations

Within the ethical principles of conducting research with vulnerable populations an 'Ethics as Process' approach (Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002) was adopted and was central to the methodology employed for the research. This approach afforded participants the ongoing opportunity to negotiate assent to participate, take breaks when and where required and an opportunity to withdraw from the interview/focus group/Mosaic session at any stage.

Given the context for this research, it was important to create materials that were accessible and relevant to participants which include multiple forms including visual imagery and digital technology. These are also important considerations when conducting research with children (Jadue Roa, 2017). For example, for the purposes of this study DCU templates were adapted to create inclusive and accessible documents.

Situational ethics relates to the "ethical practices that emerge from a reasoned consideration of a context's specific circumstances" (Tracy, 2010, p.847). In essence it refers to the "unpredictable, often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field" (Ellis, 2007, p.4). In the context of this research, the teachers, in their role as gatekeepers, were engaged with in a practical and sensitive way to ensure that routines and schedules were respected. For example, it was agreed that data generation sessions would not occur during priority curriculum time such as classes where exam preparation occurred. Other important times during the school day were established at the

outset with the link teacher. Throughout the data generation with Group one, some unpredictable ethically important moments arose (Ellis, 2007). One example illustrated below for student Ally:

Ally was invited to attend a one-off focus group as she was a member of Group one, graduating that school year. She provided assent and attended. However, as some of her peers were in the Mosaic group and had more regular interaction with the researcher, she questioned the researcher each day, enquiring as to when her next session was. It became clear that she had not fully understood that there was a distinction between the one-off session and those in the Mosaic group. Both the researcher and the class teacher reminded her of her contribution to the research already, that it was greatly appreciated and that she could still chat informally with the researcher when she spent time with their class.

#### *Ethical considerations - Student recruitment*

During the recruitment process, students were met in small groups during the school day to explain the research project. The groups were split into those demonstrating interest in the focus groups (Group one and Group two) and those demonstrating interest in the Mosaic approach (Group four). Each student was provided with a relevant plain language statement which was read aloud to them by the researcher. Students understanding was further aided by the creation of a digital video which was shown to the students on the researcher's laptop. The short two-minute animated video used language that mirrored language used in the plain language statements. After the video was shown, any questions were responded to by the researcher, and assent was sought from each relevant student using highly visual informed assent forms (Appendices J-M).

#### **Materials**

In order to support the Ethics as Process approach (Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002), each student was provided with a range of visual supports which acted as a constant opportunity to renegotiate assent and have as a visual prompt of their options to stop, slow down, or ask for clarification throughout the sessions. These cards remained in front of each student for the duration of the session. The visuals were printed in full colour and laminated. The check in card was in A4 size and the break, slow down and stop cards were in A5 size (Image 2).

### *Ethical considerations – Student focus groups 1 & 2*

In keeping with ethical principles, the commencement of the focus group included ascertaining if students still wanted to participate, having already provided assent at an earlier date. All students indicated that they wanted to participate, and each student was provided with the visual support cards. Periodic pauses to use the check in card were facilitated.

### *Ethical considerations – Mosaic Approach*

The same ethical considerations were afforded to the students in the Mosaic approach (Group four), each interaction firstly included ascertaining if they wanted to participate on each day of data generation. When the students indicated that they did want to participate, they were provided with the visual support cards to provide a constant visual reminder of their options within the session.

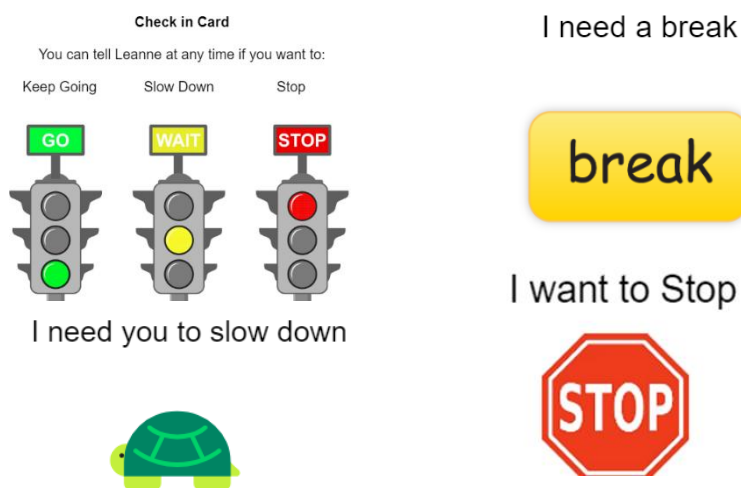


Image 2 - Examples of Ethics Visual Supports

## 3.13 Piloting

Piloting of the data generation tools in the Mosaic approach occurred with Lisa (Group four) as she was the first participant in the study. As such, her sequence of sessions preceded the sessions conducted with Tim, Ben and Sally. By working with Lisa first, it allowed for insights into which tools were garnering the greatest information and most suitable to the student. After the first session, where Lisa opted for the sketchpad and the semi-structured interview, it was determined that the inclusion of additional tools would support her in articulating her vision. After a phone call with the lead supervisor at the end of day one, it was decided to increase the number of visual supports and whiteboards were introduced.

Similarly, Lisa struggled to identify skills and talents in session two, so Widgit Online software was introduced after she revealed that she enjoyed working with computers. Therefore, the process remained fluid and reflexive in the employment of various media that would support the articulation of their thoughts.

Respecting each student participant as an individual, the tools were then adapted for each student, depending on their preferences. For example, Sally found it more challenging to verbally articulate her responses so the mini-whiteboards, flipchart paper and Widgit Online took preference over the semi-structured interview. Contrastingly, Tim chose the semi-structured interview rather than using visual supports or Widgit Online. It is important to note that health, disability or cognitive profile information was not gathered about the students at any stage of the process. Therefore, neither their receptive and expressive language skills nor literacy and writing skills were ascertained. As a result, no assumptions were made about their cognitive profiles and skills. Whiteboards were used to support the student in mind mapping and capturing key words that were discussed during the sessions. The board was then available to the student to copy the text from onto their A3 Sketchpad or the Mosaic map if they wished to do so.

### 3.14 Procedure

As part of the ethical approval process in DCU, all aspects of anonymity and confidentiality were carefully planned to ensure they are upheld and respected. Plain language statements outlined that while all efforts would be made to provide confidentiality, that it could not be guaranteed. This was also important in the context of the focus groups as confidentiality could not be guaranteed from other participants.

Successful use of the Mosaic approach requires researchers to embed themselves in the research setting, building up a rapport and familiarisation with the research participants and the staff working in the setting (Clark, 2017). Therefore, data was generated with the participants over the course of five weeks between November 2023 and February 2024. The school was visited on mutually agreeable dates and typically the full school day was spent at the

research site. Sessions with students were held in a nearby multipurpose room in the same building as their classroom.

## Focus groups

### *Group One and Group Two*

The research design included conducting two student focus groups (Group one and Group two) and one teacher focus group (Group three). Two to three focus groups yield 80% of themes on a topic when the group is homogeneous (Guest et al., 2017) when using a semi-structured guide and when the topic is not overly complex. In this study, Group one had a mean age of 16, in their final two years of school and Group two had a mean age of 17 in their final year of school.

The Group one focus group was facilitated on day three of data collection and the Group two focus group on day four. Both groups were expected to have a membership of four students in each, however on the days they were conducted, one student was absent from each group, with unknown return dates to school. As a result, it was decided to proceed with three students in each group. The focus group with Group one was held for 45 minutes, and Group two was held for 28 minutes.

### *Group Three – Teachers focus group*

A focus group was held with four of the Senior Cycle class teachers (Group three) within the school. It was conducted after some initial analysis of the data generated with Groups one to five in February 2024. The focus group aimed to support the teachers in reflecting upon the issues and suggestions raised throughout the data generation process. It acted as a support to the teachers in discussing areas of strengths and areas they wished to change. The questions had been shared with the teachers in advance of the session and consent regained on the day of the focus group. The teachers focus group was 50 minutes in duration.

## Mosaic Approach

### *Group Four – Mosaic Approach students*

The informed assent sheet was reintroduced to each student at the beginning of the sessions and verbal assent gained to proceed with the session. Periodically throughout the session, a pause was provided which allowed the use of the visual support cards. It was important to remain vigilant for non-

verbal signs that the student was becoming uncomfortable and where necessary, the check in card was employed again. This proved an invaluable resource throughout data generation, and as the students became more familiar with the card and the periodic check ins, they began to self-initiate a check in on occasion. As a result, session length varied from 11 minutes to 1 hour 3 minutes and was determined by the student.

*Group Five & Six – Mosaic Approach Parents & Teachers*

Parents and teachers of students in Group four were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview and Mosaic map consultation. The three teachers and five parents provided written consent to participate. The data generation sessions were scheduled at an agreed time in person within the school setting. The meetings were conducted one to one and participants had been provided with the questions in advance of the sessions. The sessions varied in length from 35 to 55 minutes.

### Stages in the Mosaic Approach

The Mosaic approach has three distinct stages which support the creation of a “living picture” of their lives (Clark & Moss, 2017, p.33). The three stages are outlined in Table 17, and how they were applied in this research.

*Table 17 - Stages in Mosaic Approach*

<b>Stage 1</b>	Gather learner and adult perspectives	Teachers and parents invited to semi-structured interview about the learner; learner engages in 4-6 sessions with researcher and creates the map
<b>Stage 2</b>	Discuss the material	Teachers and parents are shown the completed maps for consultation; students reflect on their completed map
<b>Stage 3</b>	Changes to practice	A commitment to a change in practice is identified and supported by the researcher

### Stage one

Stage one of the Mosaic approach involved knowledge generation with the students and relevant adults. This included a semi-structured interview with the parents and teachers and allowed for the gathering of views and experiences of transition preparation and transition planning. The questions were built upon those asked in the Phase One survey and allowed for greater depth of information to be provided. The semi-structured interview schedules included questions across three categories: transition preparation; post-school

aspirations; and knowledge of PSOs. Participants were asked to consider their aspirations for the student, and aspirations they felt the student held for themselves. The nature of the semi-structured interview allowed for participants to expand on answers and for the interview to follow the lead of the participant.

Aligning with the students’ preferences for communication and interaction, a variety of options were presented for communication of their responses (Table 18).

Table 18 - Menu of Tools

<b>Menu of tools offered to students in the Mosaic approach</b>	
<b>Method</b>	
Thought Journal	A physical journal where learners document their thoughts about what they want to do when they leave school, between sessions
Child interviews	Short interview with the student; and conversations initiated by the student
Children’s selection of images	Images selected from WigitOnline.com representing their skills, talents and attributes
Drawing and annotations	Writing that students have added to images and drawings that the students create to represent post school goals
Writing	Students writing in describing post school goals
Map making	A visual map created to represent the steps required to achieve the post school goal or represent their vision of their life post-school

### Physical thought journal

Each student that engaged in the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001; Rogers & Boyd, 2020) was provided with a physical thought journal at the start of the data generation process (Appendix N). This was a researcher designed tool as it was anticipated that due to the presence of an intellectual disability, and as they may have differences in their expressive and receptive language (Beail & Williams, 2014) that students may continue to process the conversations and questions posed during sessions long after each session had concluded. Therefore, a simple template was designed for students to capture their ongoing thoughts throughout the process. It contained four simple questions with two additional prompts (Figure 22).

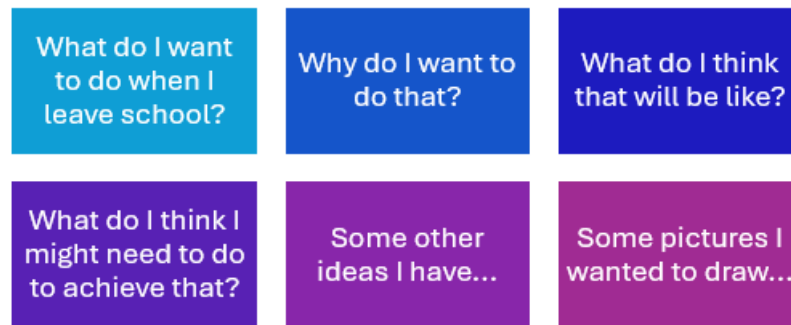


Figure 22 - Thought Journal Questions

Two of the four students used the thought journal and were invited to discuss it at the session. It remained the property of the student and was not photographed as part of data generation. All students were provided with an A3 unlined artist's sketchpad, and a range of colouring and writing implements from the first session. The sketchpad was a working document which allowed the students to capture their thoughts without committing them to their final map. When the sessions progressed to making the map, students had the opportunity to cut out some images depicted in the sketchpad and stick them into the map. This allowed students to reflect on their work in previous sessions and selectively choose which items best represented their views.

#### *Additional supports*

During conversations with students, a small A4 sized whiteboard was used to capture the students' ideas and thoughts. The whiteboard activity included mind mapping of work experience ideas, capturing ideas of what the students wished for their lives in 10 years' time and captured key words that they may have wished to use in their final map. The students dictated which points were to be written on the whiteboard. Member checking was then conducted with the students before taking a picture of the whiteboard, which was then printed off for the student. It was at their discretion whether they used the image in their final map or not. For some students, the whiteboard was used as a literacy support where words or sentences that the student dictated were written on the whiteboard and the student copied it down onto their final map. An example of a mind map created on the mini whiteboard can be seen in Image 3 by Lisa.

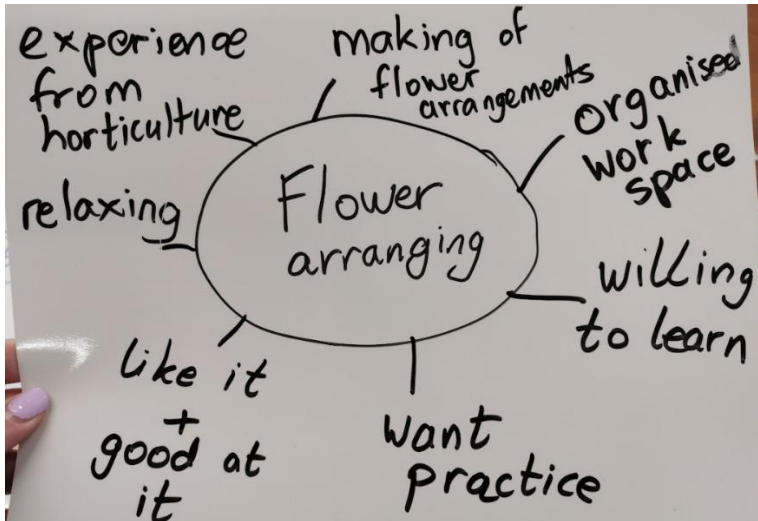


Image 3 - Flower Arranging - Lisa

Having worked with Lisa in piloting the data generation tools, the Widgit Online website was used with three of the four students to capture images that reflected their skills, talents and attributes. Students had the autonomy to name a skill, for example, hoovering or area for development and then choose an image that best represented the meaning from the range of cloud-based symbols. These symbols were saved and printed off in full colour. In the subsequent session, students then reflected on the printed symbols and selected which ones they wanted to be included in their final map. While Lisa had three A4 pages of skills, talents and attributes depicted, a select few were chosen for her map which demonstrated a level of reflection. An example of the images generated using the Widgit Online software can be seen in Image 4.



Image 4 - Widgit Online Images - Lisa

Sessions varied in duration from 11 minutes to 1 hour 3 minutes. While it was anticipated that five sessions would be conducted with each student, flexibility and reflexivity was maintained throughout the data generation process and therefore the number of sessions conducted varied from four to six sessions. It was also important to observe for signs of fatigue with the topic. As these students had at least two years left in school, most had not begun to consider life after school nor had it been discussed with them and as to be expected, there were many questions that were unanswered or answered with a response of “I don’t know”. An overview of Lisa’s data generation sessions can be seen in Table 19 and for the other three students in Appendix O.

*Table 19 - Overview of Data Generation Sessions for Lisa*

Session 1	35mins	Interview and drawing on sketchpad – focused on the semi-structured interview questions
Session 2	54mins	Questioning, drawing and mind maps dictated by student, written by researcher on mini whiteboard – focused on aspects of school student enjoyed, vision for life in 10 years’ time and three work experiences that could be explored
Session 3	1-hour 3min	Map making- cutting and sticking drawings from sketchpad. Student supported by researcher to add words to the map. Used WidgeitOnline.com to create images of skills/talents/attributes
Session 4	49mins	Map making –Using the printed off version of WidgeitOnline.com images generated in Session 3, student selected which ones to include in the map. Researcher questioning regarding goals for the final two years in school
Session 5	22mins	Recap on map and researcher questioning
<b>Total time</b>		<b>3 hours 43mins</b>

## Stage two

Stage two of the Mosaic approach involved discussing the material created. Students were invited to review the content of their map throughout the sessions and in a more formal way in the final session. Students were invited to look at the items that had been included in the final map, and items that had been previously discussed but had not been included in the final product. In some cases, students’ responses were brief, to-the-point and factual that the process had concluded. For others, this final step was an opportunity for reflection on their journey. Ben for example, appeared particularly reflective and

satisfied with his map, often commenting on “growing up” and having the opportunity to talk about it. He commented in Session 4, “look at all of my ideas” and at the end of the session thanked me for helping him “think about my life and asking me those questions.”

When the students had completed their Mosaic maps, there were asked if they were happy for them to be shared with their teacher and their participating parent/s. All four students indicated verbally that they were happy for this to occur. They had also been made aware of this at the beginning of the process through the plain language statement and frequently through the informed assent form. The completed Mosaic maps for all four students can be found in Appendix P.

#### *Group Five and Six – Mosaic consultations*

A consultation meeting was held with Group six teachers and Group five parents at an agreed time in person within the school setting. The meetings were conducted one to one and the completed maps and the materials that were used in the map making process were brought to the session (pictures from mini-whiteboards, Widgit Online pictures that had been chosen but not used on the final map, etc. – Images 5 & 6).

Firstly, the research process that had been undertaken was explained to the relevant adult/s, describing in detail the tools chosen by the student, the number of sessions that had occurred and the key points from the data generation sessions. The adult/s were then shown the students map and allowed some time to read and reflect on it.

The adult/s were then shown each item on the map, ensuring accurate representation of the students' images, writing, drawing and the narrative around the Mosaic map. This was a very important task and to support it, in advance of the consultation, the transcripts were re-read, and audio recordings listened to, to ensure an accurate representation of the creation of the Mosaic map.

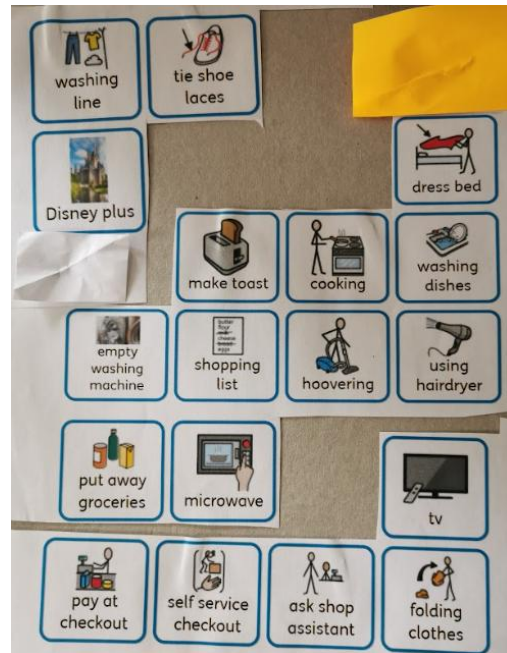


Image 5 - Widge Images Not Selected - Lisa

An example of this could be seen for Lisa – it was explained to parents that despite creating nearly three A4 pages worth of skills and strengths using Widge Online, she carefully selected a much smaller number to add to the final map. They were able to add additional context as to why she added make coffee and make tea that hadn't been mentioned by the student, as on school days, she "has to unlock the door, go in...make herself tea" (Lisa's father).

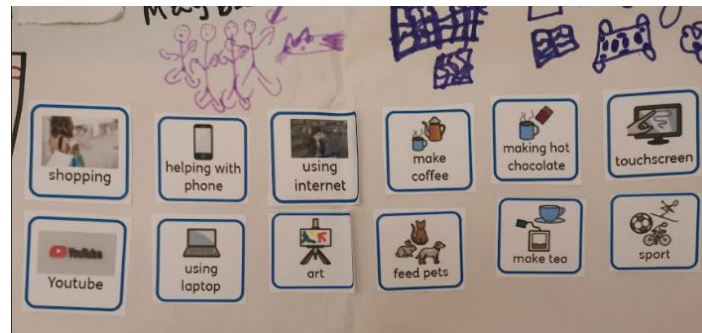


Image 6 - Widge Images Included in Final Map - Lisa

### Stage three

Stage three involved changes to practice which was also an essential element

of this research, embedded in a pragmatic constructivist paradigm. Following engagement with stage two discussion of the material, parents, students and teachers all identified aspects of change that they wanted to embed into practice. One example could be seen in the teachers focus group where they identified very tangible, practice-based changes that they were committing to implementing for example, the structure and scheduling of work experience. They identified that there were other ways of engaging with it and identified

that they would seek to change work experience to one day a week across a school term, instead of the current practice of two blocks within the school year. Examples such as policy changes, practice changes, autonomy, equality of opportunity, enhanced choice were also evidenced. These are explored further in the context of findings and discussion.

### 3.15 Data Management

Phase One surveys were gathered anonymously, with no identifying information captured such as names, email or IP address. Surveys were stored on the DCU Licenced Qualtrics account and data downloaded to the DCU issued laptop. Any identifying information in the qualitative responses was anonymised and data retention procedures outlined in the ethics process indicate that the data will be kept for a maximum of five years from June 2022. Only the researcher had access to the raw and anonymised data which was stored on a password protected laptop and in the encrypted Google Drive account.

#### Data recordings

Phase Two data generation sessions were recorded using the DCU issued laptop and the DCU Licensed zoom account. The camera feature was turned off and only the audio recorded. The participants were reminded at the start of each session that the audio would be recorded and verbal consent/assent obtained before each recording began.

On the day the recordings were made, they were automatically saved to the DCU Licensed Zoom Cloud account. As Zoom has capability to transcribe the audio recordings within the software, the recordings were not shared with a third party for transcription or any other purposes. All participants were allocated a pseudonym, and ages of student participants were presented as mean age in line with data masking. Any identifiable information that was captured in the completed Mosaic maps was redacted before being photographed and used in the final thesis. The maps remained the property of the students.

As the default name of the recorded files was “Leanne Connolly’s Zoom Meeting”, after each session concluded, each recording file was renamed to the allocated pseudonym for that participant. Each session was also labelled correctly (Image 7).

<input type="checkbox"/> Topic	ID	Start Time	File Size
<input type="checkbox"/> Teacher C & D Interview and Mosaic Consultations	968 4603 1565	Nov 30, 2023 01:56 PM	3 Files (107 MB)
<input type="checkbox"/> Student C Mosaic 4	958 3652 0853	Nov 30, 2023 01:37 PM	3 Files (31 MB)
<input type="checkbox"/> Teacher B Mosaic Consultant	950 7747 4748	Nov 30, 2023 12:30 PM	3 Files (31 MB)

Image 7 - Cloud Recording Labelling

Folders were set up on the desktop of the DCU issued laptop which used only the pseudonyms of the participants. These folders contained the original versions of the transcripts for each participant linked with that student. The audio recordings were listened to by the researcher only and the transcription edited to amend any errors. The transcript was anonymised to remove any references to local areas, names of PSOs and any names of friends, family or staff using the square brackets, for example [name of sibling]. The original transcripts were then deleted from the desktop and only the redacted versions uploaded to the DCU Google Drive Account.

While the researchers PhD folder on Google Drive was shared with the two supervisors, photos of consent/assent forms and any images created using the mini-whiteboards were kept in a folder that only the researcher had access to.

### Storage and disposal of data

In relation to the types of personal data being collected, it was limited to:

- a) paper-based records e.g., names, consent/assent forms, interview notes, focus group notes, observations during student conferencing and mosaic making, student participants age and number of years left in school, transcripts.
- b) electronic records e.g. photos of student artefacts/mosaic, photos of consent/assent forms, audio recordings of focus groups, interviews and Mosaic map making sessions.

In line with data minimisation principles, personal data was deleted as soon as possible after collection. Further details of the retention and disposal of data can be observed in Appendix Q.

### 3.16 Validity and Reliability

Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that they demonstrate the steps they have taken to account for accuracy and credibility of their findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell & Miller (2000) define validity in qualitative research as determination of the accuracy of the findings from the standpoint of the researcher, participant or the reader. While much has been written on these concepts since Lincoln and Guba (1985), their four general criteria when aiming for trustworthiness remain dominant: credibility; transferability, dependability and confirmability. Steps taken in this study included triangulation; member checking; rich, thick descriptions; clarifying bias; spending prolonged time in the field; peer-debriefing.

Cohen et al. (2018), describe triangulation as a way of mapping out and explaining human behaviour by examining it from more than one viewpoint. It brings together data from different sources to build a coherent justification for themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, triangulation was inbuilt into the theoretical framework, research design, and data generation tools. The conceptual framework brought together the human rights-based approach to this project through the UNCRPD (2006), the promotion of participatory approaches, the Simplican et al. (2015) model of social inclusion and Kohler's Taxonomy (2016) as seen in Figure 23.

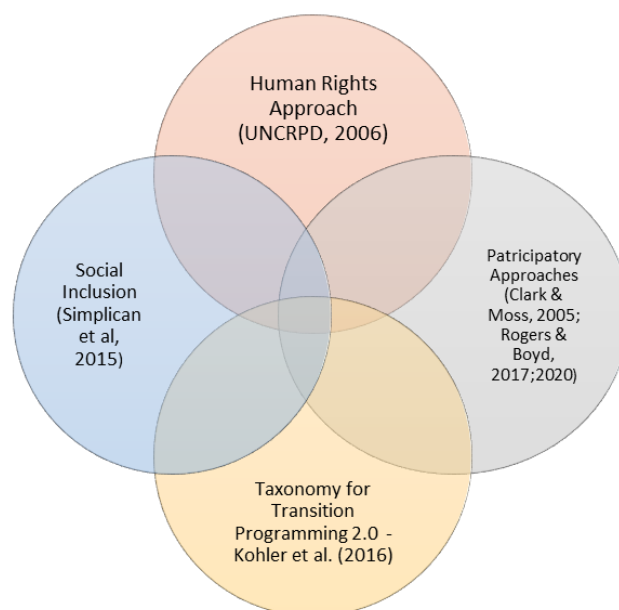


Figure 23 - Conceptual Triangulation

The complex application of the core explanatory sequential mixed method design, allowed for methodological triangulation through quantitative and then qualitative data generation, capturing the broad national voice of teachers and principals in special schools in Ireland in Phase One, and then exploring and explaining those results in more detail in Phase Two. Phase Two also captured additional voices of parents and students in special schools, ensuring that the voices of four key stakeholders in transition were captured.

The Phase One surveys captured the voices of teachers and principals in special schools in Ireland. The design of the surveys allowed for the comparison of viewpoints on topics related to transition. For example, principals' views on the role of the class teacher regarding transition planning versus the teachers own views on what their role should be. This facilitated triangulation of the results through gathering the different perspectives.

The data generation using the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001), demonstrated triangulation of data through capturing the voice of the student, their participating teacher and their participating parent/s. Supporting this, was the inclusion of focus groups of students at two transition timepoints. An additional element was the data generated with the Senior Cycle class teachers through the focus group along with the researcher's reflexive diary, field notes and observations (Figure 24).



*Figure 24 - Data Generation Tool Triangulation*

The Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) facilitated the generation of data from three distinct viewpoints to address the research questions. The aim of the research was to identify the views and experiences of different stakeholders on transition preparation and transition planning. The design of the Mosaic approach, allowed for a focused form of data generation on four students, their participating parent/s and their participating teacher. While general views were captured around concepts related to transition, by situating the student at the centre of these discussions, it facilitated the generation of very focused data about their perspective on transition planning related to that particular student.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that member checking can be used to determine the accuracy of findings from qualitative data by sharing aspects of the findings with the participants to ascertain their accuracy. Member-checks were conducted throughout Phase Two to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. This was particularly important with the student to ensure that they fully understood what was being communicated. This was achieved in several ways.

Firstly, the use of the mini whiteboards allowed the students to dictate what was being captured and they could visually see if any interpretive errors had been made and correct them immediately. Secondly, by listening to the audio recordings on the day of data collection, questions or points raised by the

students could be recast to confirm interpretation and understanding. Finally, in the focus groups, when at times it was not fully understood what the student was trying to communicate, the other students, who knew each other very well, were able to clarify or ask the student a follow-up question. Within the context of the teacher's data generation, once the data had been generated with the parents and the students, the focus group with the teachers provided the opportunity to present some initial findings and allowed them an opportunity to consider those findings and comment on them.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe the importance of spending prolonged periods of time in the research setting. This was also an essential component of the Mosaic approach (Clarke, 2017) to get to know the participants, the setting, the culture and to build trust when generating data. In this project, a significant amount of time was spent in the setting over a four-month period. The initial meeting with the link teacher took place at the end of September 2023 and the data generation sessions were conducted between early November to mid December 2023. The final teachers focus group took place in early February 2024. In total, more than 30 hours across 11 days were spent at the school site.

A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research process from initial research conception through to data analysis. It included pen and paper records in the form of documented ideas, notes from key literature and policy, training requirements and indicative timelines and tasks. During data generation, it proved supportive in managing the schedules of data generation, keeping note of availability of teachers and students and planning out each data generation session. It also provided an opportunity for observational field notes to be recorded while in the school.

Digital notes were captured within NVIVO R12 and included written reflections on informal conversations had with various participants and notations during transcription of body language and other contextual data such as if the participants were tired, distracted etc. Analytical memos and annotations captured in NVIVO, supported the documentation of any potential bias through the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) process.

A Critical Friend or "peer debriefer" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.201), supported the researcher throughout. This critical friend was a former teaching

colleague in the special school, and now an academic who has experience conducting research with children with SEND. The critical friend did not have access to any of the data and her role was limited to piloting materials, engaging in critical dialogue after data generation and posing questions which promoted reflexivity and challenged bias. This role complemented but did not replace the role of supervision from the two supervisors.

### 3.17 Phase Two - Data Analysis

The qualitative data was analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). Their six phases (Table 20) allow researchers to become immersed in the data and to work in an iterative process to generate, review and refine themes. To support the implementation of RTA, the Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) NVIVO-R12 was chosen as the most appropriate data analysis software.

#### Rationale for Selection of NVIVO-R12 Software

When considering employing a Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS), researchers must consider which approach is most suitable to the research and be mindful that each method will present opportunities, challenges or constraints (Braun & Clarke, 2022). QDAS have been a widely used technology for managing large qualitative data sets and allow researchers to organise, visualise and examine relationships between data (Robson, 2011). Within this study, NVIVO-R12 was used specifically as a data analysis tool which allowed for the generation of analytical memos, annotations on transcripts, visualisation of codes and the ability to link to the literature identified in the scoping review. NVIVO-R12 was used in conjunction with traditional paper based manual coding during the various analytical phases, which have been identified throughout and in particular in Phases Three, Four and Five.

Table 20 - Six Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

	Phase of Analysis	Researcher Process
Phase 1	Familiarising yourself with the dataset	Immersion in the data, reading, re-reading, annotating, documenting analytical ideas
Phase 2	Coding	Systematically identifying interesting, relevant or meaningful segments of data
Phase 3	Generating initial themes	Identifying shared patterns of meaning across the dataset – an active process where themes are constructed by the researcher
Phase 4	Developing and reviewing themes	A process of assessing the viability of the initial themes against the dataset. Consideration for the relationships between themes is important in this phase
Phase 5	Refining, defining and naming themes	Refining the themes ensuring they are clearly capturing the story being told. Rename and writing summaries of the themes is core in this phase
Phase 6	Writing up the report	The process of writing the narrative of the data, using extracts to bring the data to life for the reader, while also situating the data in the literature and policy context.

## Phase one

The first phase in RTA involves familiarisation with the dataset. Braun and Clarke (2022) describe how this takes place in three ways – immersion, critical engagement and note making. Each element allows researchers to engage with their data in different ways. Immersion requires development of deep and intimate knowledge of the data, such as reading and re-reading the data, listening to the audio recordings and repeatedly viewing visual items. Critical engagement involves asking questions about the dataset and interrogating yourself as a researcher, in terms of the way in which it is being viewed and interpreted. The third stage involves note making, where researchers note ideas they have about the research at this point. This can include field notes and reflective diaries, sketches and mind-maps as well as annotations and memos, either handwritten or digitally created.

During the transcription process in Microsoft Word, each recording was listened to in full and the Zoom autogenerated transcript was read, re-read, edited and corrected for any errors or omissions. The product was a verbatim transcript of each data generation session. This supported familiarisation with the content of the interviews and data generation sessions. Anonymised transcripts were imported into NVIVO and sorted into the relevant folders.

Critical engagement with the data included the creation of analytical questions, which included positionality, bias, assumptions held prior to data generation and the creation of some broader questions. An example of this was a handwritten memo in the reflective journal about school culture. The phrase “What’s valued – what’s certified or what’s purposeful?” was documented following observations in the school setting, conversations with the participants and having listened to the audio and read the transcripts.

Phase One familiarisation also involved annotating the transcripts to include non-verbal cues, gestures, and other relevant contextual information. The annotation process commenced in Phase One; however, it was an iterative process and as familiarisation with the data increased, and the broader concepts that were being explored within it, more and more annotations were made to the transcripts in Phases Two and Three.

Memos were also generated throughout the data analysis process which allowed for the development of an analytical strategy, tracking development of thoughts, and making observations. From this point, memos were captured in NVIVO only which allowed for the linkage to specific comments or extracts within the transcripts. As the twenty articles from the scoping literature review had been imported into NVIVO, the use of digitally created memos in NVIVO, allowed for them to be linked to the literature when ideas arose.

## Phase two

During Phase Two of analysis, each transcript and visual Mosaic map was examined line by line and codes were created. These codes were a combination of semantic, participant driven meaning codes, and latent researcher driven conceptual meaning codes. Neither method is superior to the other and researchers must determine the best strategy depending on their project and datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). As the dataset included multiple participants, stakeholder types and in varying formats, a mixture of latent and semantic coding was used. An example of semantic coding can be seen in Table 21.

Table 21 - Phase Two Codes - Semantic

NLN	References to the National Learning Network as a post school option
No One Size Fits All	References to the individualised nature of transition planning
No Post school follow up	References to lack of follow up with/from Post school services
Normal Child	References to the hidden disability - appearance vs diagnosis
Not crushing dreams	References to not wanting to crush post school dreams

The language of the codes stayed close to the language of the participants. Contrastingly, many latent codes were generated, which depict researcher driven meaning, examining the underlying sentiment behind a comment or extract of data (Table 22).

Table 22 - Phase Two Codes - Latent

Role of School	Views on the role of the school in transition planning/prep to include role of teachers and leadership
School culture and barriers	References to the existing school culture and the barriers associated with that culture
School preparing student for work-life after school	Identifying aspects of school life and curriculum that prepare the student for life after school

The creation of a clear and well-defined boundary around a code name was important in this phase. These code labels allowed for a brief, concise yet precise summary of what was to be contained within that code.

The process of Phase Two coding was systematic following the RTA guidelines. The first round of coding started with the student focus groups, then parent and teacher, then the individual mosaic student sessions. The second round of Phase Two coding, started with parents, then students, then teachers. Within this second round of coding, the transcripts were also coded out of the chronological sequence that they had been conducted and examined in round one. This supported considering the content of the transcript in a different way than the interviews had been conducted.

Along with the 38 transcripts from the range of data generation sessions, the students Mosaic maps were also coded. The maps were imported to NVIVO and coded within it. An example of a coded map with coding stripes can be seen in Image 8.

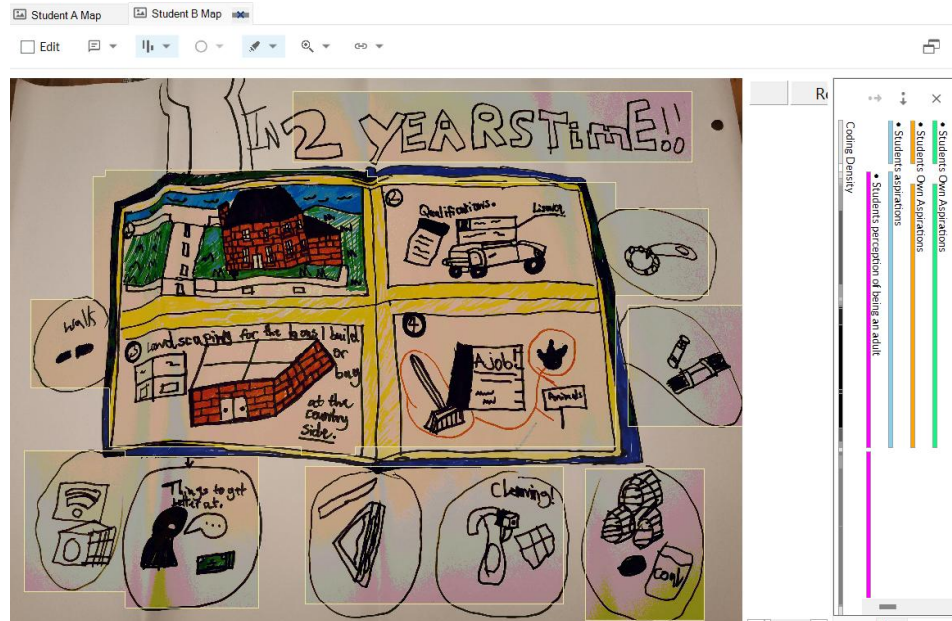


Image 8 - Coded Map with Coding Stripes

At the end of round one Phase Two of coding, 201 codes were generated, with 207 by the end of round two. This multi-round process also involved refining code names and code labels, making them more specific or refining the analytical take on the code (Table 23).

Table 23 - Phase Two - Coding Example

### Leanne's PhD Phase Two

Codes\\Phase 2 - Systematic data coding

Name	Description	Files	References
Adopted	References to the Student being adopted	2	3
Advocacy	Parents advocating and fighting for resources	1	9
After school activities	References to the students engaging in after school activities	6	9
Animals and Pets	Students references to animals; horses, dogs, hens, fish	28	105
Anti-immigration	References to employment and immigration	4	16
Anti-drugs	References to drugs and related concepts	3	3
Art	References to art being preferred or important to the student	7	20
Barrier to employment	Examples of perceived barriers to employment	5	6
Being an adult - car or license	Students references to wanting a car and a license when they're an adult	20	54
Being an adult - earning having money	student references to having money as an adult	16	39
Being an adult - Get a job	References to getting a job or paid employment after school	23	53

Some challenges within this stage of coding were ensuring that the codes did not start to become categories, particularly when employing the latent coding lens. Frequent evaluation of the code names and boundaries placed on the codes ensured they were aligned with Phase Two coding. The writing of

analytical memos at this stage supported this and allowed for documenting of ideas.

### Phase three

Phase Three of analysis explored the generation of themes which Braun and Clarke (2022) define as a “pattern of shared meaning organised around a central concept” (p.77). This was a challenging task, ensuring that the patterns of meaning were concisely captured, yet not merely becoming topic summaries. The first stages of this phase involved mind-mapping ideas around the codes and starting to identify what would fit together. This was a physical pen and paper task, along with flipchart paper, markers and sticky notes.

Moving back into NVIVO, along with a printed copy of Phase Two codes, systematic evaluation of the codes allowed for the creation of relevant categories or initial themes. This involved examining the codes, the data contained within them, and often refining the coding as at times, it was not nuanced enough and too broad. Recoding, un-coding and merging all occurred in this phase. This led to an additional six codes being generated, bring the total to 213. Additional annotations and analytical memos were also created to support the tracking of thought as well as continued links to the literature using the “See Also Links” feature.

While writing one analytical memo, the lightbulb moment occurred for one candidate theme. This theme captures the importance of parental support for post-school outcomes and can be seen in the memo (Image 9).

"12/09/2024 14:19

*The importance of parental support I feel is very strong and the influence of parent aspirations or parenting style in general is very important. I am not sure it is as well captured in the codes as it is a hard one to pinpoint but the parenting style and relationships with parents seems to have been influential in many ways on these students - **students see parents as an essential support system and source of information to them.** Actually, that sentence perhaps captures it - all 4 students in the Mosaic, despite having a mixture of parenting styles and family make ups are very invested in their families and particularly with their parents. It was similar for at least two or three of the focus group participants. **The only references to lack of parental support and the impact of it came from the teachers - which is really interesting - is it a perceived impact of a lack of support - did they have real examples????** Or is it a perception (linked to my previous memo about "are supportive parents seen as a substitute for transition planning?") that teachers have that if they have actively involved parents, then that transition support and planning might not be as important or essential, given their limited resources, and that those active parents will pursue "good" outcomes no matter what. It links to the code – "parents having resources and contacts" which came up across the dataset.*

*I wonder is it a perception then from teachers, that due to the lack of resources, that they must choose who to focus more intently on? They are very invested and they know the socio-economic backgrounds of many of the parents (references by Teacher B to drug use by siblings, TA some parents may be past pupils, etc) so perhaps they feel incase the parents don't do it, we better do it....where does equity and their duty to all students come into it then???? "*

Image 9 -Phase Three Sample Analytical Memo

During this phase of analysis, a supervision meeting was also held which acted as a support in ensuring that the coding was clear and accurately reflected the raw data. Having engaged with Phase Three, 28 candidate themes were created, containing 442 coded items which can be seen in the Phase Three codebook in Image 10.

Phase 3 - Generating initial themes from coded and collated data			
Name	Description	Files	References
Transition Preparation	Curriculum and related activities that support skill development and independence	42	1238
Whats important to the student	Codes related to what is important to the student at the time of data collection	41	758
Parental factors	Codes related to the parent as a support or barrier to transition planning	33	642
Transition Planning	Process of planning & supporting student to leave school	36	615
Curriculum	Codes related to curriculum access, allocation, as a pathway and as a barrier	41	615
Whats important for the student	Codes related to what participants view as important for students as they leave school	41	572
Supports	Codes related to current or future desired supports to engage in transition planning	32	570
Students aspirations	Codes related to students aspirations for their life post school	42	563
Students perception of being an adult	Codes referring to the concept of being an adult, what they need, what they will be able to do	41	553
Post School Options	Codes related to views on, knowledge of and experience of PSO	39	498
Participants readiness to think about transition	Codes referencing participants readiness to consider transition planning and factors that impact	36	381
What is valued What's certified or what's purpose	Codes related to what participants value vs what they currently experience	36	302
Potential employment types	Codes from participants indicating the types of potential employment	38	276
Challenges for parents	Codes for parental challenges in navigating the transition	28	268
Family relationships	Codes referring to relationships within the immediate and extended family	37	264
Collaboration	Codes related to the current or potential future collaboration in transition planning	28	261
Work Experience	Participants views towards work experience	23	250
Perceived student vulnerability	Codes referring to the teacher and parent perceptions of the impact of the SEN and their vulner	34	244
Adult views on aspirations	Codes of parent and teacher aspirations for student and their views on the students own aspirati	18	204

Image 10 - Phase Three Codebook

Towards the end of Phase Three, a meeting was held with a member of the NVIVO support team to check that the data was correctly coded, categories created and to support the preparation for Phase Four of the analytical process.

## Phase four

Phase Four involved extending and reviewing the initial theme development. Braun and Clarke (2022) (p.97) outline characteristics of good thematic analysis as themes which:

- are built around one central idea.
- employ richness and diversity in illustrating that idea.
- do not try to be all things to all people.
- are not too fragmented or multi-layered.
- are distinctive.

This phase presented a complex challenge in ascertaining how the categories interlinked and addressed the key questions posed by Braun and Clarke (2022) such as ensuring there are clear boundaries, enough evidence, coherence and conveying something important. It involved multiple iterations of manual map making using flipchart paper, pens, highlighters and sticky notes and was likened to creating a seating plan for a wedding in terms of complexity. The iterative nature of RTA was apparent in Phase Four as this stage required frequent reengagement with the raw data, transcripts and initial codes. Keeping the advice of Braun and Clarke (2022) in mind, it was identified that one candidate theme was misrepresenting the meaning behind the category, as illustrated in Image 11.

23/09/2024 13:03

So far today, I have worked both in NVIVO and pen and paper. I have created a few more sketches of maps but I think, having looked at my critical friends thesis again, I am clearer on my potential final themes. I extracted all the data under each of the themes and sent them to PDFs. I started reading them but became overwhelmed. I went back to NVIVO and knew I was missing something about parents. When outside on a break, I thought that I perhaps am misrepresenting the parents in the "Alignment of aspirations" theme. They have high aspirations but not only that, they have a strong desire and willingness to do whatever it takes to support their child in achieving this. This led to me going back to the data and creating a new code for Willingness to support aspirations under the Aspirations theme. I think this is hugely important as it is probably different to what is already out there in the literature.

*Image 11 - Phase Four Sample Analytical Memo*

At the conclusion of Phase Four, five initial themes were generated as depicted in Image 12.

Phase 4 - Developing and reviewing themes	
Name	Description
Alignment or misalignment of post school aspirations	Codes for student, parent and teacher aspirations for student and their views on the students own aspirations,
Challenges for parents	Codes for parental challenges in navigating the transition
Impact of School Culture	This theme describes the impact that existing school culture has on access to curriculum, work experience. Rel
Post School Options	Codes related to views on, knowledge of and experience of PSO
Transition Practices	This theme captures the existing transition practices in the special school: transition preparation, transition pla

Image 12 – Phase Four - Five Initial Themes

## Phase five

Phase Five of RTA involved refining, defining and naming themes. This involved flipchart paper and markers in graphically representing the candidate themes and potential subthemes (Image 13). While initially, three themes identified in this phase, upon reflection a fourth theme was added. This was due to the importance of the factors that enhance transition and the participants overall desire for change, and it was felt that including it in the Post-School Transition theme did not give enough weight to the evidence contained within it. The result was four themes with relevant subthemes.

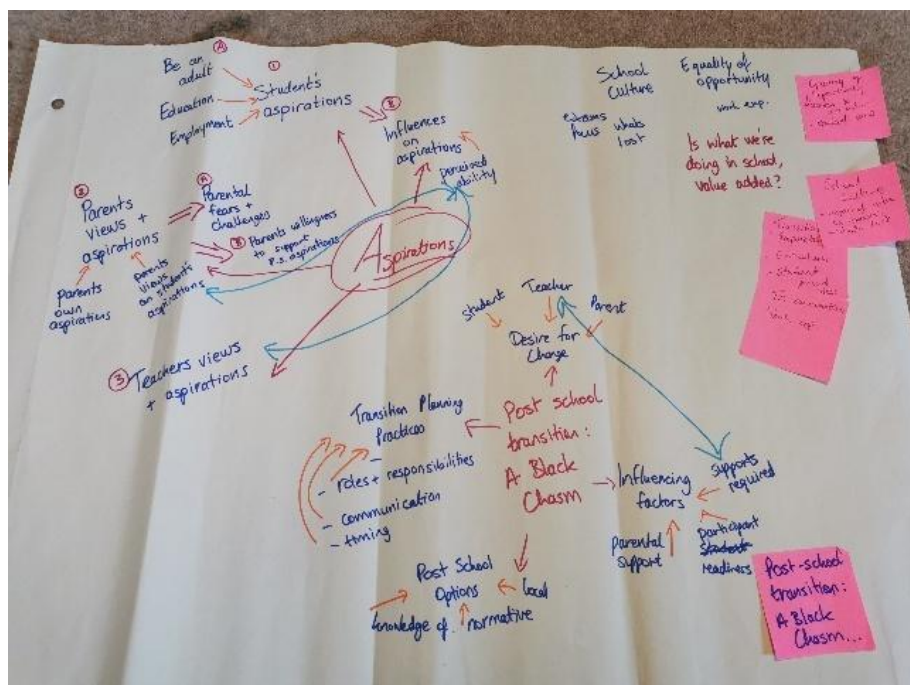


Image 13 - Phase Four - Flipchart of Initial Themes

## Phase 5 - Refining, defining and naming themes

Name	De:
Theme 1 Aspirations and Expectations	Thi
Theme 2 Current Practice for Inclusion	Thi
Theme 3 Post-School Transition	Thi
Theme 4 Factors that enhance Transition	Thi

Image 14 - Final Four Themes in NVIVO

Naming the themes was a difficult task and Braun and Clark (2022) suggest using names that will be “informative, concise and catchy” (p.111). While generating the final four themes, particular quotes from participants were noted which supported the illustration of the theme sentiment. For example, the theme Post-School Transition was initially called “Post-School Transition: A Black Chasm” employing a quote from a parent which captures the sentiment of the theme. However, in the final iterations, simple and concise titles were identified (Image 14).

Another important task in Phase Five was to write a clear theme definition. This was a very helpful exercise to ensure that the theme name and content were aligned. This involved writing one page theme summaries for each of the four themes along with thematic maps (Image 15) for each theme and an overall theme map outlining the interconnected nature of the themes (Appendix R).

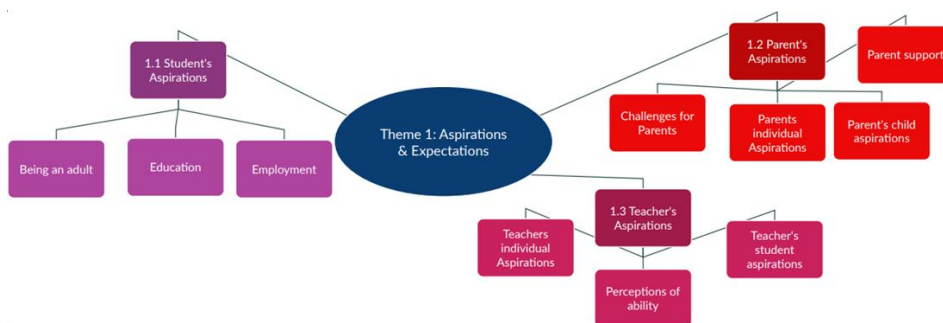


Image 15 - Theme One Map

## Phase six

Phase Six involved the presentation of the thematic maps and one-page summaries of each theme to the supervisors for discussion. This allowed for final revision to theme names and illustration of how the themes and subthemes

were interconnected. It allowed for clarity in terms of the framing of the discussion, which is presented by research question. Phase six also involved identifying and carefully selecting quotes from participants which would support and illustrate the richness within each theme.

## 4 Chapter Four: Phase One Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from Phase One of the research which involved two surveys in Irish schools: (1) to the principals of special schools and (2) to Senior Cycle class teachers in special schools. Firstly, the results of the survey of special school principals are presented followed by findings of the survey of Senior Cycle class teachers.

The overall aim of this research was to explore the experiences of key stakeholders involved in transition preparation and transition planning for students leaving special schools in Ireland and identify the Teacher Professional Learning needs of teachers to enable them to support transition preparation and transition planning. The results of these surveys capture the current transition preparation and transition planning practices in a wide range of special schools in Ireland. Both surveys sought to answer the following overarching research questions:

- A) What are the views and experiences of students, parents, teachers, and principals in Irish special schools of transition preparation and transition planning?
- B) How can the teacher support the development of autonomous post-school choices?

Specifically, the surveys aimed to answer the following original sub-questions:

1. How do Senior Cycle class teachers in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and what do teachers need in order to fulfill that role?
2. How do Principals in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and how do they view the role of the special class teacher?
3. How do students, parents and teachers experience preparation for transition?

## 4.1 Results of Phase One Survey - Principal

This survey for principals (Appendix B) contained questions across seven sections. Most survey items were multiple-choice and Likert scale questions, using a bipolar five-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree and included a neutral midpoint. A small number of open text questions were included which allowed principals to expand further on responses.

### *Participant characteristics*

The survey was issued to 122 special schools in Ireland. There was an overall response rate of 33 principals (27%). Most Principals that responded held a qualification in primary education (57.6%) (n=19), with 21.2% (n=6) holding a qualification in Montessori education, 15.1% were qualified to teach a post-primary subject (n=4) and 12.1% held a qualification classed as “Other” (n=4). One respondent held a Montessori and post-primary subject qualification.

Most respondents holding a qualification in primary education reflects the categorisation of special schools in Ireland as recognised primary schools, operating under the terms and conditions of primary school education, despite catering for post-primary aged students (Ware et al. 2009).

Over 90% of the 33 principals did not hold a qualification in Guidance Counselling (n=30) with only three principals indicating they held this qualification. The 32 respondents were predominantly administrative principals (96.9%) (n=31) with only one respondent holding a teaching principal role and they were between 1 – 22 years in that role (n=31), with the mode being eight years.

### *School characteristics*

The 33 responding principals represented schools with nine different special educational needs designations and were predominantly urban based (81.8%) (n=27). Over one third of schools were for students with Autism and Complex needs (33.3%) (n=11), followed by Mild GLD (18.2%) (n=6), Moderate GLD (15.2%) (n=5), Severe/Profound GLD (15.2%) (n=5). The remaining six schools that were represented were schools for Physical Disabilities, Multiple Handicap, a Youth Encounter Project, Specific Learning Disabilities and a Special Care Unit.

### Curricula

Principals were asked to indicate the main curricula on offer to Senior Cycle students in their school and 32 responded. The results indicated that the NCCA Level One Learning Programme (71.9%) (n=23), the Level Two Learning Programme (65.6%) (n=21) and school-based curricula (43.8%) (n=14) were available. A smaller number of respondents indicated that they offered Junior Cycle Level 3 certification (15.6%) (n=5), ASDAN (a UK based curriculum) (12.5%) (n=4), QQI subjects (9.4%) (n=3), Leaving Certificate Applied (6.3%) (n=2), Leaving Certificate Established (3.1%) (n=1) and National Adult Literacy Association programmes (3.1%) (n=1). 9.4% (n=3) indicated they offered another curriculum citing the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) and a Certificate in Vocational Training. As indicated in Table 24 no school offered the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.

Table 24 - Curricula on Offer in School as reported by Principals

Curricula N= 32	L1LP	L2LP	L3	LCA	LCVP	LCE	ASDAN	QQI	NALA	School Based	Other
% Cases	71.9	65.6	15.6	6.3	0.0	3.1	12.5	9.4	3.1	43.8	9.4

Only two schools indicated that they were providing formal guidance counselling to their Senior Cycle students with 94% (n=30) indicating that they were not offering it. However, when asked to identify what transition preparation practices were present in the school, 19.4% (n=6) indicated that they provide career guidance.

### Post-school options

While the responding 33 schools were predominantly urban based (81.8%) (n=27), it is worth noting that students attending special schools are likely residing in a wider locality. Therefore, for the purpose of clarity, principals were asked to indicate what PSOs were available in their schools' locality.

In almost all 31 cases, a health funded day service (HFDS) was accessible locally (93.5%) (n=29) followed by a training programme (32.3%) (n=11) with respondents citing the National Learning Network (NLN), SOLAS and Rehab training centres as the main options. In only a quarter of cases was full or part time employment available (25.8%) (n=8) and in less than a quarter of cases

further education (22.6%) (n=7), higher education (16.1%) (n=5) and apprenticeships (12.9%) (n=4) were available locally.

Despite these PSOs being available to some schools locally, the destination of the 2021 and 2022 graduates from those schools demonstrates that post-school pathways are dominated by health funded day services. Of the 166 graduates from 30 schools in 2021, this translated into 110 attending a HFDS, seventeen to further education, twelve to a combined education and training programme. Eleven students did not transition to education or training (NEET), and an additional three attended residential care. Only five accessed employment, while no student attended higher education or apprenticeship. Eight accessed another transition service such as NLN or Rehab training.

At the time of the survey in June 2022, of the 174 graduates of the 2022 school year, no student from the 30 responding schools was transitioning into employment, apprenticeship or higher education. 85 were to avail of health funded day services (HFDS), 26 to a combined education and training programme e.g. SOLAS, 23 to further education. Seven students would not be accessing any education or service and two would attend residential care. Seven would be accessing another training programme (NLN/Rehab). Finally, principals (n=30) were unsure of the post-school placement of 27 students by end of the school year, June 2022. Table 25 provides an overview of the post-school destinations of the 2021 and 2022 graduates.

*Table 25 - Post-School Destination as reported by Principals*

<b>Responding Principals n=30</b>		
<b>Year of Graduation</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
<b>Number of Graduates</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>174</b>
<b>Post-School Destination of Graduates</b>		
<b>Employment</b>	5	0
<b>Health Funded Day Service</b>	110	85
<b>Further Education</b>	17	23
<b>Residential Care</b>	3	2
<b>Other (NLN, Rehab)</b>	8	7
<b>Did not transition</b>	11	7
<b>Combined Education and training programme</b>	12	26
<b>Apprenticeship</b>	0	0
<b>Higher Education</b>	0	0
<b>Unsure</b>	0	27

### *Transition preparation practices*

Principals were asked to identify the transition preparation practices that were established in their schools. For the purposes of this study and drawing from key transitions literature (Kohler et al., 2016; O'Brien et al., 2011; Morningstar et al., 2010), a definition of transition preparation was created:

*The curriculum that schools offer and the related activities that support skill development and independence for the students during their time in school. These can include a range of areas including academic skill development, personal and social development, independent living skills and the assessment and profiling of students' strengths, needs and interests.*

Table 26 illustrates the type of transition preparation practices identified by the 31 respondents. The development of personal and social skills was evident in most responses (93.5%) (n=29), followed by assessment and profiling (90.3%) (n=28) and developing independent living skills (83.9%) (n=26). Consulting students on goals and aspirations for life post-school was indicated in a high number of responses (74.2%) (n=23), followed by academic skill development in just over half of cases (58.1%) (n=18). To a lesser extent, career guidance was evident in 19.4% (n=6) of cases and 12.9% (n=4) of the 31 principals indicated other established practices including parent information talks, dedicated social worker to discuss options with students and families, vocational training and a school leavers ability programme for each student.

*Table 26 - Transition Preparation Practices as reported by Principals*

<b>Transition preparation practices – n = 31</b>	<b>% cases</b>
Assessment and Profiling	90.3
Consulting students on goals and aspirations	74.2
Career Guidance	19.4
Academic Skill Development	58.1
Personal and Social Skill Development	93.5
Independent Living Skills	83.9
Other	12.9

### *Transition planning practices*

Principals were asked to identify a range of transition planning practices in their school, which for the purposes of this study were defined as:

*The process undertaken by schools in planning and supporting their students to leave special school education. Transition planning involves a range of activities which may include consultation on post-school options with students, their families and other professionals; work placements; visits to post-school settings and meeting with relevant personnel.*

Table 27 - Transition Planning Practices as reported by Principals

<b>Transition planning practices – n = 29</b>	<b>% cases</b>
Work experience	34.5
Visit to post school setting	65.5
Student showcase/fair	17.2
Meeting with Disability Officer/relevant personnel	82.8
School based transition programme	51.7
No transition activities	6.9
Other	10.3

Table 27 summarises the common transition planning practices from the 29 respondents. Principals identified that meetings with disability officers or relevant personnel such as new staff in further education or HFDS settings (82.8%) (n=24) and visits to post-school settings (65.6%) (n=19) were the most common practices. Just over half of principals indicated that a school-based transition programme was established (51.7%) (n=15) with only 34.5% (n=10) of principals reporting work experience being facilitated. A smaller number of schools held student transition fairs/showcases (17.2%) (n=5), availed of a school leavers ability programme, work experience within school while 6.9% (n=2) had no transition planning practices. Of note, one school indicated that while the school had a range of well-established practices in previous years, the impact of health protection measures due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, led to these practices becoming more limited.

### *Qualitative data responses*

Principals were invited to answer a small number of open text questions regarding their role in transition and the supports and challenges they experience in that role.

### *Principals' views on the role of the senior cycle class teacher*

Principals were asked to express their views on the role of the class teacher in special schools in supporting students and their families in planning for the final transition from their school to a post-school setting. Using a five-point Likert scale, 28 principals indicated their level of agreement to seven statements from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with a neutral mid-point.

Most of the 28 principals agreed or strongly agreed that Senior Cycle class teachers should be the lead coordinator of transition planning in special schools (67.9%) (n=19), with 25% (n=7) indicating a neutral response. 60.7% (n=17) demonstrated agreement that Senior Cycle class teachers had the necessary skills and knowledge of the range of PSOs available. A majority (78.6%) (n=22) agreed or strongly agreed that these teachers are given time to collaborate and plan for transitions, with the majority agreeing that transition planning should be collaborative involving the teacher, student and parents (89.3%) (n=22) and that collaboration with other professionals is important in managing transitions (96.4%) (n=21).

Contrastingly, while 64.3% (n=18) indicated agreement that these teachers can access a range of supports for special schools in transition planning, 17.9% (n=5) disagreed or strongly disagreed with a further 71.4% (n=20) indicating that teachers have access to ongoing Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) and training in transition planning, with only 7.2% (n=6) demonstrating disagreement with this statement.

### *Principal's role*

Principals were invited to answer a small number of open text questions regarding their role in transition and the supports and challenges they experience in that role. The 25 responses indicated that while principals of special schools have some role in the transition preparation, they play a significant role in the transition planning process, defined in this study as the process of supporting a student to leave special school. For one principal, this

included liaising with the HSE OGO, staff in post-school settings and parents as indicated by Principal #2, “liaising with Occupational Guidance Officer, liaising closely with parents, developing transition plans/set up work experience, arranging staffing schedule to release support staff during taster sessions.” (Principal #2, Autism/Autism and Complex Needs School)

This involved facilitating information evenings to support family’s decision making and ensuring options are presented to them:

“I support students and their families in liaising with the HSE and the transition profiling process. Also, I coordinate an information evening for all families and invite speakers for all local post-school providers, at all levels of ability.” (Principal #3, Autism/Autism and Complex Needs School)

One principal described the individualised nature of this planning:

“Transition planning is individualised in our school as each pupil is very different to others. My role is to lead the discussion and find out what other options may be available. I also link in with a range of service providers to ascertain if there are leisure opportunities in the community for school leavers.” (Principal #9, Physical Disability School)

Additionally two principals described the key role they have in gathering, providing and sharing information to parents, teachers, students and post-school settings, such as “facilitate meetings with the HSE, to ensure all visual supports and hand overs are complete before the child leaves” (Principal #26, Autism/Autism and Complex Needs School), “ensure that the Disability Officer has a full and comprehensive view of the child’s needs as they prepare for their adult placement” (Principal #21, Severe/Profound GLD School). While a third principal indicated that:

“I co-ordinate school leavers packs consisting of Class teacher reports, Behaviour Support Plans, Behaviour Profiles which are issued to parents and Service providers. I also issue details of School leavers to HSE and support the profiling process.” (Principal #12, Autism/Autism and Complex Needs School)

A small number of principals described their role as an overseer while others had assigned this transitions role to the Deputy Principal or Senior Cycle Class Teachers. Other principals described how students are actively involved in the process of transition preparation:

“We run a leavers programme that recognises the class as Head Students. They meet with other classes to help organise trips out,

complete the role for each class daily and become part of the ground's maintenance committee for the year. I attend any meeting the leaders have to organise activities related to these events. The staff recognise the students need responsibility and all staff working with the students support this transition programme." (Principal #11, Moderate GLD School)

Another principal also described how students are engaged in transition planning:

"...The senior students are part of planning and representative groups for the school, to enable them to use their voice, make choices and feel that contributions are listened to - through involvement in the Student Council and the Partnership Team." (Principal #3, Autism/Autism and Complex Needs School)

While a third principal described:

"...I informally (in a non-directive way) discuss options being considered by students with those students and encourage them in their work with the social worker in identifying a suitable option." (Principal #28, Youth Encounter Project)

### *Supports required*

Principals were invited to describe the supports they felt were important when engaging in this complex transition coordination role. There were a broad range of responses to the types of supports that principals value. Liaising effectively with stakeholders and communication with other professionals was noted as being important to over one third of principals. There was a clear sentiment expressed regarding the importance of sharing information on the student to ensure a smooth and successful transition.

Principal #4 (Severe/Profound GLD School) stated that they ensure "that all key information for the student is passed on. Most importantly we would focus on communication, mobility/self-help skills and medical needs." Principal #26 expanded on this notion and stated:

"To ensure the child has met the next person/ environment they are going too. A verbal hand over of BSP [behaviour support plan]/communication are handed over. A meeting to give the whole picture of the child, outline supports the child will require for the next setting. Ensure all details of the child's independence skills are handed over." (Principal #26, Autism/Autism and Complex Needs School)

Principals indicated that curriculum and assessment play an important role in supporting transitions in their setting. Principals cited the importance of assessment such as the Assessment of Functional Living Skills (AFLS), the use of

the Leaving Certificate Applied curriculum (LCA) and school-based development of skills in independent living in preparation for transition, as described by Principal #32:

“Our school is a young school with a short history of students transitioning at 18. The changing profile of our students is met with different preparations. We use a range of assessment with AFLS to provide a structured approach to class content.” (Principal #32, Autism/Autism and Complex Needs School)

Principal #23 also described a programme in use to support transition in their school, stating that the “School leavers ability programme works with students and their family for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year liaising with services and the school also” (Principal #23, Mild GLD School). However, while principals were asked to describe the supports that were important to them, many responses to this question indicated supports that they desired rather than those that were currently in place. For this reason, the desired supports and challenges experienced will be presented together.

Overall principals’ responses indicated supports required across the following areas: specialised staff, dedicated transition programme, timely allocation of post-school placement, enhanced communication with post-school setting and resources to support transition (substitution, funding). Many principals expressed a desire for dedicated staff to be made available to special schools such as;

“additional teacher for career guidance” (Principal #27, Mild GLD School),

“a post-school transition support officer/liaison person/counsellor” (Principal #22, Autism/Autism and Complex Needs School)

“career guidance teachers, home school liaison teachers.” (Principal #19, Mild GLD School)

Principals described the need in special schools for a dedicated transition programme for example, “...that there is a specific transition programme worked out between the Dept. of ED and the HSE for transition” (Principal #21, Severe/Profound GLD School). While another principal described how there “should be a nationally recognised School Leavers Programme for young adults

with a moderate or severe or profound ID. This could be altered for the transition to the adult day program” (Principal #16, Severe/Profound GLD School).

Respondents also indicated that they desired “a programme delivered by a Guidance Counsellor who can coordinate it and start working with the students at 15 years old (or even younger) working on their progression into the workplace” (Principal #20, Mild GLD School). This principal explained how this programme could facilitate student independence, preparation for life post-school and raise post-school aspirations. Expanding on this notion, this principal indicated that transition planning, coordinated by the HSE OGO should be occurring earlier in the student’s education journey:

“I would like the planning to begin when the students are younger with an idea of what areas of employment would suit our students, so they have real opportunities of being employed when they leave school or their training. We do not have a guidance counsellor so class teachers cannot individually tailor the programmes to meet individual students’ needs. We can't organise work experience as students would need a lot of support and teachers are working on QQI programmes etc. Added to that our students now tend to have more than just a Mild General Learning disability or a Moderate Learning Disability, so their needs vary a lot when we think of them transitioning to work or training centres. Walk [PEER] and other agencies seem to be developing programmes which would be of value to our students.” (Principal #20, Mild GLD School)

Given the complexity of need that exists in all special schools, principals specifically describe the challenge of this task, particularly in light of the frequently cited delays in transition planning and timely allocation of placements in HSE health funded day services. They expressed a need for placements to be allocated prior to the end of the school year in order to adequately prepare the student and their family for a successful transition:

“It is nigh-on impossible to actively support individualised person-centred planning for students hoping to get into particular HSE settings when families are left in limbo for months by HSE awaiting decision.” (Principal #8, Multiple Handicap School)

Principal #21 indicated:

“Not knowing where the child is going after they finish school. Not having a proper transition programme in place -not being able to prepare the child for their new placement. Not being able to tell parents what to expect when they ask questions. It's the not knowing - that is the biggest challenge.” (Principal #21, Severe/Profound GLD School)

Principal #6 shared this experience:

“Lack of certainty regarding placements during students' last year at school. This means students are unsure of where they are going or to what kind of placement. HSE funding may not be agreed until summer holidays or September. Difficult for schools to prepare students for transition.” (Principal #6, Moderate GLD School)

### *Challenges experienced*

Principals indicated that a challenge for schools in supporting families is the lack of knowledge and information available on PSOs. This was expressed by many principals seeking to for example, develop “an awareness of services after school” (Principal #24, Severe/Profound GLD School) while others noted their lack of awareness of wider PSOs:

“Links with all post-school placement settings. We may not be aware of all possible placements for the pupils. A dedicated team to work with the pupils, not just a placement officer and the school.” (Principal #5, Moderate GLD School)

Principals described the additional challenges they and the families they support experience in preparation for transition from Irish special schools such as the lack of dedicated time for transition planning and handover to post-school settings. Principals had already described how interagency collaboration was a significant aspect of their role in transition planning but here cited the logistical challenges of supporting teaching staff and SNAs to engage with transition. Principal #18 described the need for “time allocated to planning and in-school training for Senior Cycle staff” (Principal #18, Autism/Autism and Complex Needs School).

This was also noted by Principal #20 who explained the challenge without dedicated staff:

“The time factor and having the personnel to implement the transition programmes is certainly challenging. Staff are completing QQI portfolios with the students and have to teach classes. We do not have Home-school Liaison or a Guidance Counsellor, so the class teacher is doing it all. We are also working on three Curricula as a school for each of the areas within the school. There is an element of preparing for work in the JCL2, but these tend to be taught by part time teachers, and it is difficult to get collaboration although class teachers do try.” (Principal #20, Mild GLD School)

Principal #23 also experienced this challenge:

“School should not have the responsibility for passing on students to after school services and providing the basic information. HSE services need to stop relying on schools for this information and use the time to collaborate on transition and identifying the correct placement.”

(Principal #23, Mild GLD School)

Allocation of time and additional staff were seen as an immediate need by special schools in to order to improve transition preparation and planning practices. One principal indicated that their school needed “substitution for staff to release them for training and visits to adult placements” (Principal #2, Autism/Autism and Complex Needs School), while another described the need for “time for SNAs and teachers to visit suitable centres to see what pupils are facing” (Principal #9, Physical Disability School). A third principal desired “substitution for transition planning and implementation” (Principal #18, Autism/Autism and Complex Needs School).

Principals also expressed the need for “additional dedicated staff to support work placements and travel training” (Principal #6, Moderate GLD School), “to facilitate work experience placements” and “enough staff and resources to support students on trips out, attending events and experiencing the outside world” (Principal #11, Moderate GLD School).

## 4.2 Results of Phase One Survey - Teacher

This survey contained questions across eight sections (Appendix B). Most survey items were multiple-choice and Likert scale questions, using a bipolar five-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree and included a neutral midpoint. A small number of open text questions were included which allowed teachers to expand further on responses.

The survey was issued to 122 special schools in Ireland. There was an overall response rate of 43 teachers. As there is no database of the number of teachers employed in special schools working as Senior Cycle class teachers, it is not possible to indicate a percentage response rate. However, according to the NCSE at the time of the survey, there were approximately 1200 teachers employed in special schools (NCSE, 2018).

### *Participant characteristics*

The 43 responses indicated that a slightly larger percentage of teachers held a primary teaching qualification (40.9%) (n=18) than those that held a post-primary subject qualification (36.4%) (n=16). A smaller number of the 43 responding teachers held Montessori qualification (11.4%) (n=5) while 9.1% (n=4) held another qualification. The majority did not hold a qualification in guidance counselling (95.3%) (n=41).

Most of the 43 teachers that responded were in the role of a special class teacher within the special school (86%)(n=37), with 7% (n=3) in the role of a specific subject teacher and 7% (n=3) in a resource or special education teaching role within the school. The teachers were between 1-23 years teaching in that role, with the mode being 20 years. Just over half of the teachers (58.5%) (n=25) had been teaching Senior Cycle students for ten years or less.

### *School characteristics*

The 39 responding teachers represented eight types of special schools. Just over a quarter of responses (27.3%) (n=12) were from schools for students with Mild General Learning Disabilities (MGLD), followed by schools for students with Autism and Complex Needs (20.5%) (n=9) and schools for students with Moderate General Learning Disabilities (18.2%) (n=8). The remaining schools included Community special schools (11.4%) (n=5), High Support Units (4.5%) (n=2), one school for students with a Physical Disability, one for students with Hearing Impairments and one for students with Specific Learning Disabilities. Most of the 41 schools were based in an urban area (90.2%) (n=37).

### *Curricula*

Table 28 - Curricula on Offer in School as reported by Teachers

<b>Curricula N=41</b>	<b>L1LP</b>	<b>L2LP</b>	<b>L3</b>	<b>LCA</b>	<b>LCVP</b>	<b>LCE</b>	<b>ASDAN</b>	<b>QQI</b>	<b>NALA</b>	<b>School Based</b>	<b>Other</b>
<i>% cases</i>	58.5	78.0	29.3	14.6	4.9	4.9	17.1	26.8	12.2	24.4	4.9

Table 28 provides an overview of the main curricula that the 41 teachers reported as being available to Senior Cycle students in their school. The NCCA Level Two Learning Programme (78.0%) (n=32), the Level One Learning Programme (58.5%) (n=24) and Junior Cycle Level three subjects (29.3%) (n=12)

were the most offered programmes. A smaller number of respondents indicated that they offered QQI subjects (26.8%) (n=11), a school-based curriculum (24.4%) (n=10), ASDAN (a UK based curriculum) (17.1%) (n=7), Leaving Certificate Applied (14.6%) (n=6), National Adult Literacy Association programmes (12.2%) (n=5). A much smaller number of schools offered Leaving Certificate Established (4.9%) (n=2), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (4.9%) (n=2) and another curriculum not specified (4.9%) (n=2).

#### *Post-school options*

The teachers were asked to indicate what PSOs were available locally to their students. Of the 36 responses, 80.6% (n=29) reported a health funded day service was accessible locally, followed by a training programme (41.7%) (n=15) with respondents citing centres such as National Learning Network, SOLAS, Youthreach, local ETBs, Brothers/Daughters of Charity and Wheelchair Association. Just under a third of respondents indicated that full or part time employment (30.6%) (n=11) or further education (27.8%) (n=10) were available.

#### *Transition preparation practices*

Teachers were asked to identify the transition preparation practices that were established in their schools and 35 responded to this question. In this survey, the same definition was employed for transition preparation as in the principals' survey. The most reported transition preparation activities were assessment and profiling (88.6%) (n=31), followed closely by personal and social skill development (85.7%) (n=30), independent living skills (85.7%) (n=30) and consulting students on goals and aspirations for life post-school (82.9%) (n=29). Academic skill development was reported in 60.0% (n=21) of cases with a much smaller percentage offering career guidance (25.7%) (n=9).

Teachers indicated that transition preparation was largely commencing in the final two years of school (40.0%) (n=14) or in the final year of school (28.6%) (n=10). In a smaller percentage of cases, the teachers indicated that transition preparation was commencing in the first three years of Junior Cycle, typically from age 12 (17.1%) (n=6). A very small percentage reported commencing in the final three years (8.6%) (n=3) months of the final year (2.9%) (n=1), with 2.9% (n=1) reporting it takes place at another time.

Table 29 - School Culture as reported by Teachers

<b>SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neither Agree nor disagree; D = Disagree; SD= Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>N=</b>	<b>% SA</b>	<b>% A</b>	<b>% N</b>	<b>% D</b>	<b>% SD</b>
There is a high level of aspiration and expectation of our students	35	25.7	48.6	20.0	5.7	0.0
Student voice is valued in our school	35	54.3	37.1	5.7	2.9	0.0
Fostering independence is valued in our school	34	73.5	20.6	5.9	0.0	0.0
Transition preparation is timely for our students	34	50.0	29.4	14.7	5.9	0.0
Policies and procedures in our school support transition preparation and planning	35	31.4	48.6	17.1	2.9	0.0
We select curricula that supports transition preparation and planning	34	29.4	58.8	8.8	2.9	0.0

Teachers were asked to consider their school culture regarding transition preparation and to indicate their level of agreement with six statements on a five-point Likert scale, from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with a neutral midpoint. Table 29 indicates that of the responses (n=34/n=35) there was general agreement with all six statements, with very low levels of disagreement and no indication of strong disagreement.

Of the responding 35 teachers, they reported high levels of aspiration and expectation of their students within their school (74.3%) (n=26). Teachers indicated high levels of agreement that student voice (91.4%) (n=32) was valued. Of the 34 teachers that responded, 94.1% (n=32) indicated that fostering independence was valued within their school. High levels of agreement were also indicated for timely transition planning (79.4%) (n=27), supportive policies (80%) (n=27) and supportive curricula (88.2%) (n=30) within the participants schools.

Table 30 outlines teachers' responses when asked to consider the types of transition activities that occur once a post-school setting has been determined for/by the student. The most reported pre-transition activity from the 33 respondents was providing opportunities for students to meet key personnel in the new setting (82%) (n=27). Almost three quarters of the 33 respondents indicated that they shared assessments of strengths and needs with the new

setting (72.7%) (n=24) and 60.6% (n=20) supporting students to make multiple site visits to the new setting. Just over half indicated that they shared IEP's and person-centred plans (54.5%) (n=18) with just under half engaging in a handover meeting with the new setting and staff (48.5%) (n=16). The most cited post-transition activities included sharing of IEPs/PCPs, assessments of strengths and needs and meeting new key personnel (48.5%) (n=16), followed by handover meetings (42.4%) (n=14) and multiple site visits (39.4%) (n=13).

Table 30 - Pre/Post Transition Activities as reported by Teachers

Transition activities	N=	Pre-transition	Post-transition
		% cases	% cases
Handover meeting	33	48.5	42.2
Sharing of IEP's/Person Centred Plans	33	54.5	48.5
Sharing of assessments of strengths and needs	33	72.7	48.5
Multiple site visits	33	60.6	39.4
Opportunities for students to meet key personnel	33	81.8	48.5
No pre transition activity	33	0.0	18.2
Unsure	33	6.1	6.1
Other	33	12.1	9.1

#### *Teacher's role in transition preparation*

Teachers were invited to identify if they have a role in transition preparation. 75% (n=24) of the 32 responding teachers indicated that they had a role while 25% stated that they did not. They were then invited to describe their role in an open text question. Teachers described their role as meeting with disability officers/HSE, liaising between parents and services, implementing transition programmes and organising sampling visits to post-school settings.

In describing the role, teachers stated that they:

“consult with parents and students - taking interest and ability into consideration. Engage with Occupational Guidance Officer and look at options within National Learning Network (NLN) with the students. Facilitate work experience.” (Teacher #7)

While others describe a more student focused role stating:

“I help to prepare my students for making the huge step to adult life. I link between the H.S.E. families and the Post-school training services in

this area. I assist the process of transition and seek to make it as stress free as possible.” (Teacher #15)

Of the teachers that indicated they did not play a role in transition preparation (25%) (n=8), one stated that “only the principal and vice principal are involved, no one else is invited or welcome to participate” (Teacher #26).

### *Transition planning practices*

Employing the same definition as in the principals’ survey, teachers identified a range of transition planning practices that were embedded in their school. Of the 33 respondents to this question, 85% (n=28) indicated that transition planning typically occurs in the final two years or final year of school. In describing the transition planning practices, the most commonly occurring were visits to potential post-school settings (90.9%) (n=30), meeting with disability officers and relevant transition personnel (87.8%) (n=29). A small number of respondents indicated that they engaged in work placements (51.5%) (n=17) or held a student transition fair (12.1%) (n=4).

Just over one third of the 33 responding teachers (37%) (n=12) indicated that their school had developed a specific transition plan or programme to guide students through the transition stage. In describing the programme/plan, teachers explained that they “developed a school-based programme for seniors, focusing on development of independence, life and social skills” (Teacher #7). Another teacher explained how it supported students in the practical elements of preparation for transition, explaining:

“We research transport options to travel to the centres and where possible do the routes on the day we visit to familiarise pupils with the route. We link in with [public bus] to arrange for [manager] and his team to engage with pupils and their families once they have turned 18years to arrange independent travel. We inform parents of the JAM [Just A Minute] card as a tool for our students to use when travelling or using local facilities. We encourage past pupils to visit and inform current pupils of their experience in the training centre. When education/training information days are organised, we attend and provide updates to parents.” (Teacher #16)

When reflecting on existing practices and transition programmes in schools, teachers also highlighted the negative impact Covid-19 pandemic had played on school-based transition programmes, specifically, connections with the community:

“We have always had a preparation for work in our final year. Tendering money starts at around 12 in a local shop, then bus and Luas training into town. It was an excellent programme however with the Junior Cycle and COVID, it has fallen apart.” (Teacher #9)

While another teacher described that:

“Pre Covid 19 students would visit placements, and every Friday would go to the IWA (Irish Wheelchair Association) for a social morning to observe what happened in an adult service.” (Teacher #8)

Another respondent also identified the impact of Covid and employer reluctance to facilitate work placements as barriers to existing transition programmes:

“Before the Covid 19 Pandemic, students attended work experience placements as part of the programme. Over the years I have built up a network of contacts with some local business who take students on work experience. Work experience is brilliant introduction to the community and for helping the student to think about their own independence and sense of self beyond the setting of the school. I find there are huge challenges getting placements with employers and this is due to insurance reasons, there being no such structure provided by the education authorities and in many cases small traders are not in a position to put in the place the type of public liability insurance required.” (Teacher #5)

### *Teacher’s role in transition planning*

Teachers were asked if they played a role in transition planning. Of the 34 respondents, 79% (n=27) stated that they did with 21% (n=7) indicating that they did not. Similarly to responses to the role in transition preparation, teachers described their role as predominantly meeting with relevant personnel, preparing reports, organising work placements, sampling of post-school settings and providing information:

“Provide students and parents/Guardians with information about training centres. Organise students to sample 2 possible training centres. Sit in on HSE meetings with parents and students so disability manager can profile students’ needs and put funding in place for following year. Liaise with local businesses to take on students for work experience. Liaise with Ability programme.” (Teacher #22)

A second teacher described the planning activities as:

“Handover of documents like strength and needs, IEP’s, involved in profiling of students along with parents, discussion with parents, meetings with staff in new placement but this is rare as most students will not have their place prior to September.” (Teacher #21)

A small number of teachers indicated that they engage with students regarding their PSOs, such as “consult with parents and students, taking interest and ability into consideration” (Teacher #7). Teacher #11 described having “conversations with students, researching job or training options, preparing for work PLU with L2LP students”. While another teacher engages in “assessment and discussion with school leavers” (Teacher #20).

Of the small number of teachers (21%) (n=7) that indicated that they did not have a role in transition planning, they cited reasons such as “management doesn't allow it” (Teacher #26), “multiple teachers have school leavers in their classes so usually led by one main teacher” (Teacher #27) and “it is the role of other personnel in school to carry out this task” (Teacher #28).

*Table 31 - Teacher's Experience with Transition Planning*

<b>SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neither Agree nor disagree; D = Disagree; SD= Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>N=</b>	<b>% SA</b>	<b>% A</b>	<b>% N</b>	<b>% D</b>	<b>% SD</b>
My teaching qualification prepared me to engage with transition planning	31	0.0	19.4	32.3	25.8	22.5
Transition planning is a core part of my role	31	19.4	54.8	12.9	9.7	3.2
I have the knowledge/skills required to undertake the role	31	9.7	54.8	16.1	12.9	6.5
I am confident in transition planning	31	6.5	45.2	29.0	16.1	3.2
I know where to access information on post school options	31	6.5	48.4	12.9	25.8	6.5
I am given time and resources for transition planning	31	6.5	38.7	32.3	12.9	9.7
My principal is supportive to me in transition planning	31	16.1	67.7	12.9	0.0	3.2
Transition planning is essential for my students	31	51.6	45.2	0.0	3.2	0.0
Transition planning is valued by members of my school community	31	32.3	54.8	9.7	3.2	0.0

Teachers were asked to express their level of agreement regarding their experience with transition planning (Table 31). Just under 20% (n=6) of the 31 responding teachers agreed that their teaching qualification prepared them to engage with transition planning with 48.3% (n=15) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that their teaching qualification prepared them for the role. Of

those that disagreed or strongly disagreed (n=15) the majority (66.6%) (n=10) held qualifications in Primary, Montessori or special school and the remaining 33.3% (n=5) held post-primary teaching qualifications.

Despite the lack of sense of preparation, 74.2% (n=23) indicated agreement that transition planning is a core part of their role and 64.5% (n=20) felt that they had the required skills and knowledge to undertake the role. In a smaller percentage of cases, the 31 responding teachers demonstrated agreement that they were confident in transition planning (51.7%) (n=16), that they knew where to access a variety of information relating to PSOs (54.9%) (n=17) and that there were given adequate time and resources to plan for transitions (45.2%) (n=14).

The 31 responding teachers were asked to indicate their level of agreement that their school principal was a source of support to them in transition planning. 83.8% (n=26) agreed or strongly agreed that the principal was a support to them and that transition planning was both essential for their students (96.8%) (n=30) and was valued by their school community (87.1%) (n=27).

Table 32 - Views on Role of Senior Cycle Class Teacher

<b>SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neither Agree nor disagree; D = Disagree; SD= Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>N=</b>	<b>% SA</b>	<b>% A</b>	<b>% N</b>	<b>% D</b>	<b>% SD</b>
Senior Cycle teachers should be the lead coordinator of transition planning	33	27.3	39.4	24.2	9.1	0.0
Senior Cycle teachers have the necessary skills and knowledge of the range of post school options	33	24.2	54.5	3.0	15.2	3.0
Senior Cycle teachers are given time to collaborate and plan for transitions	33	30.3	30.3	15.2	15.2	9.1
Senior Cycle teachers can access a range of supports for transition planning	33	24.2	42.4	15.2	12.1	6.1
Senior Cycle teachers have access to ongoing TPL and training in transition planning	33	18.2	27.3	3.0	3.0	21.2
Transition planning should be collaborative	21	66.7	23.8	9.5	0.0	0.0
Collaboration with professionals is important	21	76.2	19.0	4.8	0.0	0.0

#### *Teachers' views on the role of the senior cycle class teacher*

Having considered their experience, teachers were asked their views on transition planning and the role of the Senior Cycle class teacher (Table 32). Just

over two thirds of the 33 responding teachers agreed that Senior Cycle class teachers should be the lead coordinator of transition planning (66.7%) (n=22). Similarly, over two thirds (78.7%) (n=26) indicated they have the necessary skills and knowledge of the range of PSOs available to their students, while just 60.6% (n=20) indicated that they are given the time to collaborate and plan for transitions. While 66.6% (n=22) indicated agreement that they can access a range of supports for transition planning, a much lower percentage of 45.5% (n=15) indicated that they have access to ongoing TPL and training, with 21.2% (n=7) strongly disagreeing with that they have access to such supports. Over 90% (n=19) of the 21 participants agreed that transition planning should be collaborative and collaboration with other professionals is important, despite only 60.6% indicating that they are given the time to engage in such collaboration.

#### *Student engagement*

Teachers were invited to consider the role of students in transition preparation and transition planning in their school by indicating agreement with a range of practice statements (Table 33). Of the 33 respondents, there was general agreement that students' IEPs facilitated considerations for transition (75.8%) (n=25). However, when rating student attendance at IEP meetings for transition planning, a mixed response was evident with 36.4% (n=12) neither agreeing nor disagreeing that this occurred in their school, 33.4% (n=11) disagreeing and 30.4% (n=10) agreeing that this practice was in place in their setting. Students' active involvement in selecting IEP goals was also rated with a mixed response, with 42.4% (n=14) neither agreeing or disagreeing, 30.3% (n=10) agreeing and 27.2% (n=9) disagreeing with this statement.

More positively, teachers (n=32) expressed agreement that students are facilitated in school to become independent in many aspects of their lives (97.0%) (n=31) and that they are actively involved in decision making processes related to their own lives (63.6%) (n=20). However, when considering if students were consulted in meaningful ways regarding life post-school, a mixed response was evident again with 68.8% (n=22) agreeing but 25% (n=8) remaining neutral regarding consulting on goals and 60.6% agreeing (n=19) and 30.3% (n=10) remaining neutral for consulting on aspirations.

When considering students' awareness of the range of employment options available to them, the 32 responses varied significantly with no teacher responding with strong agreement, 37.5% agreement (n=12), and 31.3% (n=10) respectively rating neutral or disagreement with the statement. Slightly less variation in response to students understanding of the range of education options available to them, with 51.5% agreeing (n=16), 18.2% (n=6) remaining neutral and 30.3% (n=10) disagreeing with this statement.

Teachers were also asked to respond to several statements on students understanding of their rights as per the UNCPRD (2006). With regards to their right to participation, just over half of the responding teachers (n=33) agreed that students understand their right to participation, with 30.3% (n=10) remaining neutral and 18.2% (n=6) disagreeing.

Responding teachers indicated that their students understood their right to education in only 39.4% of cases (n=13), with a most teachers neither agreeing nor disagreeing (42.4%) (n=14) and again 18.2% (n=6) disagreeing. Similarly, 36.3% (n=12) of teachers indicated that their students understood their rights to employment, with 42.4% (n=14) neither agreeing nor disagreeing. This statement had the highest level of disagreement from teachers 21.2% (n=7) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

Teachers were invited to consider if their students were given an opportunity to explore a range of PSOs. There was general agreement with 69.6% (n=23) of teachers responding with agree or strongly agree, with almost one third of teachers (31.3%) (n=10) in disagreement with this statement. In considering if students have the required knowledge of the range of PSOs to make a fully informed decision, a mixed response was noted. Just 39.4% (n=13) agreed or strongly agreed, 30.3% (n=10) neither agreeing not disagreeing and 30.3% (n=10) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

Table 33 - Student Engagement as reported by Teachers

<b>SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neither Agree nor disagree; D = Disagree; SD= Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>N=</b>	<b>% SA</b>	<b>% A</b>	<b>% N</b>	<b>% D</b>	<b>% SD</b>
IEPs facilitate considerations for transition	33	30.3	45.5	12.1	12.1	0.0
Students are actively involved in selecting goals for IEP	33	12.1	18.2	42.4	24.2	3.0
Student regularly attend IEP meetings for transition planning	33	15.2	15.2	36.4	27.3	6.1
Students are actively involved in decision making processes related to their lives	33	12.1	51.5	24.2	9.1	3.0
Students are facilitated in school to become independent in many aspects of their lives	33	21.2	75.8	3.0	0.0	0.0
Students are consulted in meaningful ways regarding goals for life post school	32	18.8	50.0	25.0	6.3	0.0
Students are consulted in meaningful ways regarding aspirations for life post school	33	18.2	42.4	30.3	9.1	0.0
Students are aware of the range of employment options available to them	32	0.0	37.5	31.3	21.9	9.4
Students are aware of the range of education options available to them	33	3.0	48.5	18.2	21.2	9.1
Students understand their rights to participation	33	3.0	48.5	30.3	12.1	6.1
Students understand their rights to education	33	3.0	36.4	42.4	12.1	6.1
Students understand their rights to employment	33	3.0	33.3	42.4	12.1	9.1
Students are given opportunity to explore a range of post school options	33	3.0	63.6	12.1	15.2	6.1
Students have the required knowledge of the range of post school options to make a fully informed decision	33	6.1	33.3	30.3	21.2	9.1

### *Parent engagement*

Teachers were invited to consider the role that parents play in planning for their child's transition from school and 33 teachers responded to this section (Table 34). The statements were divided into sections relating to: Aspirations and Advocacy; Planning; Post-school Options. When considering if parents have high aspirations for the child to be employed upon leaving school, there was a very mixed response. 42% (n=14) indicated agreement, 30% (n=10) neither agreed nor disagreed and 27% (n=9) disagreed that parents aspire for their child to obtain employment. Similarly, when asked to indicate level of agreement

regarding parents' high aspirations for their child to access further and higher education, teachers again had a mixed response with 41% (n=13) and 50% (n=17) respectively neither agreeing nor disagreeing. However, there was higher level of agreement that parents aspired for further education (41%) (n=13) over higher education (19%) (n=6). Only in 9% of responses (n=3), did teachers indicate that parents had no aspirations for their child post-school with the majority of teachers (64%) (n=21) disagreeing.

In relation to transition planning, the 33 responding teachers indicated very high levels of agreement (90.9%) (n=30) that parents look to the school for impartial transition planning advice and that parents expect transition planning to be led by the school (82.7%) (n=27). Interestingly, only 18.2% (n=6) of teachers agreed that parents typically instigate the transition planning process, with 51.5% (n=17) remaining neutral and 30.3% disagreeing that parents are the instigators. Teachers also indicated high levels of agreement that parent advocacy is essential for successful transition planning (90.9%) (n=30) and that parents play an active role in transition planning (63.6%) (n=21).

With regards to PSOs, less than half of the 33 teachers agreed that parents are aware of all available PSOs with 45.5% (n=15) agreeing and 33.3% (n=11) disagreeing. Similar differences were noted in the 32 responding teachers' level of agreement in whether parents are supported by the school in understanding financial implications of PSOs with 33.3% (n=11) agreeing, 36.4% (n=12) remaining neutral and 30.3%(n=10) disagreeing. Finally, 65.7% (n=22) of teachers agreed that parents and their child are making a fully informed decision about the post-school placement, with 28.1% (n=9) remaining neutral and only 6.2% (n=2) disagreeing.

Table 34 - Parent Engagement as reported by Teachers

<b>SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neither Agree nor Disagree; D = Disagree; SD= Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>N=</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>
Parents have high aspirations for child to be employed	33	3	39.4	30.3	24.2	3
Parents have high aspirations for child to access further education	33	9.4	31.3	40.6	18.8	0
Parents have high aspirations for child to access higher education	33	0	18.8	50	31.3	0
Parents have no aspirations for child post school	33	3	6.1	27.3	51.5	12.1
Parents typically instigate transition planning process	33	3	15.2	51.5	24.2	6.1
Parents play an active role in transition planning	33	12.1	51.5	21.2	12.1	3
Parents expect transition planning to be led by school	33	44.8	37.9	13.8	3.4	0
Parents look to school for impartial transition planning advice	33	42.4	48.5	6.1	3	0
Parent advocacy is essential for successful transition planning	33	42.4	48.5	9.1	0	0
Parents are aware of all available post school options	33	0	45.5	21.2	24.2	9.1
Parents are supported by the school in understanding financial implications	32	0	33.3	36.4	24.2	6.1
Parents and the child are making a fully informed decision	33	9.4	56.3	28.1	3.1	3.1

### *Qualitative data responses*

Teachers were invited to answer a small number of open text questions regarding the supports and challenges they experience in their role.

### *Supports required*

Teachers were invited to respond to a small number of qualitative questions regarding supports and challenges for transition preparation and transition planning. Similarly to the principals' responses, while asked to indicate supports that were important to them in their role, their responses illustrated supports that they required from the education system rather than ones that they currently had access to. In describing these desired supports, teachers' responses were across four main areas: increased knowledge of and access to training (TPL) regarding PSOs and transition planning; interagency collaboration; time for planning and profiling; and practical supports such as resources were required.

While principals indicated a desire for a dedicated career guidance counsellor or home school liaison officer, only two teachers shared this desire:

“Special schools do not have access to Career Guidance unlike mainstream schools. A career guidance counsellor would benefit this cohort and support class teachers with the process. Access to CPD [Continuous Professional Development] would also benefit teachers engaged with the transition process.” (Teacher #11)

Instead, the majority of teachers stated that they need additional knowledge and training (TPL) for themselves in order to be better equipped to support students and their families as described by Teacher #24, “more training, and clear guidance on where to access the answers to their questions”. Teachers indicated that knowledge of options outside of the traditional health funded day services was important to them, stating “knowledge of suitable choices...maybe a set programme to deliver” (Teacher #5), “knowledge of agencies available” (Teacher #17) while Teacher #22 and #21 described “having an understanding of what's available to our students and not relying on HSE staff. Also having a defined curriculum for our students exactly like the JCT 1and2” (Teacher #22) and “having a good knowledge of the training options available to pupils other than the HSE services” (Teacher #21). Teacher #15 described how easily accessible post-school pathways such as “websites with clear information” would be a support to them.

### *Challenges experienced*

Teachers described how this lack of knowledge was posing a challenge to them in their current transition planning:

“I was trained as a primary school teacher and had no training at all in how to support transitions out of school. Parents and students would ask me questions to which I didn't know the answer.” (Teacher #22)

While teacher #21 described:

“Trying to facilitate pupils who want to work rather than attend training centres when the employment market requires additional training and qualification levels our pupils have not attained.” (Teacher #21)

One teacher also referenced the additional challenge of the “lack of information on what training centres are available for students with more complex needs or are living in a more rural location” (Teacher #18). Many teachers indicated that improved communication with post-school settings was required and cited the

delays in allocation of post-school placements as a contributing factor to this challenge. This included “not knowing what day centre a student will be going to or if they have a place anywhere, very hard to prepare them for that (Teacher #20).”

Teacher #25 described:

“Parental concern knowing very little about adult services. Adult services not allocating places before school finishes. One student in my class last year still does not have a place. This is not uncommon.” (Teacher #25)

Teacher #26 also described the challenge with the delay in placement allocation:

“Pupils often do not find out what day centre they will be going to until mid-summer therefore we are unable to fully prepare them for the transition (e.g. social stories, videos/photos of centre, visits etc). Sometimes pupils do not get a place until the October after they have finished school”. (Teacher #26)

Similarly to the principals’ responses, teachers demonstrated their commitment to sharing information with post-school settings to ensure a smooth and successful transition for the student:

“More engagement with the staff of post-school settings. Visits to the post-school option, where the programmes delivered there are discussed. Visual aids e.g., photograph booklet that pupils can look at and discuss pictures with parents/teacher - keep referring back to this over a few months, to be done in conjunction with staff of post-school setting.” (Teacher #2)

This also included “information on what activities are done in the day centres. What staff work there, some pictures etc to show the students.” (Teacher #16)

On a practical level, teachers described the challenge of balancing full time teaching commitments with the time required to engage in effective transition planning. As already identified, their roles include collaboration with many stakeholders and cited additional challenges such as “time for compiling reports, time for meetings. Adequate time is not allocated to the pupil visiting their post-school option” (Teacher #6).

Similarly other teachers identified issues such as “time management - very busy and hectic schedule” (Teacher #19) and “time to plan and prepare whilst still

teaching the full curriculum and develop and make resources that are suitable and age appropriate” (Teacher #21).

Teachers indicated that a required support is for “substitute teachers and extra SNA support” (Teacher #12) to support students in accessing sampling visits to post-school settings as teachers are “losing classroom support when SNA accompanies a student on trial days” (Teacher #16). The impact of this challenge is described by Teacher #27 below:

“Need to be able to release an SNA to attend a sampler with some students. This can be policy of Centre. But SNA is needed for the rest of class back in school. Need a sub to release me while HSE come to school to profile students’ needs. This year I had 7 of these meetings, each meeting can take at least an hour. While I attend these, there is no one to stay with the rest of class.” (Teacher #27)

### 4.3 Summary of Findings

The results of both surveys present an overview of current transition preparation and transition planning practices in a wide range of special schools in Ireland. They aimed to answer the following overarching research questions:

- A) What are the views and experiences of students, parents, teachers, and principals in Irish special schools of transition preparation and transition planning?
- B) How can the teacher support the development of autonomous post-school choices?

Specifically, the surveys aimed to answer the following sub-questions:

1. How do Senior Cycle class teachers in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and what do teachers need in order to fulfill that role?
2. How do Principals in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and how do they view the role of the special class teacher?
3. How do students, parents and teachers experience preparation for transition?

Overall, the responding special schools demonstrated a range of transition practices that were embedded in their schools. However, despite some effective

practices, transition outcomes for students remain poor. Students with SEND are still transitioning to health funded day services which reflects earlier findings by Scanlon and Doyle (2018) with a minority accessing further or higher education. Of particular interest is that of the 174 graduates from 2022, no student transitioned into employment. Participating principals and teachers outlined a range of measures that they require in order to support more autonomous post-school transition options, including time, resources, transition programmes and professional learning opportunities. The findings from both surveys are discussed in more detail in Chapter Six within the context of the wider study.

Aligning with the explanatory sequential mixed method approach to the study, the findings of Phase One supported the development of the Phase Two methodology. Phase Two included using the Mosaic approach with students, their teachers and their parents, combined with two student focus groups and a teacher focus group.

## 5 Chapter Five: Phase Two Findings

Chapter four presented the results of the predominantly quantitative online survey of teachers and principals in special schools in Ireland. The findings were summarised and specifically described the views and experiences of transition planning of Senior Cycle class teachers and of principals of special schools from a national online survey.

Building on the findings from Phase One, Phase Two of the research sought to broaden the participant voice to include students and their parents. Using a triangulated design of students at different transition timepoints, their participating parent/s and their participating teachers, this phase allowed for a lived experience of preparation for transition to be captured from those experiencing it.

The thematic analysis outlined in Chapter three resulted in the generation of four themes. A thematic map outlines how the data remain connected throughout the four themes (Appendix R). The themes are Aspirations and Expectations; Current Practice for Inclusion; Post-School Options and Factors that Enhance Transition.

### 5.1 Theme One: Aspirations and Expectations

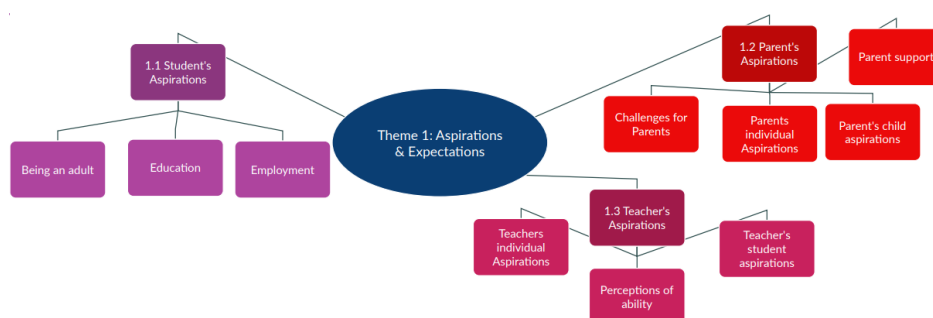


Image 16 - Theme One

This theme captures the participants aspirations for the student's life post-school. It is discussed through three comparative perspectives, presented as subthemes: students'; parents' and teachers' aspirations. Image 16 illustrates

the categories that underpinned the development of each subtheme and will structure the presentation of the findings of theme one.

### Students' aspirations

This subtheme demonstrates that students hold aspirations for their life that go beyond merely education and employment. Their descriptions depict a much richer life of a desire for housing, for independence, to drive and own a car, to have friendships and relationships as well as ways to earn money as important aspects of being an adult.

Throughout the data generation sessions with participants in the focus groups and those that employed the Mosaic approach, a common theme regarding a vision for their lives post-school was illustrated. Some comments from students arose in direct response to questions such as "What do you want to do when you leave school?" (Focus Groups) and "Where do you see your life in 10 years' time?" (Mosaic sessions), while other comments spontaneously emerged during the sessions.

#### *Independent living*

The participants described a desire for housing, and in most cases, the desire for independent living separate from their current family home, for example "I hope...to have a nice house, not too expensive, but good enough to live in" (Will, Pre-School Leaver). One student, Sam, a school leaver gave an example of how his desire for independent living was already underway in the garden of his family home;

"I'm actually just doing the shed myself and actually building my own shed. So, to stay down there. So, what I'm doing is we put on the, my father started putting up on the wood on...The galvanised (roof) supposed to be arriving today, we have to put it on the door and the frame of the door. The, the, the windows are on. What he's doing is, trying to do is, if he could put a bedroom, a toilet, a sink and a kitchen like and like, and that I could just put my food on. And, and I could just stay down there for, like, you know." (Sam, School Leaver)

He described further how this would facilitate his independence:

"because, like then, I could just go to the bus out. So, I don't need to go out the door all the time...Ya I would just jump over the gate and be gone on the bus like that." (Sam, School Leaver)

While other students described the various types of housing they desire, ranging

from “an apartment” (Ally, School Leaver), a farmhouse (Ben, Mosaic Student), and a desire to “probably stick in the city” (Lisa, Mosaic Student). Tim had a clear vision for his life in the countryside (Image 17):

“I'm thinking of moving up in a safer place, better than my area [currently a housing estate], where I'll have the money to get it, live somewhere nice up in the countryside, which I'm already living in the countryside somewhere better with a big field, a big piece of land and a house and a few acres. (Tim, Mosaic Student)



Image 17 - Tim's Mosaic Map - House

He further described the role he would like to have in designing the house, stating:

“Landscaping and to build a house or buy some house and just start renovating it in the countryside... I will have to get a grant for the house and to renovate it as well, a few grants, from the Government.” (Tim, Mosaic Student)

A mixed response was noted when asked if they envisaged sharing this new home with another person. Will in the Focus Group said he will “probably have someone” with him and Tim, a Mosaic Student again left the possibility open; “yeah, maybe hopefully, God only knows.” For the rest of the students, they were unsure with many “I don’t know” responses and shrugging of shoulders. Related to this, a small number of students expressed an interest in having children or were considering becoming parents in the future. For example, Tim explained “if I had to have children of my own, I’d mind them, I’d stay in the house...If I ever do have a family” (Tim, Mosaic Student) and Lisa stated her uncertainty “[I] don't know if I will have kids. I don't know. I don't know” (Lisa, Mosaic Student). Will in the Focus Group spoke about it in the context of skills he would like to learn in school when he explained “let's say you, you're married. You have a child, how to take care of the child” (Will, Pre-School Leaver).

Aligning with independent living, were the students’ views on skills that would be required in order to achieve that. They spoke broadly about the skills they currently have and the skills that they are learning in school. They also spoke

about the importance of life skills and what they wished they were learning in school. This is captured by Will in the Pre-leavers Focus Group when asked us there were any subjects in school that were helping him to achieve his goals:

“Do you have to learn what to do in the future like pay the bills, pay taxes, how to pay insurance for cars, and all those important stuff you need to know in the future how to buy a house, how to buy like a car, and have a car... The life skills being the most important one for sure.”  
(Will, Focus Group)

The variety of life skills that students had already acquired was captured across the Mosaic maps of the four students (Images 18-21).

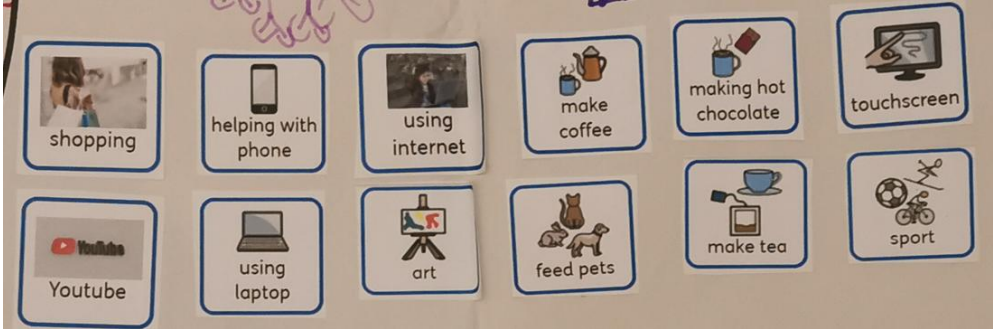


Image 18 - Lisa's Mosaic Map - Skills

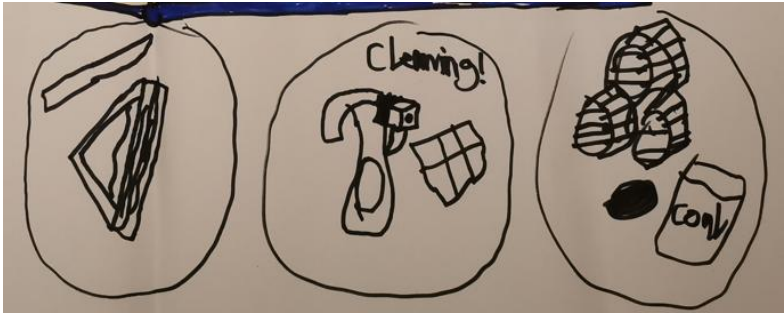


Image 19 - Tim's Mosaic Map - Skills



Image 20 - Sally's Mosaic Map - Skills



Image 21 - Ben's Mosaic Map - Skills

Another dominant feature of their post-school life was a desire to be able to drive, get a driving license and to have a car. Many students described the importance of obtaining a license and spoke about how they were being prepared for that, stating, "I'm gonna make sure I get a car license" and "It's just like, my mother might be teaching me how to drive soon" (Tim, Mosaic Student).

Lisa also described her knowledge of the driving test process:

"[brother did the driving test] and he got on good...Yeah, he had someone to [teach him], yes, he was brilliant. Ya you download a thing on your phone, and you have to basically do all that [theory test]". (Lisa, Mosaic Student)

Additionally, for some students, they had a specific vision for the type of car they would like with Tim stating, "I won't be buying an expensive car for my first car, just buy a Toyota."

“Probably for the first thing I would say am...I would probably have a car...I have 2, like 2 brands of car that I love. I love a mini cooper, and there’s another mini one as well and I don’t know if it’s called a rally car or a rally rover, I don’t know?” (Lisa, Mosaic Student) (Image 22)

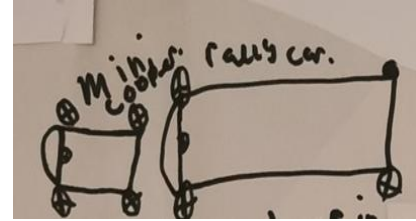


Image 22 - Lisa's Mosaic Map - Car

It was clear in the dataset that the desire to drive was linked to a desire for independence. Eight out of the ten student participants expressed this desire for a car and had varying reasons for wanting one. For example, for some students, it was a means of having independence and being able to socialise; “probably go shopping and do like, go around in my car basically” (Lisa, Mosaic Student) and “...drive a car to take my friends out...I can go out with my friends...I can go to, Garden Centre. Oh, if you can get any new plants...I would like to help with shopping with my parents, if I get a car” (Ben, Mosaic Student).

Students associated the freedom to socialise with being an adult with various students giving examples of being able to “go out with my friends and visit them when I grow up” (Ben, Mosaic Student), and as Sally, a Mosaic Student described in her map, to hang out with her friends (Image 24) and go out to nightclubs with her sisters (Image 23).

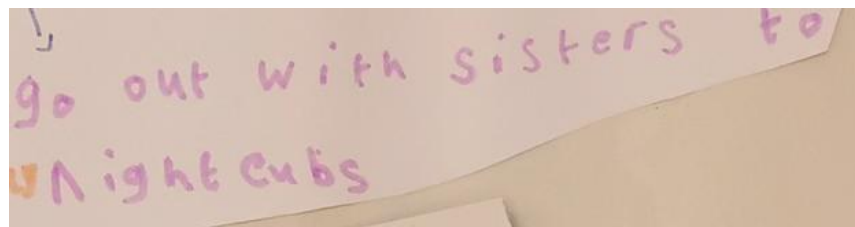


Image 23 - Sally's Mosaic Map - Social

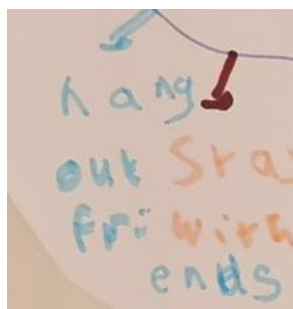


Image 24 - Sally's Mosaic Map - Social

Two final components that students spoke about in their vision for their lives post-school were the importance of pets and animals in their lives and earning money. All four Mosaic Students included animals in their final maps, ranging from dogs, cats, horses, fish and farm animals. Earning money was discussed at length by Tim and Ben, two of the Mosaic

Students. For Tim, he had a very clear desire to be financially independent and not reliant on other people for money:

“No, I don't like relying on people if they give me money, I won't accept it. But sometimes I have to. Yeah, And I have to leave it go...”

He spoke about his family life and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on them:

“And yeah, it's something very expensive. I won't rely on my mother to buy it for me. I have to buy myself. So, I saved up an awful lot of blood, sweat, blood, and sweat for the money.” (Tim, Mosaic Student)

### *Employment*

All of the student participants expressed a desire to gain employment post-school. There were several influences on the type of employment the students aspired to. For many students, the type of job reflected their current areas of interest. For Sam, a School Leaver, he expressed a keen interest in sport and this interest, along with the influence of a family member that is training in that area, have informed his decision:

“I'd like to get a job inside somewhere like, ya. That's like big, cause my cousin is over in England. He's he's, someone's teaching him how to be a coach for like soccer. That's what like he's looking for...But like sport is my thing.... Well like, if, if, it's like that, my cousin's like really into soccer, like he knows, like the, the attackers the defenders the goalkeeper who's playing on this team, who's the head coach. But I'm like me, I really like Rugby, because, like, I know who's on and who subs whereas soccer is like, you know...” (Sam, School Leaver)

For Sally (Mosaic Student), she enjoys playing with and being around children, which led to her aspiration to “mind children after school, Montessori.” While Lisa (Mosaic Student) was a little unsure of her future employment, she described her love of art (Image 25) and how this could possibly lead to a job in the future:



*Image 25 - Lisa's Mosaic Map - Art*

“I don't know what I want to do with the job. But like, basically, I was thinking of to do thinking to do like, you see mostly, I'm interested in like doing art, basically. So, I don't know how I'm gonna get around that? I am very good at doing art... [I would like to] do art with people, kids yunno, get into a school and help a teacher out...” (Lisa, Mosaic Student)

This was also influenced by her experience with the art teacher in school and how she is sometimes given the role of assisting other students. When asked what type of skills or experience she would have, or need in the future, she explained:

“I even do here it here in school in art...She [art teacher] tells me. Oh, go and help that person there. So, basically, I helped [peer] wherever that day was, and I was finished my work. So, I was helping and then miss [teacher] just basically said, miss said, Oh, you need you just do something there to help [peer] to finish, so I did that...Ya I always help out and I'm mostly good at art as well.” (Lisa, Mosaic Student)

School leavers, Kit and Ally and Pre-School Leaver, Fiadh demonstrated the possibilities that were before them and that they didn't need to have it all figured out just yet:

“Something in IT probably, working on a computer or a helpline, taking emergency calls...I wouldn't say like IT is my favourite, I have different stuff I want to do. It's very hard to pick you know. I could do DIY; I could DIY for two years and if I don't like it, I can move on to a different one and just carry on. I could do a taxi driver; I could do anything like.” (Kit, School Leaver)

Fiadh described how she “might be a vet...or a shopkeeper” and Ally described how she might work in a hospital:

“And I will help the surgeons with the bloods. Okay, it's still okay. But the worst thing ever, the surgery, the inside of the bodies, I would say, ew. But it's okay, I need to do it.” (Ally, School Leaver)

For other students, their post-school employment aspirations were influenced by their engagement with work experience during their time in Senior Cycle. For Tim, (Mosaic Student) his time working as a cleaner in a heavy haulage company allowed for a combination of his preferences, which were cleaning, and having an employment option that was local, that he could walk to independently “I'd be one of the, the top-class cleaners in that haulage company because no one cleans there.” (Tim, Mosaic Student)

Interestingly, during one of the latter sessions on Map Making, Tim described his love of animals and decided to represent on his Mosaic map (Image 26), a combination of his interests – cleaning and animals, stating “I've no problem

getting a job with animals, and if it's part of cleaning as well." (Tim, Mosaic Student)

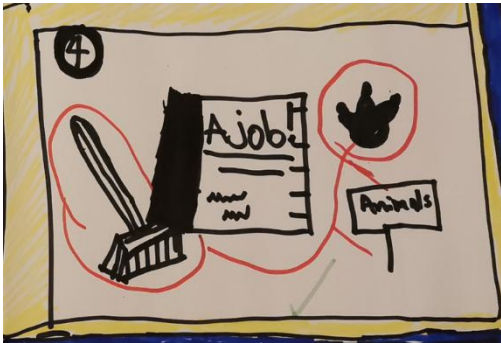


Image 26 - Tim's Mosaic Map - Job

### Education

The majority of participating students expressed an interest in attending a college or training centre following graduation from the special school. The students demonstrated varying levels of knowledge about the types of colleges or post-school educational opportunities available to them. One student, Kit, a School Leaver, knew exactly the name of the course and the name of the training centre; "Career Start, upstairs in NLN [National Learning Network]". He knew this because he had been brought on a visit to the setting and had a visit from staff to talk to him and his peers in his Leaving Certificate Applied class:

"Well, I last year, there was a meeting in the other class last year and my class I was in last year, we're like talking about what we do there and bits and bobs about the training centre." (Kit, School Leaver)

He was also influenced by his friends and past pupils regarding the training centre, NLN, being the most suitable option:

"Well, I think I know what's gonna happen in NLN like, because they told me the basics of what courses they do there, and I think I would like to go in there. Like all my friends from, past pupils of this school are all in there...Ya my friend that I talk to every night, his name is [name], and he goes there and he's really sound and he said I would recommend it 100%. And he said you'll make new friends there like, I like, he literally said it's the best place to go cause there are no other places that will look after you like. Like the staff are so nice over there, the people are so caring over there. But am, they will help you get through the work like." (Kit, School Leaver)

Ben's knowledge of PSOs was also influenced by where his friend had attended, which was similar to a meals-on-wheels centre:

“Well, I never went to college before, but [classmates’] friend, was in the college before...but I would like to work in, where [his friend] works. Yeah. And it's like, when people get a job. And they got all the, it's like college. It is college. But yeah, and they get little plastic stuff, a lot of tins for sticker for the food... I might go to the same one as [name of best friend].” (Ben, Mosaic Student)

Other students were influenced by peers and by family members regarding their aspirations to attend a post-school educational setting. For example, Lisa (Mosaic Student) said regarding the NLN training centre, “Ya a lot of people are going there, I hope I get in there cause my mom really wants me to try to get in there.” However, she had little knowledge of the courses that were offered in NLN and identified this in her Mosaic map (Image 27) as something she wanted to learn more about.

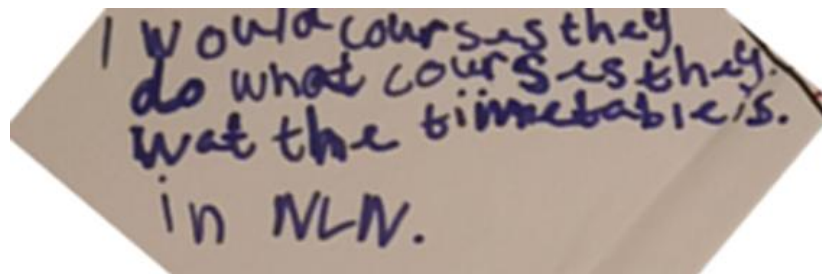


Image 27 - Lisa's Mosaic Map - Courses

Similarly, Sam (School Leaver) stated that his:

“mother said she is going to wait for the college to contact me.... but I don't know which college I am going to go to...Well, what I would really like is [name of IT College].”

He went on to describe how his friend was helping him in considering the decision; “I was talking to one of my friends in the yard last week about them...He said that if you want to do it, then it's up to you” (Sam, School Leaver).

However, he did not appear to have specific knowledge of the courses or programmes available as unlike Kit in the LCA class, he had not received a visit from NLN to discuss the courses on offer: “Never, I've never seen them come in” (Sam, School Leaver). Later he then referred to wanting to attend the NLN training centre as his friends attend it and they play lots of sports, which aligns with his interest area;

“so yeah, some of my friends past pupils here are actually in the training centre... they do a lot of sports like, they do GAA, Hurling, Soccer, Rugby...they do a bit of everything.” (Sam, School Leaver)

For other students, the desire was simply to attend a college with various areas of interest being mentioned including “do some business” (Luke, Pre-School Leaver) and “maybe doing business or learn about computers” (Will, Pre-School Leaver). He went on to specify “good, known college, that would be close by or not that far away or any just like just any place that’s excellent I guess...”, ones that are “not that expensive to get into” (Will, Pre-School Leaver).

Tim (Mosaic Student) was the only student to explicitly state that he didn’t want to go to college or continue with his formal education, instead seeking employment was his goal stating:

“I don't, I just feel, cool about it, I just don't really mind, I'm thinking of, I might go to college, or I might not but I'd say I'm not going to...I'm just, I'd say I'll get a job cause my mams friends with the whole lot [haulage owner] I think, so I might be able to get a job there like.”

## Parents’ aspirations

This second subtheme relates to the views and aspirations of the parents of the Mosaic approach participating students: Lisa, Tim, Sally and Ben. Within the context of views of their child’s aspirations, parent’s perception of their child’s ability was an important factor that they felt might be a potential barrier to achieving aspirations. The components that inform this subtheme include parents’ individual aspirations, parents’ child aspirations, parental support and challenges for parents.

### *Parents’ individual aspirations*

The aspirations that parents hold for their children was explored through the semi-structured interviews with the five participating parents. This took place before they were shown the completed Mosaic map which their child created. It aimed to gain an insight into what the parents wanted, as opposed to what they thought their child wanted for their life post-school.

Their aspirations showed a desire for their child to access mainstream education or employment and to be included in society as demonstrated by Lisa’s parents; “we want to try to mainstream system first, to see if she can do that, and stand on her own two feet” (Lisa’s father) and Tim’s mother when she said “he’ll work

towards his lorry license like his mammy. Hopefully, hopefully, if I get him driving lorries, he'll be fine, there'll be a job for him."

Parents expressed a desire for their child to be a contributing member of society and to be engaged in meaningful, yet realistically attainable, work or education. Three of the parents specifically noted that they did not want their child to be "just sitting at home on a computer looking at, at a screen all day long" (Lisa's father) and Sally's mother indicated that Sally was "not going to be sitting at home looking at me every day. I mean, you've got to get out. You've got to get your job". Aligning with this both Sally's mother and Ben's mother, did not want their child to access traditional health funded day services as their PSO. Ben's mother was influenced by a family members experience:

"Like Ben has an older cousin that went to the school here. He's in these rehab places and it's not a place I want for Ben, you know. Yeah. yeah, I think there's more in him than that..." (Ben's mother)

And Sally's mother expressed similar sentiments:

"I don't want to pop her on a bus at eight o'clock in the morning. Open the bus door for her, that's not our family, that's not our family...and that's great cause, you know, we, we just know there's more out there for her." (Sally's mother)

Two of the participating families were self-employed business owners, however, they did not want that to dictate or become a normative pathway for their child. While Sally's mother described how it influenced her oldest daughter to pursue an International Business degree at university, she didn't want it to become a default option for Sally. She describes it below:

"The plan will not be that she is going to sit, just because we own a business, that she is going to sit in an office just because we own a business, that's not, like [older sibling] goes out to [place name] and works in the [name of hotel] every weekend, you know what I mean, and so she doesn't want to be the directors daughter, so you know, and I don't. She wants to get her own money and pay her own emergency tax, and all the rest and Sally will be the same and so I don't mind what it is." (Sally's mother)

Lisa's parents explain a similar situation when they state that they own a company that Lisa could work in but that means her social circle would still remain too closely linked to her parents. They describe not wanting her to be a "solo flyer" and that they "want her to interact with people." They outline how working in the family business could be a reserve option:

“If we got caught between a rock and a hard place that’s Plan B basically. But we would have to adapt some stuff for her so that she can feel like she’s being productive. She’s not just being brought in to move that box over there. It has to be more than that. It has to be a fulfilling role for her as well. But as I say, that’s the plan B, to explore different plan is...”  
(Lisa’s father)

Ben’s mother described their “dream that he would live independently” and:

“doing something he is happy with, and hopefully, you know, who knows? Maybe he’ll have a girlfriend and a family and all of that. Yeah, I think he’d love to be a dad, you know”.

Tim’s mother also expressed her dream of “a roof over his head, that’s the most important thing and I keep saying it to him”.

### *Parents’ child aspirations*

This section reports on parental responses to questions in the semi-structured interview regarding their thoughts about what their child may want to do post-school. Also informing this is parents’ reactions and comments when they were shown their child’s completed Mosaic map.

Despite parents expressing an interest in their child accessing mainstream employment and education and aspiring for more than traditional health funded day services, parents were concerned about their child’s SEN limiting their future potential. All the parents identified areas of academic or social behaviours that they felt their child experienced difficulty. Some of the main areas noted were money management stating “he’s not good with money” (Ben’s mother) and “no concept of money” (Lisa’s parents); social skills for example “he would not be great with customer care, hmm, he’d be very quiet, very, extremely introverted” (Tim’s mother) and “if it’s too busy, her social awareness as well, if it’s too, there’s too much happening around, she can’t focus” (Lisa’s parents) and literacy skills as noted by Ben’s mother “that’s where he’s caught with his vocabulary. He’s using a word that he may not necessarily understand” and Lisa’s parents “It’s a huge challenge for her; she is struggling with even the small words still. Not even the big stuff.”

Most of the parents had an idea of what their child wished to pursue based on their current areas of interest. For example, Ben really enjoys farming, and his mother anticipated that something like an “adapted horticulture course” or farming would likely be his post-school path;



her late 20s that she may, you know, and I'd like to keep those doors always open for her." (Lisa's father)



Image 29 - Lisa's Completed Mosaic Map

### Parent support

Despite parents having concerns about their child's future aspirations, in terms of achievability and suitability, they demonstrated a "whatever it takes" attitude towards supporting their child in achieving "a fulfilling daily life" (Lisa's father). While Lisa's parents were concerned about the qualifications required to be an art teacher or assistant, after the Mosaic map consultation, they became open to the idea of pursuing her preference, with Lisa's mother stating:

"Maybe there's something there in classes like that, again now, you're talking about evening classes, woodwork classes in the evening time...she could have that then to help out if she was an assistant. That's not a bad idea...You have us thinking now."

Lisa's parents further expressed a willingness to support their daughter also, describing how they will assist her in exploring a range of PSOs:

"We're not going to put any massive pressure on. Say, you have to do this, it's going to be more – 'Let's have a go at this. Let's have a go with that', but not ad infinitum. It'll be we want to try these things. One of these is going to be working for you, and it's up to you to put in the effort." (Lisa's father)

Ben's mother described the importance of fulfilment for her son, stating "I mean, they should be able to fulfil their, their desires as much as possible" and further committed to supporting Ben stating "we'll certainly try with him" in relation to his farming dream and that his family would not let distance of a PSO

“be a barrier. Ben went to school in [a town about 30mins away] for four or five years. We drove him in and out every day.” (Ben’s mother)

Similarly, Sally’s mother spoke about her own drive to have a PSO that will be suitable for her daughter when she said she “will spin wheels...to get opportunity for these kids.” She spoke at length in the semi-structured interview about the current curriculum Sally is accessing [QQI], possibly creating barriers to higher education opportunities in the future. She did her own research into the QQI modules that Sally was taking, explaining that:

“it doesn’t open any doors, which I only discovered over the weekend so I’m like ok, right so where do we go, you know what I mean and being realistic, I mean I know I suppose that’s, we don’t want to limit anybody.” (Sally’s mother)

She spoke about the family commitment to working around that issue:

“Do we need to try and get, if I want Sally to do a course, that maybe that the school doesn't come to that level at maybe QQI 3 or 4, as a family, do we wanna bring in somebody at home to support her, to get to that level if she wants to do a course that's at [a higher level]...rather than saying, 'Oh, I'm sorry that door's not open', because she never took the QQI! Yunno that type of thing. So, to give us the options and to give Sally the options and to see where we need to focus our time focus our energy.” (Sally’s mother)

This parental commitment to sourcing information to attempt to make their child’s aspirations a reality was also reflected in the conversation with Tim’s mother. When presented with his Mosaic map (Image 30), she expressed a gratitude for highlighting his preferences. She noted her own surprise at the prominence of his preference for landscaping and designing of his future home stating “that's that surprises me. Big time. Now, he is very good at artwork, so there could be a linkage there to landscape design, or something, maybe” (Tim’s mother).

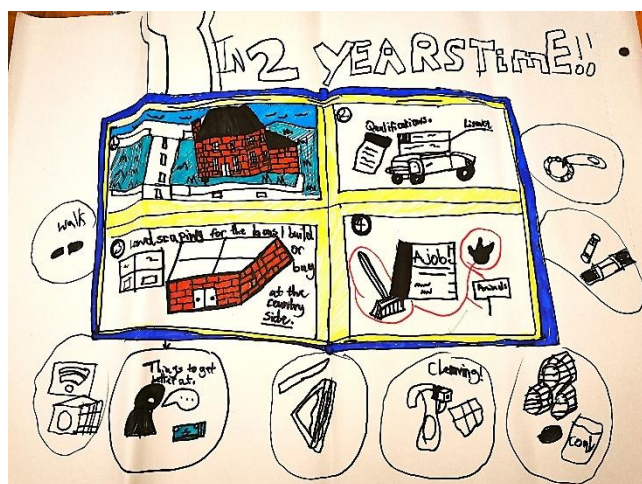


Image 30 - Tim's Mosaic Map

She spoke about how that will initiate next steps for her in exploring those options:

“That's interesting. I'm going to have to do a bit of homework on this and throw it out in front of him just to see...[the Mosaic map] will go up on the wall now hopefully, hopefully, cause this is good....it's amazing, this is interesting [pointing to the landscaping], I'll definitely have to find info on that...there may be a FETCH course for it, we'll have to check that out. The lad he owns the haulage company has a hardware shop as well. So, we'll see, we'll see, we'll see.” (Tim's mother)

### *Challenges for parents*

For all participating parents in this study, the forthcoming transition of their child from special school was a new experience. While some parents had previously supported one of their children through the transition from mainstream post-primary school to third level, they felt that experience was not transferrable, nor would it be relevant or supportive to them in navigating this upcoming transition.

This is captured in the interview with Lisa's father as part of the Mosaic approach when he described his experience supporting his oldest son:

“It's completely different. He [his son] has been normal everything, normal school, college and all that. He's going along now, touch wood, he's going along the finest so he's not as high of a concern to us. Lisa's process it's going to be completely different.” (Lisa's father)

It was echoed by Sally's mother in her interview when she described how her oldest daughter had recently transitioned from mainstream to university. She

described the provision of guidance to her oldest daughter as an important stimulus for conversation:

“Ya, typical guidance and lots of questions. And [older sibling] was in [a fee-paying tutorial college] here in [County]. So, there was a, you know, she had the opportunity of going through, you know a Guidance Teacher. She didn't agree with what the guidance said, but that created a conversation in itself. Like she was suggesting things like, oh, you know she could have Occupational Therapy, because your sister has [a physical disability] you know, and [older sibling] was like, no, no, I don't mind doing it at home, but that's not what I wanna do. So, it created all this conversation, asking, what do you think? We have our own business at home. And so [older sibling] was saying, like, I think I really wanna do more in business. And then so these were conversations at the table. We never had a conversation about Sally at the table.” (Sally's mother)

She further describes the differences between transition from mainstream and from special school:

“I think for us as parents, you know, as we, we're you know, we come through a kind of seesaw of a journey. It's not as straightforward as in mainstream, secondary and stuff like that where you just know there's peaks of exams, like, we're, we're kind of but yeah, so yeah, it's different. But yeah, we're kind of, yeah, we just need to, you know, get, we're like peeking at that chapter, but we haven't got there yet. At the moment, we're not quite sure what's on the table of contents, and that's what makes me a little bit – Okay, I want more information!” (Sally's mother)

Many parents described their fears and concerns for their child, owing to their SEN, which they described as making them potentially vulnerable. Lisa's father described her as “quite naive, in a sense, will be, in other words, very easily led” and that she has “no fear whatsoever”. This led to his fear that she could be taken advantage of in a workplace environment:

“But the main goal is ultimately to keep her safe and secure. That would be my biggest concern, Lisa is very naive, very...I suppose, when she's in, she lives in her own world when she is in... This school is a happy place. It doesn't really reflect what the real world is like outside. So, it's to make the transition from happy zone here to what the real world is like is a huge concern, you know. And you know, she's a very delicate soul, I suppose, and I, I don't want to see her, when she goes out into the real world to have a bad experience that could reflect on a long term on, or even her mental state. So, I, I would be quite concerned for that, you know, because the real world works a little bit faster, and there's a little less caring, so we'd be certainly for me, [Lisa's mother] would be the same. We'd be very, very careful as to what she moves on to. If she moved on to work with or where she's going to work, or whatever here, or if she is going to work, we don't know, but her safety and security,

and her mental state is, is something high on the priority list.” (Lisa’s father)

For Sally’s mother, she recalled a previous negative experience that has shaped her fears for her daughter’s life post-school:

“My fear that she, she did a Saturday club once where she went into place here in [county], and it was bigger guys, teenagers at the time. They took her [wheel] chair. They ran with her. There was shouting, flapping, and all of that, and that's not what, you know what I mean, I suppose... and that may never be what's out there, I suppose that's my fear that you know that there's some courses that you know, that would drop her off, and I need something tailored to what she wants to do and how she is gonna contribute in the world.” (Sally’s mother)

Similar fears owing to their potential vulnerability were reflected by Tim’s mother when discussing navigating the post-school transition, saying “Yeah, especially with children with needs, you know, that's the worrying part as a parent.” She has also emphasised the importance of her son being streetwise and keeping himself safe, stating “I have him warned, I keep warning him, you have to, times have changed” (Tim’s mother).

On a more practical level, Tim’s mother also expressed her fear regarding how he will cope with day to day living such as “to keep the bills paid, keep an eye on them” (Tim’s mother) and Ben’s mother had similar concerns regarding money management:

“You know, he's, he's, he's not great, he's not good with money, right? And you know he has to spend it the minute he gets it. So, I have him on my revolute account, which he doesn't like, because [best friend] has a Bank of Ireland card, and 'he can go to the machine mum, and he can see how much is in his account'. Now Ben has a Bank of Ireland account that he'll never know about because he would just spend everything that's in it, you know, and I've been saving into it for a number of years for him. So yes, few bob there, you know he, he doesn't get Maths. I don't think he will ever get Maths.” (Ben’s mother)

Lisa’s father also discussed the challenge of replacing the familiarity of school routine for their daughter once she leaves school:

“My biggest concern is that when this school finishes here, cause this school has been her life really, when that finishes, it's like we're going off the edge of a cliff here...my biggest concern is we have to replace that, the school routine with another routine, where she is happy and doing something and she is safe and secure in what she is doing. That's the biggest concern. And I'd say most parents are telling you that I'd say.” (Lisa’s father)

Sally's mother expressed her concern about her daughter's inclusion in society and echoes the description of a cliff edge by Lisa's father when she said:

"Now, these kids, they're, you know, they've been there from the age of four, in Montessori's and stuff like that. But it's more or less what happens after, after 18, that they disappear. And it's like they're part of society up to that point. And they're part of mixing in and sports days and everything. I mean school tours..." (Sally's mother)

She provided multiple examples of trying to empower her daughter to advocate for herself in society to ensure she is seen and heard. Some of her examples included:

"Her SNA gave her voucher for coffee shop in town, and I said, 'now stand up tall and go in and say, you know, can I have a hot chocolate? And they'll probably say, do you want marshmallows, and if you don't'...and then he [the server] said to me, 'Does she want cream on it?' It's taken me 10 minutes now to get out of the car, encourage her, hand it [money] to her and I said, 'why don't you ask her that?' And she said sorry to her, but that needed to happen for her to see, you know that people don't mean anything bad by it but... But we're doing that in the background all the time, all the time." (Sally's mother)

Parents were also concerned about the future due to their prior experiences of accessing disability services and all five participating parents gave examples of the challenges they faced accessing and advocating for supports and services. Examples such as Tim's mother paying privately for speech and language support describing the "small fortune" she had spent due to lack of public system support and Sally's mother describing the "firefighting a lot of the time on the physical side in terms of getting resources and OT's and Physios, speech and language". She further described the challenges of low aspirations of multi-disciplinary professionals in her example:

"Somebody told me many years ago, a Senior speech and language therapist, please don't set the bar too high for Sally...and I was like, What? Pardon? What did you just say?" (Sally's mother)

Lisa's parents express their doubts about future provision for their daughter in their example:

"I guess there will be support there with, whether it would be suitable or good enough. (Lisa's mother)". "I have my reservations about this. Been through some of that support systems before, and they have been abysmal, to be honest with you. The, the money isn't there. The people aren't there. The skill sets aren't there either. And you know there is a big, huge hole there. Need I say anymore..." (Lisa's father)

Additionally, when discussing what role the school may have in transition planning, Ben's mother described her experience in accessing the services:

"I don't think they'll have any role; that's my feeling that they won't. That it'll be up to me to seek that out, or where or how, I don't know. Maybe through [name of disability service], but [name of disability service] services aren't very good either, you know they are very poor...when he was diagnosed with Autism in June, we have had no services. I was offered a course for parents and Autism, but I couldn't attend it, because I'm just recovering from a stroke. So, I wanted to do a night course. But they don't have one, of course. Yeah. So yeah, every time you go to something you're hitting a brick wall. I'm sure, you're hearing that from everybody." (Ben's mother)

### Teachers' aspirations

The third subtheme of theme one captures the voice of the three teachers of the participating Mosaic approach students (Lisa, Tim and Sally and Ben – who have the same teacher), along with the two teachers of students in the focus groups, Mr. Dean and Ms. Taylor. Teachers' views were captured through individual semi-structured interviews, an individual consultation on their students completed Mosaic map (where applicable) and a focus group. Three components supported this subtheme: teachers' individual aspirations, teachers' student aspirations and teachers' perceptions of student's ability.

#### *Teachers' individual aspirations*

During the semi-structured interviews, the teachers were asked to consider what they think their student could/should do after they leave school and where they see the student in ten years' time. Overall, the teachers demonstrated aspirations for their student to access mainstream employment or education, similarly to the parents' aspirations. In her response, Lisa's teacher explained that the PSO would need to be realistic in terms of the logistics of the location:

"One of the training centres is what I would imagine, because her parents would work, they work out around [area where NLN is], anyway, and it there that has to be taken into account as well as the logistics of getting someone from A to B and all of that." (Lisa's teacher)

And that post-training centre, she could see her accessing employment in her interest areas of "horse-riding, something with animals". Speaking more about it, Lisa's teacher noted:

"I can see her, actually with a little job. I do see her with a job, maybe not a full-time job, but I do see her like working in some capacity...I would like to think that you would actually be working in some capacity,

whether it be like a part-time job or full-time job, or something like that. Yeah” (Lisa’s teacher)

Tim’s teacher also expressed his thoughts regarding education and employment for Tim in the future stating “I’m sure Tim will want to do some sort of post leaving cert”. However, he noted that, to his knowledge, Tim “doesn’t have a particular passion for any field”, so he suggested:

“He might work in the storeroom of, of a, a warehouse from a big shop or something like that, you know, stacking orders, working in the warehouse of a, of a tile shop or something. You know what I mean putting orders together and loading them into cars, yunno that kind of way. Not overcrowded...not being over social, you know, with too many people where he’d be dealing with customers and dealing with colleagues and stuff like that.” (Tim’s teacher)

He spoke additionally about how that type of employment would align with Tim’s skillset:

“You know what I mean. If he had a list, a picking list, you know what I mean, he would be careful about getting it right and making sure they didn't break anything, you know. I think you would be, he would be an asset to that sort of, that sort of job. That's, that's where I would see him.” (Tim’s teacher)

Regarding his dreams beyond employment, he indicated that he thought “he'd like to settle down and kind of live his life within 3 miles of that [home]” describing him as a real homebird (Tim’s teacher). Ben’s teacher also envisaged him gaining some form of employment, aligned with his interest in gardening, indicating that he could build on this interest in the training centre; “you know, he likes gardening and possibly, I suppose if there was an element of that that could be picked up in the training centre” (Sally and Ben’s teacher).

This would then be with a view to leading to a potential employment. However, as also noted by the parents, she noted his vulnerability and needing to be in a safe, supported working environment:

“Little garden centre, you know, I don't know, in the right environment with the right amount of, he'll probably always need a support person. But you could say to Ben, look it, organize those plants, and whatever you know, give him the small tasks. But again, it would have to be, I'd imagine, anyway, in a minded, safe and nice, happy, calm environment. And they are there but it's just trying to find them...they are there aren't they?” (Sally and Ben’s teacher)

Contrastingly, Sally and Ben's teacher described how priority has been given to Sally's medical needs, as she gradually returns to school following a significant medical procedure. She notes how this has led to her managing the day-to-day support for Sally, and has precluded her from thinking about her life post-school:

"You know, I haven't probably put in enough thought not having Sally for only short days, you know it has to be more about. Oh, my God, we need to focus. We need to do your maths, we need to do your English, we need to do your computer module. It hasn't been like, Oh, my goodness, where do I see Sally, I genuinely haven't thought." (Sally and Ben's teacher)

This supports statements from Sally's mother where she described the firefighting and day-to-day activities involved in supporting her daughter.

### *Perceptions of ability*

Already illustrated are the aspirations of teachers for their students to access mainstream employment in the future. However, during data generation sessions, it was clear that teachers had concerns regarding students' ability. Similarly to the parents' concerns, the implications of the SEND on the student's and their views on the misalignment between aspirations and ability were illustrated.

Speaking about a student that was not a participant in this research project, Tim's teacher described the issue with challenges such as low literacy levels on a student's aspirations:

"There's one boy who is very, very good, and with his hands very, very, very, very talented now, with his hands, but he is completely illiterate. And then he, he wants to do LCA because he feels it will be a pathway to an apprenticeship. Now whether it will be or not, I don't know because he's going to come up...he's gonna struggle with an apprenticeship. Obviously, you know, I mean in with, with the way...and it's you know, I don't think anyone's...I don't think anyone's broken that to him like I mean." (Tim's teacher)

Perceptions of literacy as a potential barrier were also noted by Lisa's teacher and Sally and Ben's teacher in their examples. Regarding Lisa's literacy, and as already noted by her parents, Lisa's teacher stated that "she would have huge problems with literacy". She gave a further example of the implications of the low literacy levels on her ability to achieve a driver's license, stating "she probably would be able to master the actual driving part, but the theory test would be very difficult. Which is such a shame." (Lisa's teacher)

Describing some students in her class, Sally and Ben's teacher also noted that she is supporting "two students that really aren't reading, can't read anything on their own." Most of the teachers discussed the tension between wanting students to have their dreams "for as long as possible" while balancing being "realistic" (Tim's teacher). While one of the focus group teachers (Mr. Dean) described aspirations as needing to be "kind of somewhere realistic", he spoke about how he manages this tension when parents ask about the potential for third level:

"And like I'll often tell them, yes, down the line but maybe in three or four years in the training centre, and then maybe going in a little bit more mature. You might get to do some of the courses..." (Mr. Dean, Focus Group Teacher)

However, both Lisa and Tim's teachers reiterate their challenge in navigating this perceived misalignment in their interaction in the Focus Group:

Tim's teacher: "Well, very I mean very often the kids themselves are completely, do you know, that their aspirations are way beyond their abilities. You know, you know you have fellows who say, like Sam will probably want to be a policeman."

Lisa's teacher: "He'll want to play for Liverpool like."

Tim's teacher: "And you know, like, and you know, my, Noel in my class would want to be an engineer or whatever but he can't. You know there's massive limitations there. And so, you'd wonder, you know, where that conversation or that conversation would, would go with them, because you don't want to run someone like, you know, completely..."

Lisa's teacher: "...shoot them down really."

#### *Teachers' student aspirations*

Following the completion of the Mosaic maps, the three teachers of Lisa, Tim, Sally and Ben were invited to consider their students vision for life post-school. Lisa's teacher was surprised at the preferences that Lisa had depicted on her map. For example, in response to flower arranging as a potential type of work experience (Image 31), she noted "I've never heard of this one". Similarly, when she observed that art was the main interest area for future employment, she responded:

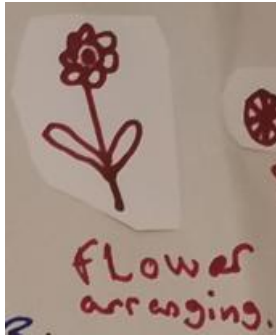


Image 31 - Lisa - Flower Arranging

"I wouldn't really, art isn't something I would have really associated with her. We go to art only once in the week and she doesn't have a what you'd say, a real artistic flair you know. That's why I mean, that's, that's interesting. Because she doesn't, it's not like...I like other years where I have someone who's natural ability...yeah, you know..." (Lisa's teacher)

Referring back to the literacy challenges experienced by Lisa, she considers that perhaps art is a preference because "I suppose it's, it's not academic right?" She also stated that she feels that Lisa will have some autonomy over her post-school decision making, stating "she's not going to be pigeonholed into something that she might not really want to. Do you know?" (Lisa's teacher).

Reacting positively to Tim's Mosaic map, his teacher describes how there were some aspects of his vision that surprised him. He noted the inclusion of pets as "something to work with" in terms of future work experiences and that the type of work documented on the map, aligned with his initial thoughts during the semi-structured interview:

"I suppose when we were talking the first day, I kind of had some idea...you know, like work with his hands, and, you know, have some sort of a like, I know he wants to work. You know what I mean. I think that that would be very important for him, like, you know. So, and yeah, I mean, I suppose that's Tim, you know, like..." (Tim's teacher)

When discussing Tim's vision for his house in the countryside, additional context was provided to the teacher of the reasons Tim had for this vision. During data generation sessions, Tim had indicated that he was "thinking of moving up in a safer place, better than my area" and referenced social housing, drug use and antisocial behaviour as contributing factors to his decision. This was a surprise to his teacher, "...and like his big house in the country. I wonder I didn't I never heard him mention his estate being particularly dangerous." (Tim's teacher)

Referring back to his initial thoughts that a job aligned with Tim's skillset would be best, having seen Tim's Map (Image 32), he stated how he felt the Map was an accurate representation of Tim:

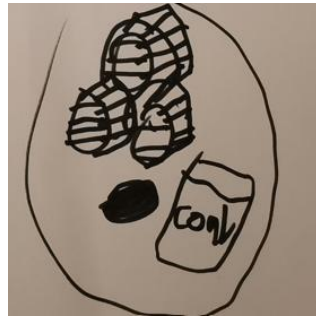


Image 32 - Tim - Carrying Coal Bucket

“...because he is diligent, and he's kind of you know, he'll complete a task, anal is the word I'm thinking of, but you know what I'm saying like. He would take pride in it, do it right, double checking, and you know, and that's, that's really where you know, what I would see, but like you know, the rest of it then, is just him. You know what I mean, and it's like, you know, he's very proud. He's a proud person, like, you know, but like, you know, little jobs, did, you know, like bringing in the coal and things like that and wanting to be stronger to lift the coal. That's him like, you know...and I think it would make him, you know, that would be pleasant, pleasing for him, and that it would be what he wants and that it's kind of reflected in there as well [referring to the map].” (Tim's teacher)

Sally and Ben's teacher also expressed how Ben's map was a confirmation of post-school vision that she expected stating “honestly, I don't think there's anything that has jumped out there, really.” She mentioned that he had been having these conversations with her and making his post-school ambitions known:

“You know it's lovely to be able to see how mature he has become, but he'll talk about what he wants to do, you know, and he sees his future where he is. He's talking about what he wants to do, and I think he's even mentioned wanting to drive a car, you know.” (Sally and Ben's teacher)

She noted that it was not a surprise that some of his post-school aspirations had been influenced by his best friend stating:

“I'm not surprised that he's saying, ‘I go where [name of best friend] goes’, and I think he sees that he has a safe circle, and he would like to see that moving on.” (Sally & Ben's teacher)

She did, however, reiterate her concern about his vulnerability when she said:

“...and look at you know what, the fact that he, he knows there is this ‘growing up’, there, but you know, at the same time then there's the, you know, finding Snickers his Elf in his wardrobe, and he's thinking, why is he not in the North Pole?” (Sally and Ben's teacher)

Sally and Ben's teacher, despite having to focus her energy on supporting Sally's day to day medical needs, and not having much time to consider her future, was

very happy to see that Sally herself has been considering it and has high aspirations for her future. Similarly to Tim’s teacher, she also felt that it aligned with her skillset and strengths (Image 33):

“And that's purely from a practical point of view, and the fact that she hasn't been in school, you know, all day every day and I, I suppose we've just been so mindful of her in the here and now, but I'm loving that she's seen herself with the whole childcare. You know. I don't know what the practical side of that, you know. But are there, you know. Maybe it can be. I can see her, I mean, she loves working at a desk. And she does love doing her work so you know maybe, if you could see her working in a childcare facility where she's getting to see people coming in and kids coming in and welcoming them, you know. I don't know but I'm just, you know, but it's lovely to get that information...” (Sally’s teacher)



*Image 33 - Sally's Mosaic Map - Skills*

## 5.2 Theme Two: Current Practice for Inclusion

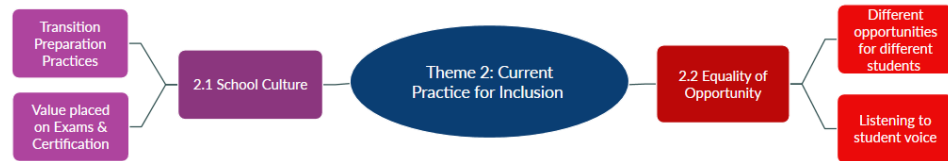


Image 34 - Theme Two

Theme two captures the complexities of special schools in relation to culture, curriculum and transition preparation practices (Image 34). It explores the tension between current school culture, which focuses on qualifications and certification, against what the participants deem as relevant and meaningful learning to prepare the students for life post-school.

### School culture

Two components informed this subtheme. Firstly, transition preparation practices which are broken down into student focused development, curriculum and work experience. The second component is value placed on exams and certification which includes community-based learning, impact of focus on exams and students understanding of examination and qualification.

Within this study, transition preparation practices were defined as:

*“The curriculum that schools offer and the related activities that support skill development and independence for the students during their time in school. These can include a range of areas including academic skill development, personal and social development, independent living skills and the assessment and profiling of students’ strengths, needs and interests.”*

In theme one, all of the participants described how they aspire for the students to access mainstream education and employment opportunities post-school. Therefore, parent and teacher participants felt there was limited time in Senior Cycle to ensure that students are fully prepared for that transition, and that there was a need to ensure that what they are doing in school is value added:

*“And the teachers here are amazing but as a parent, I suppose we have this limited time before, you know, and that type of things so like whatever we plan to do as a teacher realistically, that what they're doing in school is value added.” (Sally’s mother)*

Curriculum was identified as a key feature of transition preparation for these students. Participants identified aspects of the current curricula on offer in the school that they felt contributed positively to the student's overall development and preparation for life post-school. Students in particular, were able to identify specific subjects that they felt were useful to them.

For example, in the Leavers Focus Group, Kit outlined that he was engaged in "Woodwork, Art, Maths, English, French" as part of his LCA Curriculum, and responded that they will "definitely" help him in the transition to NLN, adding that the most useful subjects would be "like English, maybe French, if, if I'm going to France or something to travel, like language is very important to like to understand what people are saying" (Kit, School Leaver).

Sally, a Mosaic student engaged with QQI, had identified specific subjects that she felt aligned with her own personal goals. She stated that "Maths" and "English" would support her goal of becoming a Montessori teacher and "Hair and Beauty" would support her personal care skill development (Sally, Mosaic Student).

Sam, a School Leaver engaged in QQI Curriculum felt that engaging in practical activities around the school was very useful to him for example:

"Well, for now, when we, we started putting out down all the chairs on Thursday for the graduation day. The award and that's, that's the one thing that we're trying to do as well, help like put down chairs and table and all that." (Sam, School Leaver)

Will, a Pre-School Leaver accessing LCA, indicated that the following subjects were the most beneficial to him: "Woodwork, for the business side of it", "Maths" and "maybe when we do plays, we speak, and we, I have to listen to what to say...I think they'll make us be able to learn, good communication skills" (Will, Pre-School Leaver).

Luke and Fiadh, Pre-School Leavers, were accessing QQI Curricula, and indicated that "Woodwork, Horticulture, Cookery, [classroom] Work" were their main subjects and Will indicated that these subjects were particularly helpful:

"[They] are preparing you to actually give you the skills for the work, so like woodwork can be something in working with wood, cutting, or making something with them, cooking can be a chef and for art, you

could be an artist making drawings for people that they want or sell them.” (Will, Pre-School Leaver)

One parent also suggested that these practical subjects were supporting the students’ development with Ben’s mother indicating that:

“The little Cookery classes help, and the Woodwork classes help. And you know, they go to the shop and they're teaching them money. And I think they do, they, they try to teach them life skills.” (Ben’s mother)

However, it was clear in the data generated that participants expressed doubt and concern about the relevance of some aspects of the curricula and considered if time could be better spent on supporting life skills. For example, Will, a Pre-School Leaver, wished that during his time in school, he would learn about:

“What to do in the future like pay the bills, pay taxes, how to pay insurance for cars, and all those important stuff you need to know in the future how to buy a house, how to buy like a car, and have a car...and let's say you, you're married, you have a child, how to take care of the child.” (Will, Pre-School Leaver)

Tim’s mother supported this practical element stating that “...if a child wants to learn how to drive, I think it should be involved in the education system” (Tim’s mother).

Sally’s mother stated that while some aspects of the curriculum are nice to know, are there other areas that time could be spent on instead:

“Sally is doing things like Woodwork and which I get it. It's lovely to understand it, but is, you know, Sally’s hand eye coordination wouldn't be the best, are there other things that she could be doing?” (Sally’s mother)

While she believes that:

“You have wonderful schools like these are wonderful teachers who, you know, only want the best, and that's what I've been finding that they just want the best for the children, just to make sure that we're feeding into. You know what, what they're gonna need for, and really need [for the future].” (Sally’s mother)

Suggestions of additions to the curriculum from her included:

“...things like make an appointment, ringing up a doctor and saying I’m not feel...you know, make your own appointments, like you will tell them that you’re not feeling well or whatever, that we just have that conversational transactions in the classroom, social skills like, what would you do in this situation and things like that.” (Sally’s mother)

Lisa's father suggested that for Lisa, more hands-on practical learning would be aligned with her interests, stating that he:

"...could see her out doing agriculture, horticulture, that kind of stuff, now in gardens and that kind of stuff, better than being inside in the classroom trying to learn trigonometry. That's not going to happen."  
(Lisa's father)

The teachers also expressed their doubts about the relevance of the current curricula on offer. Lisa's teacher stated that:

"this year above all years, that this is the class, that I just no matter what I am doing, it's not applicable to them at all! I feel really bad about it you know." (Lisa's teacher)

She added that she would love to teach the students "to do really basic things themselves" such as "to be able to bring in the kettle and get somebody to make the cup of tea here" (Lisa's teacher).

During the Teacher's Focus Group, they identified that there was "a mismatch for us all" in terms of what they felt should be taught against what they need to teach as part of the QQI and LCA Curricula. Tim's teacher illustrated this when he explained:

"For English and Social Ed and your French, and what have you that and then most of that is going over their heads as well. I hope nobody minds me saying like, you know, it's like, you know you're, you're, you're teaching them something, it's too hard for them in one way, and then you're neglecting, because you have to do that, you're neglecting what you probably should be doing with them." (Tim's teacher)

Ms. Taylor spoke about historical school practice, where "there was a skills, a social skills class, for students" (Ms. Taylor) but that it "has been lost" (Lisa's teacher) in the move to a more qualifications-based curricula. Ms. Taylor added that "basic things of making a sandwich" or "make a cup of tea" (Lisa's teacher) should be "the things to focus on" (Lisa's teacher), with Ms. Taylor adding that the school is "kind of gone very academic in ways" (Ms. Taylor). She added that there is a cost to this "academic" focus on the students, stating that:

"...some in the class you'd look at and you'd say, you know, they're in exam class. The amount of work you've to cover. It's all non-stop. And they're missing out on certain social activities or basic social skills." (Ms. Taylor)

Tim's teacher also experienced this tension and consideration of the cost of the focus on the academic development when he discussed teaching "trigonometry

or Pythagoras theorem” with Ms. Taylor adding “for what” in terms of added benefit to the students. Tim’s teacher added that:

“I know that it's not going to, you know it's not going to stick anyway, but you know it's there, it's on the course you run through it. But then you know what I mean so much you're missing out on by, by spending that 40 min.” (Tim’s teacher)

He feels that “life skills” would be more beneficial stating that:

“I feel that that's probably would, would be what would stand to them the most, and that I'd be happier when they leave that they would have had that grounding.” (Tim’s teacher)

Mr. Dean added that students in the school that were accessing the Autism Classes, who have more time dedicated to social skill development, are perhaps leaving the school better equipped to face the daily challenges of adult life post-school:

“I suppose if you look at our ASD units, they do social training at least once a week. So are like, they're out of school. But are they getting more experience than those who are left in the school? I think they are.” (Mr. Dean, Focus Group Teacher)

A second key factor in transition preparation cited by participants was work experience. Work experience was seen as being advantageous to the students that were given an opportunity to engage with it, as noted by Mr. Dean, who stated that “I suppose in QQj, with different levels, so the level three students are more, I suppose they are at an advantage in that they cover work experience” (Mr. Dean).

For students that had engaged with it, they outlined how it positively impacted upon them. Kit, a School Leaver, spoke about the many work experiences that he had engaged with since Junior Cycle and stated that they acted as a support in deciding on a post-school path, “because it makes your mind up to see what you want to do” (Kit, School Leaver). He spoke about how he felt valued during one particular work experience in a nursing home and that he would choose it again in the future:

“I say, I say, [name of care home], because its literally like being inside a school, you feel like you are an SNA inside a school, helping the older people and you are making conversations with them and it's just really nice to see them...I'd say, I'd say I'd go back to [care home] again because it's really nice because you are helping everyone the whole time. We have art, horticulture,

the old women love horticulture, they loved talking about their flowers, you know like, they love the art, they loved the painting, like they can paint whatever they want. They use their own head like, ya. We just have a laugh there you know.” (Kit, School Leaver)

Many students and teachers provided examples of how the work experience opened doors for potential part time employment. For example, Will, a Pre-School Leaver, indicated that he “actually really enjoyed” his placement in a Hyundai Dealership. While the mechanic element of the role was not aligned with his interests, he found a role within the work placement that aligned with his strengths of being organised:

“From my work experience I had to work as a mechanic and do some filing also... I preferred the filing for sure, it’s more cleaner, it’s not as dirty to do, and you can sit down or stand up to do it...” (Will, Pre-School Leaver)

When asked if he would consider working there in a part time role, he responded “part time job, maybe, I think if it was for filing, then definitely” (Will, Pre-School Leaver). Tim’s teacher provided an example of sourcing a placement in a local Creche for two students and that after it had concluded “your wan [owner] said to me, if she ever wants a job, come back, she said she’s brilliant” (Tim’s teacher). Ms. Taylor provided an example of a student that had successfully gained part time employment directly from their work experience, explaining:

“...like one of the students in my class, you know, he got a job, his work placement in a cafe, and then he ended up getting weekend work out of it so it can be really successful for them.” (Ms. Taylor, Focus Group Teacher)

Parents also spoke about how it could help their child to “get into all these places, and get a feel for them, might help her make her decision” about a post-school pathway (Lisa’s mother). Ben’s mother supported this stating that if he had an opportunity to access a specific type of work experience that “it would also tell us if he was cut out for doing the course or not” (Ben’s mother). She added that as long as it was aligned with his interests, it would be very valuable to him. When speaking about his Mosaic map which represented his love for animals, his mother said “that’s another place for Ben like to do work experience is in a pet shop. Something like that would be great for him, cause he would walk them” (Ben’s mother).

Tim had engaged in a work experience in the weeks prior to data generation and his mother described what a positive and affirming experience it was for him stating that “he's had work experience, and to be honest, I think it was great for him, because gives him that bit of independence. He's broke away from mammy as well.” She further explained that he did such a thorough job at the cleaning tasks he was given, that the existing employees were spoken to by the owner about their cleaning standards:

“In the heel of the hunt, don't say this back to him, but there was an apprentice in the garage, and he would be working on something over there, he'd throw all his rubbish on the floor, coming into the lunch break and he'd wreck it. But after a couple of days, they realised it was actually him that was wrecking the place. So, he got ATE. He got pulled to one side because you would quickly show up who was not cleaning the place.” (Tim's mother)

She added that this gave Tim “confidence”, and she told him “you've done this right, and you've shown up the other people. I think that that really stuck with him” (Tim's mother). Tim also spoke very positively about that work experience and his sense of achievement stating the “best thing was, they couldn't get over. They couldn't get over how, how I got the whole place clean for them” and that “if I pick another work experience, I'd go to the same place” (Tim, Mosaic Student). He also indicated that he would be open to a part time job in that setting, stating that:

“Ya I'd say my mother's friend who is the boss, if he might be ringing me about it, saying, 'are you gonna take a winter job for me?' So, I would say, no problem. I would say, no problem.” (Tim, Mosaic Student)

Tim's teacher spoke about the importance for Tim, that the work experience was aligned with his strengths, stating that:

“Tim was doing his dirty work in with haulage man, and I think he was fine with that like. But and again, I suppose, in a way that would suit Tim as well, because Tim doesn't mind getting his hands dirty.” (Tim's teacher)

He added that it was valued by his mother as it was a realistic PSO that could be further explored, stating:

“...they were working him hard, but I think that was, I think she [Tim's mother] liked the idea of that, because it was just, it was realistic. You know what I mean.” (Tim's teacher)

Tim's teacher spoke about how for some students who access work experience, it might not be as valuable to them if it isn't aligned with their interests stating that:

"I think the challenge, then, is with work experience is getting them something that's actually relevant, you know, because if they do go on source it themselves, they're just taking the first thing that they can get."  
(Tim's teacher)

This was reiterated by teachers, parents and students when discussing the potential value of work experience as a transition preparation activity.

Tim's mother stated that "It's, it's to get the opportunities of the work experience is the difficult thing. There's a lot of companies don't want to take children on" and that "I actually didn't realize, because Tim was telling me, however many young lads were in his class who didn't get work experience, which is sad" (Tim's mother). This links with comments from Lisa's father, who is a self-employed business owner. He spoke about the barriers to employment and work experience for people with disabilities from an employer perspective:

"It's going to be hard to find people that do that [part time work]. We're self-employed and the biggest problem with small companies is insurance, they are going to go 'no way'. I know, I know how hard it is, so, the risk is too big...But the problem is, then you're looking at smaller companies. And now we're hitting insurance again, because I, we'd be the same. Somebody came to me with a child with special needs or whatever, and said, 'Would you take them on?' I'd have to say I'd love to, but I can't, insurance. My insurance would go through the roof, or if anything happens or anything happens to that person while they are working for me, it's just it's a, it's a massive risk for a small company."  
(Lisa's father)

This barrier was also cited by Mr. Dean when he recalled previous school practices regarding work experience, stating that companies used to reach out to the school annually to source students that would work with them:

"Like I remember years ago, when I first came into QQi, or FETAC when it was like, we had people ringing that have had people on work experience here before, and even car valets saying 'Can you send more? Do you have anyone who can come down this year?', and it was easy and then it became harder to get work." (Mr. Dean, Focus Group teacher)

Students also noted the challenge of sourcing a work experience, for example, for Lisa, who was yet to access work experience stating that "it's very hard to get places to go, it's a place that you like to go" (Lisa, Mosaic Student). Sam was

relying on his family members and their contacts to source a future work experience for him, stating that his “mother work out in school...like a canteen”, his “aunt works in the restaurant” and his uncle works for a stone company and that he could “help him around and stuff” (Sam, School Leaver).

Tim’s teacher stated that an additional challenge to sourcing a meaningful work experience is that at times the employer may not value the contribution the student can make. For example, he said that:

“I think sometimes you know, like when you send kids from our school to a work experience, they might be wrapped up. You know what I mean, whereas I think Tim got a taste of you know, they might be kind of in the way, or whatever.” (Tim’s teacher)

This echoes an experience that Kit, a School Leaver, relayed in the Focus Group. He described the three different work experiences that he had recently engaged with: a “coffee shop”, a “hardware shop” and the “nursing home”. When asked to discuss his favourite, he had this response:

“But in [name of coffee shop] it’s really hard going, you are on the go the whole time, there’s no break at all in the coffee shop because in [name of coffee shop] it’s a takeaway and there’s queues going outside the door and stuff like. And the DIY one was a bit boring like, there’s no, I had no one to talk to. There was no one helping me around, I was just staring into space like...the only good thing I did was cleaning dirty stoves, it’s not really, it’s not my favourite like. Like, like, they didn’t they really give me anything to do like. I was over in the paint aisle, and they just wanted me to turn the paint over, you know like, just say this is the paint, [student demonstrates], so they want me to flip it over so I can see it. Ya like the paint was turned backwards and they wanted me to turn it forwards, it was a bit boring like, really boring, and I wouldn’t like to work there again.” (Kit, School Leaver)

Linked with curricula and work experience, was the transition preparation practice of student focused development for Senior Cycle students. Throughout the focus groups and the Mosaic map making sessions, students were invited to identify areas of strength and identify areas for development or areas they wish to improve prior to leaving school. All of the students were able to identify areas of strength across a range of areas.

The areas of strength were demonstrated across work related skills, independent living skills and sports and recreation. For example, Tim identified that if he was drawing up a curriculum vitae (C.V.) for a future work experience, he would include skills such as “hard working, diligent, clinical. Doesn't multitask...I just stick with the one thing and then do it after” (Tim, Mosaic Student). He added that he is “good with time”, “always on time”, “very respectful” and “doesn't give up that easily” (Tim, Mosaic Student).

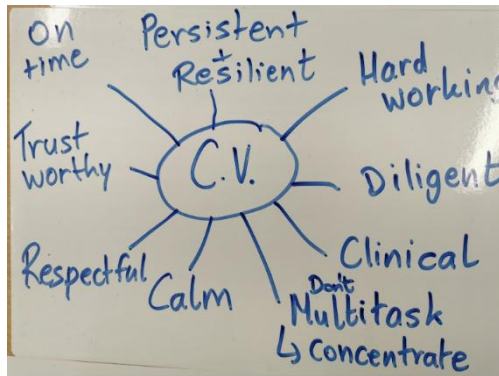


Image 35 - Tim's C.V.

When exploring some potential future work experiences during the Mosaic Sessions (Image 36), Lisa stated that she was “very good at flower arranging” and had identified skills such as “willing to learn”, “organised” and “good at taking instructions” through a mind mapping exercise:

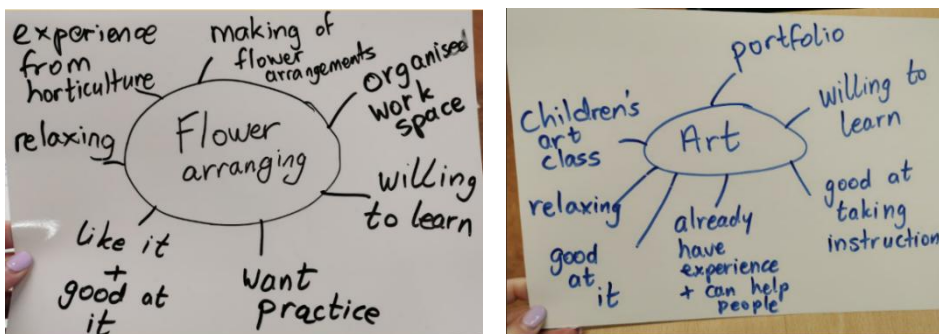


Image 36 - Lisa's Work Experience Preferences

During the Mosaic Sessions, Sally was also able to identify that she had skills such as “working independently”, being a “people person” and was good at “using computers” and “typing” (Image 37).

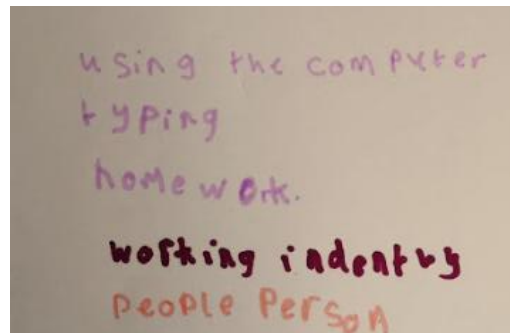


Image 37 - Sally's Mosaic Map - Skills

Students identified a broad range of independent living skills that they felt were an area of strength to them. Ben spoke about his pet chickens, how he takes care of them, but then also can collect and cook the eggs himself:

“I collect some eggs, and sometimes, if it's not much eggs, I go to coop. I collect them, and I, yeah, I know. Yeah, and I bring the eggs in and, and sometimes I put the dates on them, so we know which is fresh. And, and I fry them.” (Ben, Mosaic Student)

He added that he can make himself several meals such as hotdogs and hot chocolate:

“I go shop I like. Get them on, and I get the hot dog rolls and put them in the microwave 30 seconds, about 30 seconds...And then I was doing hot roll is warm. And I put this sausage in 30 seconds and warm the hot dog too, 30 seconds and then you can eat it. Easy...I make hot chocolate myself, too. You get dairy milk, you pour it and put it in the microwave for about two minutes and it's warm. And I put the hot chocolate. It's like powder. Yes, and let's melt it down stir it and goes, brown.” (Ben, Mosaic Student)

Students were also able to identify recreational hobbies, interests and strengths and gave some examples of the importance of extra-curricular activities that were facilitated within the school. For example, Lisa spoke very positively about the school choir which she had recently joined and the sense of achievement that she had been able to join it, stating:

“I'm going to be in it basically, I am going to be singing in the choir now...there was one last year as well but I just wanted to know, go into it like, cause I asked her, her name is Ms. [teacher name], she's the teacher over there, and I asked her can I join and she said ya, I'm glad

you're interested in choir. Cause she said before the summer holidays, she said, think over it on holidays and come back to me. I went today and she said, I met her there on yard and she said did you enjoy it and I say ya. So tomorrow we have practice in big break again so were singing basically two songs..." (Lisa, Mosaic Student)

Sam, a School Leaver, spoke positively about his strengths in "soccer" and "rugby" and Ben, Mosaic Student, spoke about his experience of joining the basketball team in school:

"I play basketball in the other boys in, in what's the name of the county... [place name]. I play basketball with [name of best friend] this year, I won it, a medal this year in 2023." (Ben, Mosaic Student)

Some students were able to identify areas for development. For example, Tim was able to state that he wanted to become "a bit more talkative", to become more confident with using "money" and get better at "manual handling", especially lifting bags of coal, following his work experience. Sally focused on her personal care development stating that she would like to "brush my hair", "putting on my sock" as she can "find it difficult" to complete those tasks independently, as well as "tell the time" and using money, especially understanding "how much it costs" (Sally, Mosaic student).

However, some students had trouble with identifying areas of their skillsets that required further development. Lisa found the question particularly difficult to answer, replying "I would like to get better at...let's see...that's a hard one..." and "hmm...[hesitation]...ya I, this is a hard one now, I don't know what to say" (Lisa, Mosaic Student). When Tim was asked if he had ever discussed skills he would like to get better at with his teacher, he said "better at? They didn't say nothing to me about that" (Tim, Mosaic Student).

The second component that informs this subtheme is the value placed on exams and certification. Teachers have already identified that increasing the amount of time they could dedicate to life and social skills teaching would be a beneficial transition preparation practice for their students. Teachers also identified that the practice of community-based learning was one that they felt should be explored further. They felt that with the value being placed on examinations and certification, it was leaving less room for the "meaningful" learning.

Supporting this view of the importance of getting "out of school" (Mr. Dean), teachers gave multiple examples of the value of community-based learning for

their students. Tim's teacher spoke about a trip to the local library being impactful for one particular student who "had never been to the library before":

"Yesterday, yesterday, I took mine, now it was part of an LCA task, but I took them over to the library over in the [shopping centre] and to look at the local studies section, or whatever you know. So, we did that kind of ticking the box, but while we were there, [a student] got really like, he was like, do you think they have any Michael Crichton books? And I, I showed him the catalogue - [student] had never been in the library before, and he was looking up, and he went up. I said, 'look go over there and ask that lady, and she can help you' cause I couldn't find the book. It was in a certain section, a classic section. He went over and she took him over to get the book, and he was walking around with Jaws. And now Jaws wasn't Michael Crichton, but you know, I said, we've loads of books about dinosaurs, you know he's literally, he, he was shook, and then when he came back, he brought the card. So, I filled in the card for him, so he can go to [his local] library. But when we came back at the end of the day they were on their Chromebooks and [student] says, 'how do you get onto that thing there from the library?' He was on the catalogue just looking up the books." (Tim's teacher)

Ms. Taylor added that "if from that, one student got to go to the library, sure isn't it worth it" and Mr. Dean added "trigonometry wasn't going to get him that".

Ms. Taylor provided an additional example of the value of her students accessing the local Gym:

"But like our two LCA classes, the last couple of weeks [Tim's teacher] got onto the sports partnership and they've been going to a gym in [locality]...and they didn't know how to use [the machines] like. And I mean, it's most beautiful Gym. I learned how to use some machines itself, but like two students in my class, have now signed up to a local gym because of that experience." (Ms. Taylor)

Mr. Dean outlined the challenges within the existing school culture that teachers experience in accessing community-based learning:

"We're always going to have the academic side anyway. And, and we're always going to have certification and stuff, but I suppose a life skills programme that can be fitted in or around what we're doing. That you can, there's, whether it's like your room might be dedicated a day, certain day, or half a day. Another day, and during the week but you still continue on with your Maths and English, which they need, but a life skills programme that – if it involves going to a particular place to get experience - Well, then, we're going to a particular place. We're not looking for *permission*. This is part of it's planned, planned activities and kind of, I think work and working backwards from that placement meeting, what do we, what do the parents expect your children to be

able to do? Is it get, get the bus? So how many times a year have we taken them to the bus station, how many times this year have they used their card, aside from their parents in school, and are kind of given that to work backwards. Build it into our timetable kind of.” (Mr. Dean, Focus Group Teacher)

Ms. Taylor agreed that it is a challenge to engage in community-based learning when it appears outside of the curriculum:

“You know what I mean, because we got out of school, you know and, and I feel, you know, if there was more experiences like that which are nearly sometimes, you're kind of nearly – Oh I've to get this done, and this covered. And then, as [Mr. Dean] said, it's trying to - How do you incorporate it into the curriculum that you're teaching?” (Ms. Taylor, Focus Group Teacher)

Lisa's teacher added that “it needs to be factored in that an agreed X amount time in the week for life skills” (Lisa's teacher). She further stated that an additional challenge was that:

“We are kind of a school that like they, where it's liked that you're in your classroom, and that you're doing your work, and you're getting through your, your work. And after that, then whatever happens after, there isn't much thought of it afterwards.” (Lisa's teacher)

Additional challenges cited by the teachers in accessing community-based learning were “the price of buses” (Mr. Dean) and the behaviour of some students combined with limited adult support in the form of a Special Needs Assistant. This was illustrated by Sally and Ben's teacher when she said:

“Like I would love, I would love to say that every single Friday I bring mine to the shop. I've tried it but I've got so many behaviour issues in the class, and that I'm begging somebody from, you know, if I can get somebody to maybe walk with us, because I can't let...there's three or four like, they could be picking up something and throwing it at a car on the way down. But then I've said, I have two slow walkers, I have got the girl in the wheelchair, you know, and I would love to think that we could do more.” (Sally and Ben's teacher)

She expanded on this by giving an example of the type of community-based learning that could be done if she had access to the resources required such as additional staffing:

“Like I had a year where I had full time [SNA] support and just, I suppose there wasn't the behaviour issues that I have now and we went out every single Friday, to all these businesses. We researched them, and we met, and we made a beautiful magazine, it was fabulous, but like the, the learning that was done that year in that and, and you know, look at you go to, you know, with an idea, and I got sign up for it. But the

support is there for it, but it's not just getting the sign off to do it. It's the actual practicality. I couldn't, I couldn't say, we walked all over [the city]. We got buses out to places in the county, to see so much, but it's just as much as I want to do that this year, even to get them on a Friday to the shop is a struggle. You have some parents saying, 'oh, that's fabulous! I'll send in' and they're sending in money to go to the shop. But because there's behaviour issues, you can't. I can't bring three and then, you know I can't leave some behind and whatever, if I don't have the staff." (Sally and Ben's teacher)

It was suggested in the focus group, that perhaps the teachers need to:

"...make more use, like, what [Tim's teacher] did going down to the, to factory, making use of what's in our locality in the community but I suppose increasing the links because it's getting people in..." (Mr. Dean)

Building links with the community businesses also expressed as an avenue to explore by Lisa's teacher, when she said:

"What I'd love to be doing is be able to take them out someplace. We could locate somewhere that everyone had the chance to get out. Some of them don't get out of the weekends, very sheltered lives, and a lot of them then do, and they're well able to kind of get themselves out...I just think there's like so many businesses that are within walking distance of here that I don't know if there was any way that we would like link in with them, touch base with them, email them, or whatever, and say, look, we have a student here, this is their profile, would you? Would you consider us coming down to see would they, you know a little bit of volunteer work, with a view to actually maybe down the line, and that bit by bit, then a little bit of relationship and a trust between school and, and businesses." (Lisa's teacher)

However, she cited a challenge of trying "to get [principal] in on board as well, to see can we be like kind of be pushing. This is what we need to do like" (Lisa's teacher). Teachers expressed a difficulty with balancing this desire for more community-based learning and focus on life skills with the reality of supporting students through a qualification.

This was illustrated by Tim's teacher who stated that:

"I'm here to get them there, whatever their mark in the Leaving cert, and if I don't do that, we're all a failure like you know what I mean, and that's not the way it should be." (Tim's teacher)

The teachers consistently cited the pressure of covering all of the current course content in their respective QQI and LCA programmes with Lisa's teacher stating:

"...you couldn't be teaching at the same time [as leading transition planning]. You just couldn't. There's no way you get through the course

that you're supposed to teach them and prepare them for, for what they have to do." (Lisa's teacher)

Tim's teacher echoed this when he stated that when he taught in the junior end of the school, there was much more time and scope to focus on social and life skills:

"I don't know I always would have said in Room one and in Room seven when I was up there with younger kids. That was because I wasn't, I wasn't being pressured into teaching curriculum. I had loads of time. And yeah, it was always a big focus of mine. Do you know what I mean? Just in socializing and moving around or going, you know, going to the shop, or whatever you know. Just and it would be something that it would have been a big focus... this year, I'm, I'm under pressure, you know, like it is. I have a class that really aren't...and I've 12, and five of them, aren't, you know they are probably aren't up to it. You know what I mean. They're doing it for a reason, maybe, just to fill a classroom..." (Tim's teacher)

He went on to add that:

"...like the, the LCA, there's, there's far too much like it's far too big a course, and, and while the VPG [vocational preparation and guidance] is fabulous you can only devote until you're coming up to work experience time. There's so much tasks and stuff that need to be done...you're neglecting what you probably should be doing with them." (Tim's teacher)

Sally and Ben's teacher added that with the "busy classes" she has, it has precluded her from thinking beyond completing the curriculum content, stating that "you come in and you're hit with, Oh My God! I have to teach ten modules, so I need to get on with that" (Sally and Ben's teacher).

Tim's teacher spoke about how this focus on exams impacts his teaching and ability to support his students, stating that he feels he must just "pay it lip service":

"We can teach tax for three or four lessons. Do you know what I mean? And we'll have to move on, and then, you know, and then by Christmas, by Easter, you know, most of our kids would have forgotten again, you know. So, it's, it's an endless cycle, and but I have to do it because it's there, and that's it. There's an exam question on it, and, and you know, but then I have to move on to what the next exam question is going to be on like, you know, which could be trigonometry or Pythagoras's theorem, like, you know, which is trigonometry, and it. But like, that's what I'm teaching. I'm teaching. Pythagoras's theorem! I swear to God! You know. That's next that's on my to do list, like you know." (Tim's teacher)

Teachers also questioned the validity of the qualification gained by the student stating that it may give a:

“...false sense of the security that were at level three QQI, we’re at LCA, but is that their real level and when they go out then, they’re struggling then because... [it’s what employers expect].” (Mr. Dean, Focus Group Teacher)

This focus on the exams and qualifications was also reflected in the data generation sessions with the students. Students frequently referred to class groups by the name of the curriculum they were accessing, describing themselves as “in” a qualification. For example, Kit, a School Leaver, who described that he:

“...actually, wasn’t in Junior Cycle, I was in JCSP, I was with [name of teacher] in Room ten, so I only do that and then I moved straight to QQI. So JCSP, Junior Cert, QQI, and now LCA.”

And Sam, a School Leaver, who said that:

“I didn’t want to go into QQI this year, I wanted to go into, I wanted to go to higher level in LCA like do a Level 3 or something like that, but like, it would be perfect if I was in, if I was in LCA this year I’d go to a level 3.” (Sam, School Leaver)

Students demonstrated varying levels of understanding of the qualifications they had engaged in and were currently accessing. Ally, a School Leaver, spoke about doing the “QQi Awards, and I did level one and level two” and that she “did woodwork and everything” (Ally, School Leaver). Tim demonstrated his knowledge of his LCA, stating that “I’d be mainly doing the drawing for the theory and then be doing other parts for the leaving cert, for, for the projects for the leaving cert” and that he “almost got honours in English” during his Junior Certificate Exams (Tim, Mosaic Student). By comparison, Sally demonstrated less knowledge about her QQI subjects, stating that she knows the subjects she is doing, and that she has projects to undertake of “make a book”, “make a plane” but that she didn’t know what level QQI award she was working on (Sally, Mosaic Student).

## Equality of opportunity

This second subtheme explores the participants views and experiences related to the equality of opportunity provided to students within the special school.

The first component of the subtheme describes the different opportunities available to different students within the same school. The allocation of students to classes at Junior and Senior Cycle, as described by the teachers, appears to be based on perceptions of academic ability, rather than aligned with students' post-school aspirations and "they're kind of being pushed....whether or not, no matter what, no matter what their, their interests are their, their, their ambitions for, for post-school or whatever" (Tim's teacher).

Building on this, Mr. Dean (Focus Group Teacher) outlined the current typical pathways through the school from Junior to Senior Cycle:

"There's different pathways, the rule of thumb previous was, they got to Room 8, 9, and 10. That was where they started to branch off. So, they're in that corridor, are they capable of a Junior Cert? And if they were, they will go this direction over to this building for the Junior Cert, either a two year or three-year program. If they weren't able for the Junior Cert, they come to QQi. It could be two years, three years. Some have gone to, to the Junior cert or [JCSP]...But if they were in the Junior Cert, and they weren't able just the stress of the exams, or they weren't able for the program, then they came to QQi. If they done well, in the Junior Cert they go to LCA. But also, people who have done the Junior Cert but are of age to get three years, so they might come to us for QQI programme for a year and then go to LCA, so just there's a few different pathways there but..." (Mr. Dean, Focus Group Teacher)

The teachers added that the students engaging with the QQi before accessing LCA are at an advantage, as "it buys them a year doesn't it really" (Lisa's teacher) and "they're a bit more mature" (Ms. Taylor). Mr. Dean expanded on their thoughts by stating that:

"And I think to ones that benefit the most, not benefit most, but kind of got more out of the school, was probably likes of the Kit's and the [female student] who'd done a year of QQI after the Junior Cert. There was, it was kinda less pressure on them, because then it wasn't a final year. You didn't have to cover every module. They got to do work experience. Then they've gone to, to LCA. And I guess for some it them it takes out the, they're not nervous for work experience. So, they've been there before to know..." (Mr. Dean, Focus Group Teacher)

Supporting this view, teachers also expressed a need for enhanced collaboration and consideration for how students are allocated to classes at Senior Cycle to ensure that it centres around their best interests and their post-school aspirations:

“You know, they're moved in this school nearly based on their IQ, you know. Like, if they're like you know, at a certain level, they're prob... or like above 80, or whatever you know, they're being pushed towards an exam class. And then, if it's and, and also their reading ages once, you know, we do a standardized reading test and, and a maths age test like, you know, and that's the way they're kind of being pushed....whether or not, no matter what, no matter what their, their interests are their, their, their ambitions for, for post-school or whatever. Yeah, you know what I mean. Yeah, there is no need. There is no need for well like, you know.”  
(Tim's teacher)

Other factors that influence student class allocation included “maybe just to fill a classroom” (Tim's teacher) and because “they appear, they're, they're so well behaved, they're a fabulous student or they work well in class” (Ms. Taylor, Focus Group Teacher). Teachers, within the focus group, expressed a desire to change this practice and to engage in more collaboration when determining class placements.

Ms. Taylor described:

“Like coming into LCA, I feel there should be more consultation with all the staff that they've had, all the subject teachers that they've had, and say, look, would you know, should this student be coming into the LCA program or is he or she ready for it, you know?” (Ms. Taylor, Focus Group Teacher)

Lisa's teacher agreed that there are several factors that should be considered such as “ability levels” but also to consider the wellbeing of the student facing the pressure of the LCA:

“And then some would actually have, would have you know, fairly good ability, but like the, the pressure of it, would be too much. Like, you know, there's that as well, and I think they're better off not having to go through it for two years. Or to be pulled and dragged through it... to what end.” (Lisa's teacher)

Tim's teacher agreed that he had “quite a few in that boat” and that at times, it's what “the parents want for them” but that:

“...there has to be better consultation, I suppose, for further back, you know, and, and just to like as Mr. Dean kind of alluded to the kind of, and kind of set their expectations at a realistic level. You know what I mean, even if it's the, the difficult conversation, like, you know.” (Tim's teacher)

Sally and Ben's teacher gave an example of the decision making between the teachers, regarding what level of QQI her current class would be accessing:

“They’re all, we decided, and we looked and spoke to subject teachers as well and based on, some of the subject teachers would have had them for Junior Cert and would be aware of their ability level, so they are all going to get a full level one certificate. But there's a few within the class that have, you know, probably they'd be probably more able to do a level two. We'll start it this year and then finish it next year, because some of them have still three years left, do you know? So, you don't want to kinda go in at a level two, and then for their final year, they're kind of just, you know. So, if they get a full certificate, level one and the ones that are able, then my plan is by maybe March, April. They've already started their level two, and might get some I would say, like the points, or whatever for those modules and then do the full level two certificate next year. And there a few this year, very few in this class, that will ever be able to do a level three but potentially by the end of next year, we might be starting with level three with those.” (Sally and Ben’s teacher)

Mr. Dean gave an example of the impact of the current practice of allocation to classes when he explained:

“I suppose even one of the girls I had last year was debating whether she'd stay in QQI for one year or go to LCA for one year and I suppose she was arguing the point, ‘Why do I need to do LCA and do exams? I can do a level three QQI, I can (Her brother was in the training centre) I can go to the same training centre as my brother, who done his LCA, but I can still get in with a QQI. Would not be better for me, and I have no pressure?’” (Mr. Dean, Focus Group Teacher)

Similarly, Tim’s teacher indicated that placing the students in a LCA class, without consideration for how it aligns with their post-school interests, may not be supportive to students:

“So, if I imagine I'm only guessing. But if you went back through the leaving cert classes here in this [school] for the last 10 years or whatever, and there's very small percentage of them would be using that qualification that that would have been relevant. Do you know what I mean? But it would be there or not, it would be a percentage, but you know, like they would be as well served by, you know, would have been as well served, you know with their QQI or whatever yunno...” (Tim’s teacher)

Parents appeared to have limited knowledge of the pathways within the school and did not appear to be consulted in the process of what curriculum may best support their child’s aspirations. When Lisa’s parents were asked what led to the decision for Lisa to access QQI at Senior Cycle, they stated that she had engaged in JCSP at Junior Cycle and that “it was the natural progression on, it seems to be the school’s system, that is the way they're doing stuff” (Lisa’s father), with Lisa’s mother adding, “if they are able to do it they’ll continue”. Sally’s mother

also noted that she didn't have much knowledge of the QQI Curricula and upon investigation, realised that it maybe limiting in the future:

"I am just learning that and I'm like ok so if Sally only gets a QQI two or three, does that open any doors? No, it doesn't open any doors, which I only discovered over the weekend so I'm like ok, right so where do we go, you know what I mean and being realistic, I mean I know I suppose that's, we don't want to limit anybody..." (Sally's mother)

This supports a comment from Ms. Taylor during the focus group where she stated that in terms of pathways through the school "the parents don't really know though", adding:

"A lot of parents, though, would say, you know, in that age bracket they kind of don't know like, oh is my, my son or daughter, where are they going next? Are they doing the Junior Cert, are they going into LCA, or are they going into QQI, what's the route?" (Ms. Taylor, Focus Group Teacher)

Lisa's teacher agreed, stating that parents:

"...are nearly figuring it out as we go along, you know, and there isn't enough of a, I suppose, starting early enough" in terms of planning the pathways and qualifications that might best align with the students' post-school aspirations." (Lisa's teacher)

Ben's mother explained that while it would be her desire for Ben to avail of an additional school year, the only way that opportunity could be provided to him, is if he was accessing a level three programme stating:

"...his teacher doesn't think he'd be able for the next level, which would be QQI three. She said he wouldn't be able for the maths section of that and that it's very difficult to get that in a year." (Ben's mother).

She added that her reason for wanting him to avail of an additional year was due to the impact of Covid, stating "like all kids in whether they're in special schools or not, they lost out a year with Covid, you know, which was very detrimental to their education" (Ben's mother).

A challenge presented by the current allocation model within the school to the QQI or LCA curricula, is that access to work experience is determined based on the curriculum the student is accessing. Therefore, students in LCA access work experience through the Vocational Preparation and Guidance module, but the students in QQI only access it if the teacher has chosen to include a relevant work experience module, typically at level three. This has resulted in some students engaging in multiple work experiences by the time they graduate and

for others, they may never have engaged in one. This issue was highlighted by two of the students in the School Leaver Focus Group. Kit, an LCA student, had accessed approximately five work experiences, while Sam, a QQI student have never accessed one:

“But there is a problem there that the LCA’s get to do it, but we never get to do work experience. This is what I told [name of teacher] last year, will we be able to do work experience and [teacher] said you'll be able to do like next year, and we were supposed to do it. But I don't know what the problem is like. You see, if, if, if I can get, if I can get the work experience, because like my mother really wants me to do, I think it's better for me.” (Sam, School Leaver)

When Sam was asked how he felt about not having had an opportunity to access it, he said:

“Well, like I'm feeling down because, like we never done it like before. Never. Like when I started doing QQI last year, we never done it. The LCA’s were only the ones that can only do it.” (Sam, School Leaver)

These comments were confirmed by the teachers when this conversation between Sam and Kit had been relayed to them during the Focus Group, with Mr. Dean stating that:

“And that goes back to the, to the levels and what [Lisa’ teacher] said about having it written in, that no matter what your level, you get to experience it. Because, I suppose Kit came through the QQI setup, and onto LCA he has got three, three years of work, experience...and I suppose Sam then coming in at his level of ability, never got to experience the work experience module and I suppose it was a thing that was kind of here, that if we're doing the work experience module, you go on work experience. If we're not, you don't.” (Mr. Dean, Focus Group Teacher)

Lisa’s teacher echoed this practice, stating that work experience is “mainly for those, we kind of would look at those who are doing like more, more of a level three and my class aren't at that”. When asked if Lisa would have an opportunity to access work experience before she graduated, her teacher stated “that would be next year now and that would depend on the class group and all of that” but that Lisa “would be fine to go to do some bit of work experience, and like, and to see again her parents, to be good, to help figure it out” (Lisa’s teacher).

Sally and Ben’s teacher had a similar response when asked if Sally will access a work experience, stating that:

“There’d be no reason why not, you know, but for the [work] experience, the way we do it in the school, we don’t source our work experience so its back on the family with their family contacts. So, if the family wants to do it, 100%. I love doing the work experience module and, to be honest I’m loving that personal safety module that I’m doing with the boys. It’s a module I’d love to do with the girls If we had time as well, because it’s practical for that, but that work experience module covers all of that, anyway. So that wouldn’t be a this year module. It would be either next year or the year after, depending on who has the three years.” (Sally and Ben’s teacher)

However, despite Sally and Ben’s teacher stating that it is up to the parents, some parents are unaware of the work experience plan for their child. When discussing Lisa’s Mosaic map and the potential work experiences explored, her mother responded with “sorry now, would that be happening this year or next year?” (Lisa’s mother) with her father replying, “I think it is this year” (Lisa’s father). Through the focus group, the teachers identified their current work experience format within the school as a practice they wish to change, to make it more equitable for Senior Cycle students, something that is further explored in Theme Four.

Embedded within the subtheme of equality of opportunity, is the consideration given to the voice of the student and participation in decision-making. With regards to curricular choices, student voice does not appear to be gathered or consulted in terms of access to a particular qualification-based curricula. When students were asked if they had choices of which modules they studied, Lisa (Mosaic Student) indicated that “no” she doesn’t experience choice of modules but that she would like to and Sam who stated, “no [teacher] has to, no actually it’s up to the teachers” (Sam, School Leaver). Sam went on to further explain that he didn’t want to engage in QQI and would have preferred to engage with the LCA curriculum:

“I really wanted to do LCA this year cause I think I was better than QQI. But like I told [teacher] last year, can I do LCA? And she said, and she said, like she said, you can’t, because, like if it’s if you like it, you want to do. But she wanted me putting it. They want me to put me in a different class. But LCA is really the thing to do like cause then you get to do French and English... I didn’t want to go into QQI this year, I wanted to go into. I wanted to go to higher level in LCA like do a Level three or something like that, but like it would be perfect if I was in. If I was in LCA this year I’d go to a level three.” (Sam, School Leaver)

With regard to ongoing consultation with students in more structured meetings, current practice in the school is to hold parent teacher meeting or IEP meetings with the parents only and students are not invited to attend or consulted by the school. Students gave some examples of this during the focus groups.

When asked if they had ever been invited to meetings such as IEP or parent teacher meetings, Luke, Fiadh and Will in the Pre-Leavers focus group all indicated “no I don’t believe so” (Will), “my parents” only (Luke) and “no, they [my parents] came here yesterday” (Fiadh). When asked if they are ever asked about their own learning and areas they might like to improve on, they gave no response. Similarly, Tim, during the Mosaic Sessions, when asked the same question, indicated, “[get] better at? They didn’t say nothing to me about that” (Tim, Mosaic Student).

Kit, a School Leaver, believed that students should attend the meeting, alongside the principal and parents. He stated that:

“I think, it is really up to your parents’ choice or your choice in fact, because you are an adult and you are ready to do your own choices, make your own choices.” (Kit, School Leaver)

Sam reiterated this when he said that “they come to parent teacher meetings, and they say what you are going to do when you finish school and what are they doing this year” but expressed a desire to attend these meetings to “talk about what’s gonna happen” (Sam, School Leaver).

When this idea of students attending parent teacher meetings was shared with the teachers in the focus group, there was a noticeable hesitation and momentary pause from the teachers. The silence was broken by Mr. Dean who provided a very powerful example of the potential value in capturing student voice:

“Now in saying that, I would have come back from the placement meeting with the HSE person and probably learned more (I know some of them are an hour or hour and a half), probably learned more listening to the child speaking to the questions that were asked, and saying, ‘God I never covered this with them, and now they don’t know how to do it’. But maybe, not at the full parent teacher meeting but maybe we should be bringing them in for 5 min, 10 min at the end. And it’s not like your normal mainstream parent teacher meeting, where you go from teacher to teacher, this is more focused and like having the base teachers here is ideal so you know, and, and this could be part of their planning

process, if you have them for two years like that's, that's, that's, that's two extra meetings that they can come to." (Mr. Dean, Focus Group Teacher)

This comment sparked a positive response from the teachers, including Tim's teacher who suggested:

"It's probably more of a like a consultation meeting, say that you know, when you're talking to the kids. I don't think everyone really wants to be at a parent teacher meeting like we would have, but they probably would like to have a meeting where you know your parents and the teacher is in the same room, and you know what I mean. We're discussing things, and they can, they can have their say, like, you know." (Tim's teacher)

Lisa's teacher agreed that a lot of the school "leavers like, that they would like to be able to say" what they wanted and contribute to the meeting.

## 5.3 Theme Three: Post-School Transition

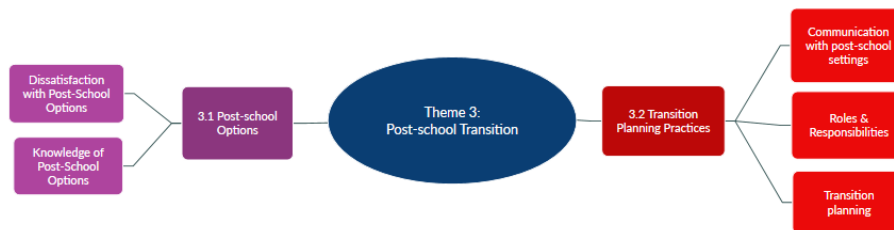


Image 38 - Theme Three

Theme three (Image 38) illustrates existing post-school transition practices and lived experiences of participants about to embark on that transition. It discusses participants knowledge of the range of PSOs available and how normative pathways and historical influences of transition to specific settings has dominated post-school transition practices.

### Post-school options

This subtheme addresses participants knowledge of PSOs for students leaving special school. It was evident across the dataset that the participants had limited knowledge of the range of PSOs available. Parents repeatedly expressed that they had little information about the transition process or the PSOs available to their child. Lisa's father captured the harsh reality for parents when he described "as regards what happens in two years' time when she leaves here, that's a black chasm. At the moment, there's nothing there." Similarly, Sally's mother described navigating the upcoming transition in the absence of any support or information, describing "we know that there's, you know, there is that kind of Bermuda Triangle of what happens after this" (Sally's mother).

Parents expressed that they are "just hungry for information" (Sally's mother) and that they know "nothing, nothing, that's the problem..." (Ben's mother). They also indicated that they did not know how to access that information or who would be able to support them in accessing it, stating "it's how to access all that is, I just don't know" (Ben's mother) and that they "have no idea, what is, what are his options? So, we'll see, we'll see, I have to do a lot of reading, I suppose" (Tim's mother).

She further outlined that while she didn't have much information on PSOs and none had been provided to her to date, that she had the skills and resources to

acquire that information herself, but that for many parents, that may not be the case:

“Currently I haven't received anything, and I doubt I will. And it's wrong. Really, it's fine. Okay, I don't want to take this from anybody or be discriminative or anything. But it's fine for me. I've been educated; I've done college. I've done XY And Z. And I'm lucky I have someone in education to actually consult with, but the people who don't, and people who haven't the knowledge or the access to our computer literacy even, you know, they're really in, in trouble. And that's, that's not right.” (Tim's mother)

Sally's mother echoed similar concerns explaining that while traditional post-school pathways for students leaving mainstream education are well advertised and spoken about in the media, the same does not happen for settings supporting students with SEND:

“Then, if that's all on the radios, you know, when the Leaving Cert comes out, yunno, don't worry, there's plenty of other options. It's not the end. And people kind of, you know, to know, like it just goes into, you know, subliminally, we know that that's all out there, you know. But if you ask me for Special Ed schools, or anything like that? No, I don't know.” (Sally's mother)

Teachers too expressed their concern about the level of information available to the parents and the stress that the lack of information and uncertainty can cause for parents. This was captured in the Focus Group with the teachers where they were asked if parents are making a fully informed decision about the post-school setting:

“Probably not. They're probably relying on like the professionals who don't have all the information then either, you know, to help them out, because they are, they are *completely in the dark*. That's one *glaringly* obvious part of all this is like, even like, well functioning adults who our parents here are, they don't know the path. They don't know what the options are. They don't know where most of them will go, and then, when it comes to the final year, they're all up in a heap stressed about it even the summer before they start in here in their last year. And it is all consuming, I know, from talking to some of my parents...I feel sorry for them, I think back to Sept and this year now I was kind of bombarded more than any other year with, like they were stressed, they were worried all that summer...” (Lisa's teacher)

A further challenge is the lack of knowledge of PSOs from the teachers. They frequently cited their limited knowledge of the PSOs, outside of the normative pathways of HFDS and training centres such as NLN, “the options are the centres

really like the two main [training] centres here...There is a path. This is the only path that we see" (Lisa's teacher).

Ms. Taylor, a teacher in the focus group, described the issue of the lack of information for parents and teachers:

"Like I even brought three [students] down to the Solas Centre to look at trades and they got a tour, and they were like 'wow'. But like only for I bringing them, and knowing about it, so many others, I feel like there's very little there, and the parents don't know either. Whatever amount we know, they know less. And I feel that's a problem." (Ms. Taylor, Focus Group teacher)

Teachers expressed a desire to be "getting out there" into the community and become more informed the range of options, saying they would love to see "what else is out there, what are the other options" (Ms. Taylor, Focus Group teacher). They also described how uncomfortable they felt "when you're recommending these places, or you're not recommending. You're trying to suss it out yourself. What's the best thing when you haven't, you don't really know" (Lisa' teacher).

As Tim's teacher was new to teaching Senior Cycle students, he described himself as a "complete rookie" and stated that as he hadn't led students through transition yet, his knowledge was based on where past pupils had attended:

"I only know, like the, the vast majority, move on to the National Learning Network. And then, you know, there are options for the lesser able kids as well, I know there's the, God I can't think of it now." (Tim's teacher)

When asked if there was support available to him or if there was a teacher that leads transition in school, he responded that:

"...maybe they [other teachers] would [know], and I'm like, say, it hasn't happened for me yet, you know, and...I don't know, are there other options? Are there similar? I don't even know, you know. And I don't know if anybody knows fully, you know." (Tim's teacher)

This knowledge of past-pupils transition to normative pathways was also evident from some of the parents, for example, Tim's mother who stated that:

"one young lad that has left here, he was living local to us, and he's gone, he went to a college in [where NLN is] ...I don't know much about it, but I must make inquiries about it." (Tim's mother)

Similarly, Ben's mother knew of the Rehab centre due to "an older cousin that went to the school here".

Contrastingly, for Sally's mother, her experience was different, describing the impact of not knowing what the typical pathways are from a special school context:

"We transitioned Sally from mainstream here, so she's only a year [here], so I don't have a network of parents here that have moved through the school, that oh their son is here, their daughter went there. So, for us, we're very much in a vacuum of, and she's in a new class this year. So yeah, I have no nothing...that's just not me. Normally, I'm a year or two ahead. But that's why I initially started Googling, even just what is out there. You know what's available, you know." (Sally's mother)

The normative pathway of past pupils to the "kind of two main placements that we'd be looking at" (Sally and Ben's teacher) was also noted by the participating students. When discussing knowledge of PSOs with Lisa, she stated that:

"I think they [students] have a choice where they want to go. Like you can have a choice to go to college or go get a job. I think some got a job is saying, I'm not sure. I say some probably go to college. But basically, I know, for some people definitely left this school, and they went to college. And most of them go to same college [NLN]." (Lisa, Mosaic Student)

In the Pre-School Leavers Focus Group, the participants demonstrated little knowledge of the PSOs available. They indicated that PSOs are "college or go straight into a job" (Will), a local university and NLN (Luke). When asked if they knew what courses were available in NLN, all three students indicated that they didn't know.

Most students were unclear of the entry requirements to the training centre, with examples from the Leavers Focus Group with Kit explaining that he will need his "QQI and Leaving Cert results" and Sam further stating that:

"You apply first and then they know that you actually left school, and you're finished...they said if you get, [teacher] said if you get you know that long sheet for your Leaving Cert, bring that into the training centre and then they'll see if you passed your school thing." (Sam, School Leaver)

They were also unsure about the admissions process in terms of when they would know if they had a place in the training centre. Sam and Kit illustrate this in their exchange below:

Kit: "I'd say in June probably, when like, I sent an application from already to, to NLN and just fingers crossed I get in. Ya I sent an application form around September, and they like, they got it there, the

receptionist said in there like, you're better off to do it a year before you go in there. And you will definitely get in for next year like...My friend [that's in NLN] told us to ring them and say can you get me a form like." (Kit, School Leaver)

Sam: "I have the form that my mother signed from this school and I'm like rang to see if I could get...but you know [teacher] said that you know the form that we get for the awards that we got for QQI, if you give them that, they will definitely take that. That form will be like, they will definitely take that, 100%." (Sam, School Leaver)

Parents and teachers expressed a dissatisfaction with the current normative pathways, with the parents having already indicated in Theme One, that they have higher aspirations for their children than service-based provision. Lisa's parents shared their thoughts stating:

"We've been hearing that, certain places, or 'I got my son into this place' or whatever, and I'm like ok, but is that really where that person should be, or can we do a bit better than that?" (Lisa's parents)

They further indicated that they want to broaden the options "so it's not just a HSE corridor, or the learning network, and all that". They felt that programmes such as those offered in NLN are "temporary" (Lisa's mother) and:

"It's just moving the problem on from one school to another, because when they finish there, you still end up with a semi- ok they might be better qualified. But you still end up with the challenge." (Lisa's father)

Lisa's teacher agreed with this perspective stating that "we need to kind of look at other paths like..." as "it's all centre focused" (Lisa's teacher). She expressed the desire to change current normative practices within the school when discussing if she felt the teachers were fully informed:

"No, no, definitely, not we don't. And it's like, I guess it's to. It's just the way it's been, you know, when, like you just land into...you have a leaver's class, and I remember the first year I was like, what do I do? So, I had to go to ask like [Mr. Dean], and like he was explaining kind of the pathways, and the pathways were HSE or NLN and that's it. And there was no other. That, that's what, because it's what has happened all the time. And that's what's happening. And so, are we? No, we're not. We're definitely not. And we will keep going on the way we're going if we don't try and do something about it." (Lisa's teacher)

Ms. Taylor (Focus Group teacher) also shared this desire to stretch beyond the norm stating:

"I'd love a list of other, you know, places that would say, 'Oh, my God! We would take on an 18-year-old with mild general learning difficulties.

We've been successful! I feel I'm; it's the same places all the time. So, I'd, I'd love more..." (Ms. Taylor)

An additional challenge cited by Lisa's teacher, is the wide geographic area that some students are travelling to attend the school. This means that teachers do not have contacts or knowledge of potential PSOs in the student's home area, as for some students, they live in a different county to the location of the school:

"Because we're not local. Yeah. you know, it makes it harder. I have two in [town far away], yeah. And I am really leaving it up to the parents to try to figure out where's the best place for them, and then I would like to be able to go and visit them a couple of times, you know, to make sure everything's okay. So, there's that, too. If we were all local, [it would be] much easier." (Lisa's teacher)

Students choosing an option close to home was also noted by the students themselves with Tim stating they "would prefer to stay in my own area, rather than spending the petrol driving to that place" (Tim, Mosaic Student). Will in the Pre-Leavers Focus Group stated that when choosing a college, it "would be close by or not that far away" and Lisa also stated this need for a work experience or post-school employment "well it has to be somewhere where it's not far away, you know." (Lisa, Mosaic Student).

### Transition planning practices

The second subtheme within Theme Three, outlines the transition planning practices that were in place in the school setting. As outlined in Chapter Three and for the purposes of this research, transition planning practices were examined across transitions literature (Kohler et al., 2016; O'Brien et al. 2011; Morningstar et al. 2010) and the following definition was created:

*"The process undertaken by schools in planning and supporting their students to leave special school education. Transition planning involves a range of activities which may include consultations on post-school options with students, their families and other professionals; work placements, visits to post-school settings and meetings with relevant personnel."*

Drawing on this definition and aligning with Kohler's Taxonomy (2016), the components that informed this subtheme were communication with post-school setting, roles and responsibilities and transition planning.

One of the challenges cited by the participating teachers was the limited communication with the post-school settings. Mr. Dean gave the example that

once the post-school setting had been determined by the HSE Guidance Officer and the family, that the communication loop ceased:

“But once the Placement officer comes in, they meet, it's like, are we finished? We don't, there's no follow up, no follow on. There's no linking in with the training centre to say, well, this guy is into Woodwork. This fella is into Computers. We need to veer them this way, this is their interest, or this is what we need to do. We, we kind of stop at a level, and that's it. Now, on your side of it, there's no communication back from the other side.” (Mr. Dean, Focus Group teacher)

Lisa's teacher echoed those sentiments, adding that there is often uncertainty about the type and how much information can be shared, and how to ensure that students are given a fair and equal opportunity to succeed in the new setting:

“Now there are times there that we could be asked. But like, I suppose, where there's, there's this caution as well of, of, we don't get any information when we get in here. There's no and I, apparently legally, no one is bound giving information either. So, I guess that they're kind of grey areas, I know, like, you know, that [the principal] would have would, would want to know, you know if you were passing on information, what would it be? Especially with very troublesome child, or whatever that you've kind of, you know you want everyone to have same crack at the whip and maybe that, too, I suppose. So, that'd be another thing that would have to be decided on, you know.” (Lisa's teacher)

While there is a desire for teachers to visit the post-school settings “to be able to get out there with them [students] and see where to go and what would work and what's best suited...” (Lisa's teacher), there is also a lack of visibility of the services within the school community. When asked if the various post-school settings were visiting the school to meet students, teachers and parents, the response was “no, nothing, there is *nothing* coming from outside” (Lisa's teacher). Mr. Dean supported this by saying that “I suppose, pre Covid, we were starting to do that, and we had the speakers coming in from the training centres” (Mr. Dean, Focus Group teacher) and Kit who gave the example of this practice of speakers from NLN visiting the LCA class.

This desire for information and collaboration was noted by Ms. Taylor, suggesting that they would like to “get a team of people in to meet the parents and the students and say look, these are options, this is what's going to happen”

(Ms. Taylor, Focus Group teacher). This was also expressed by the parents, with Sally's mother suggesting:

"It's probably more collaborative in terms of bringing people in from the industry that are running these centres, courses. whatever. And then the teams here. Obviously, the teachers that was, you know, that we just have a plan for each kid going forward." (Sally's mother)

Parents and teachers indicated that transition planning conversations were occurring typically within the last school year, with meetings with the HSE Guidance Officer taking place six months prior to transition, as described by Lisa's teacher:

"So, we just got an email, actually, last Friday from a new person again within the HSE, who's going to be coming to do the profiling, who's contacted us now. So that will be, she's hoping to see students before Christmas which would be really good if that got done now and then, because it sets the ball rolling then for the parents to kind of say, well, I need to go. They need to go, make the appointment to go visit the centres. But it's all centre focused." (Lisa's teacher)

However, the teachers and parents expressed a dissatisfaction with the current timing of the transition related discussions. They feel that it would be important, going forward, to start having those conversations earlier during the student's time in Junior Cycle. This is described by Mr. Dean who thinks that:

"It's to do with that forward planning, I suppose how far we go back. I think the school are starting to do it, going back into the junior corridors and start planning out rather than waiting until after Junior Cert and get that pre planning and done, that's, that's essential here now." (Mr. Dean)

Lisa' teacher agreed that for teachers and parents, "they are nearly figuring it out as we go along, you know, and there isn't enough of a, I suppose, starting early enough" (Lisa's teacher).

Mr. Dean went on to explain a current practice within the school that he feels is adding to that challenge. Under an exemption of Rule 64 (1) of the Rules for National Schools, students can apply to remain on enrolment for an extra year beyond their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday to complete a qualification, subject to certain conditions being met. He believes that this is adding to the lack of clarity of when a student will graduate:

"we're back again though to the planning and profiling, they know they are finishing in 2024, no that, 'oh well maybe, maybe if I can get an extra

year', it should be just black and white – you are finishing and that's it..."  
(Mr. Dean, Focus Group teacher)

This was echoed by Lisa's teacher who said that this uncertainty regarding final graduation date, is impacting when the transition planning conversations start:

"So that's why we need to be bringing it back to two years before and looking at who we think and earmarking those who are in their second last year for sure, then you'll you will have some parents that will apply, who look to reapply for another year. Yeah, and that's really down to [principal] and the teacher, if they think that's the, the student could do a QQI level 3, then they're allowed given the last year, if they, you know, having turned 18 and everything...For this year's school leavers, oh yeah, there'll be nothing mentioned for the following year at all until it's even... It hasn't even been properly decided who's definitely going the following year. So that's why we need to be bringing it back to two years before and looking at who we think and earmarking those who are in their second last year for sure." (Lisa's teacher)

Parents state that transition planning conversations have not formed part of existing IEP meetings for their child, explaining that:

"No, not really. Obviously, it's all kicking off because we are two years out from that. But no, to date, not really, it wouldn't have come up on the radar at all. The clock is ticking all the time." (Lisa's father)

Ben's mother had a similar experience stating:

"Well, I only had one [meeting] with his class teachers this year about it. It's been scoping out the conversation so far, my work, I suppose my, my work on that, will start in September when he goes into his final year." (Ben's mother)

Tim's teacher reiterated that transition planning had not formed part of IEP meetings stating that "like the IEP would be based around his educational needs as it is at the moment, and because he does have two years to go" (Tim's teacher). He went on to explain how his parent teacher meetings with Senior Cycle students are very different to those he would have held while a teacher in Junior Cycle:

"My parent teacher meetings would have been all about, and kind of socialization. And do you know what I mean? And making sure the child is, is happy, because they were coming as first years, you know, whereas now, it would be, it would have been an aspect of my meetings and would have been... my meetings this year were mostly just explaining what is involved in the Leaving Cert. Yeah, you know, because they didn't have a clue like, you know, they knew like, some these kids would have mostly done Junior Cert. They would have come out of their Junior Cert last year and finished their exams." (Tim's teacher)

He considered however, that these meeting regarding transition “maybe it should happen earlier”. Participants also expressed an uncertainty regarding the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder involved in the transition process. As already outlined in Theme Two, students do not currently play a role in transition related conversations or their IEP meetings in general. Parents and teachers were asked to explain who leads or instigates the transition planning process for the senior students and their responses indicated a lack of clarity and distinction between the role of the teacher, the role of the parent and the role of the HSE Guidance Officer.

Most of the parents expected to have a significant role in transition planning, however, they offered differing perspectives. For example, Tim’s mother, didn’t “actually think it's schools’ job to be quite honest. Parents are responsible for the children...it’s up to the parents do the work...” (Tim’s mother) and Ben’s mother expressed similar sentiments stating:

“I don’t think they’ll have any role; that’s my feeling that they won’t. That it’ll be up to me to seek that out, or where or how, I don't know.”  
(Ben’s mother)

While Sally’s mother and Lisa’s parents felt that it would be up to them to lead the process but that there may be some collaboration, stating “it would be me, it would to be me that would have to do that...I think, I think it's probably collaboration” (Sally’s mother) and:

“I think for this school it’s going to be a bit of both I think...we’ll have to lead the way. Keep a push on it and see what options are available for her.” (Lisa’s father)

Teachers provided examples of their role as “liaising with the HSE officer to sort placements out” (Ms. Taylor, Focus Group teacher) and to “link in with the HSE placement officer as well, we’d have those meetings, we’d meet the parents” (Mr. Dean, Focus Group teacher). Teachers provided examples of sourcing work experiences for students and bringing some students to “the Solas Centre to look at trades” and bringing a group to a manufacturing company which she “organised outside in my own time” (Ms. Taylor). However, she noted the tension here that “I shouldn’t be doing it but obviously there are students that want to do it [manufacturing]” (Ms. Taylor).

She also provided another example of supporting a student in gaining a post-school placement:

“Like my other last leaving cert class, I had one student, [name of student], like, I, basically, the lecturer was in from [local college], like, I set up the interview, I prepped her in class, the SNA prepped with all her CV, we went through interview questions, like but that was all outside because I knew she wouldn’t have the support at home. You know that, you know, it’s frustrating at times, because I feel, are you kind of feel guilty when they’re leaving, are they set up, are they?” (Ms. Taylor, Focus Group teacher)

Lisa’s teacher also gave examples of visiting a post-school setting with a family due to English as an Additional Language stating:

“I went to visit one, but I went with the student of mine who, his English wasn’t great, and his dad’s English was worse again, and I went with them kind of, you know. Be there to help them out.” (Lisa’s teacher)

For Tim’s teacher and Sally and Ben’s teacher, as they indicated that they were relatively new to supporting transition, they both indicated that they felt that parents would play a key role in the transition planning. Sally and Ben’s teacher stated that “there’ll be supports coming in from outside to kind of speak with me, speak with Mom, speak with Ben, see where his interests are”, and that the HSE Guidance Officer:

“...will meet, make contact with us, when and they will set up some meetings and will talk them though, I guess from previous experience, probably the bones of 45 min to an hour, where they ask me lots of questions. And in some cases, I would sit in with the student and the parent.” (Sally and Ben’s teacher)

However, she said there was a tension that for some students:

“If you don’t do it [transition plan], you know it’s not going to be [end of the world] but you do feel like that for some of them that God, if I don’t do this, if I don’t kind of, you know, advise them, what are they, you know who’s gonna do it for them? But for Sally, you just know, you know mom is there and dad is there.” (Sally’s teacher)

A similar sentiment was expressed by Tim’s teacher when he said that:

“...sometimes they [parents] just don’t have the ability, I think, to, to, to direct the child in the best way possible. That means we should be doing, maybe we should be doing more. But like I said, I, I have great faith in the teachers.” (Tim’s teacher)

In relation to Tim, he said that “mom is quite forward, generally, in helping” and:

“I think mom will, will look after that you know what I mean, and he she'll she and she'll, she'll get him. She seems to be well; she's quite well connected in her...I don't know she...I know she used to write the local notes for the local newspaper. She's, she's a, she's 'somebody' in [local area], and so, you know she can. She could. Probably she'll be a great help to him, you know, when it comes, and it is. It is like getting your, with work like that, you know. I mean, this about getting in there.” (Tim's teacher)

## 5.4 Theme Four: Factors that Enhance Transition

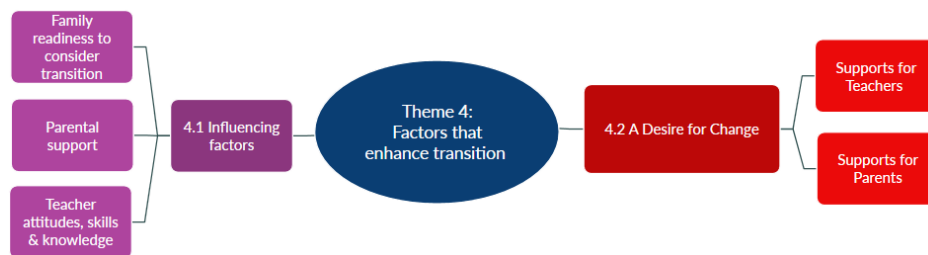


Image 39- Theme Four

Theme Four (Image 39) discusses the factors that participants view as important in facilitating transition from special school and supports that they feel are important in order to enact change to existing practice.

### Influencing factors

This subtheme explores the participants views on the factors that influence transition and is informed by three components: family readiness to consider transition, parental support and teachers' attitudes, skills and knowledge.

Across the dataset, it was evidenced that both students and their participating parents, had not given significant thought to the forthcoming transition. As part of the research design, a criterion was that students in the Mosaic approach had at least one more full academic year remaining. Linked with Theme Three, the transition planning conversations appear to occur in the last academic year and more formally within six months of the transition with the HSE Guidance Officer.

This current practice of transition planning in the final year, along with the day-to-day challenges of supporting a child with SEND appear to be an influence on participant readiness to consider transition. Lisa' teacher for example, stated that "parents weren't ready to talk about it" and that "they don't really think about it until the final year" (Lisa's teacher). Sally and Ben's teacher reiterated this stating that for Sally, with her medical recovery taking priority, transition planning hasn't been considered:

"But I suppose a lot of focus with us, and with Mom, and with Sally has been more on getting her back into the classroom as opposed to looking beyond...Well really to be honest, it's been more the here and now than what's going to come further down the line and I suppose, you know...I suppose because of everything that's been going on for Sally, the future,

hasn't really been the focus...it's been more the here and now." (Sally's teacher)

Sally's teacher felt that because she had two years left that "she is young, she still has time".

When each of the Mosaic participating parents were asked to consider where they see their child in ten years' time, each either made an audible gasp, had a significant pause or stated, "oh mother of God" (Tim's mother). Lisa's parents spoke about being in the here and now and Sally's mother gave the example of being "in the midst of going through Leaving Cert and transition to college with my other daughter" and that when considering that Sally is "next in line" it gave her a "little bit of a freeze moment" (Sally's mother).

Ben's mother echoed these sentiments when asked if she could see him having a part time job in the near future, she said:

"I didn't really think about it. I don't, I don't know. I don't know where he'd work. You know my sister thinks he should have had a summer job this year, and I'm thinking God he's only a child, like, you know, you know but I haven't thought about it." (Ben's mother)

Some of the parents have started having initial conversations with their child about the future such as Tim's mother who said, "I keep dropping the hints every so often, I'd say 'well Tim any idea what you'd like to do when you're finished'" (Tim's mother). Sally's family have also started to get her to consider PSOs stating that its "is something that she needs to start thinking about now" that "she sees [older sibling] transitioning now" (Sally's mother).

For the students themselves, there was varying levels of readiness to discuss the transition. Lisa's parents expressed that they have "asked the question now and again" but that they are "not getting a response I suppose, she hasn't really put thought into it as such. We haven't actually..." (Lisa's mother) and "ya we will see later on but I don't think she has thought too far into the future, she kind of lives in the now" (Lisa's father). They described her focus at present on "going into school, meeting her friends, comes home, she is still focused on that" (Lisa's mother).

This echoed what Lisa communicated in her Mosaic sessions when asked about the future, where her responses were consistently "...hmm...[hesitation]...ya I, this is a hard one now, I don't know what to say...[hesitation], hmm that's a really

hard one like...I don't know, I didn't think that far yet" (Lisa, Mosaic Student). Similarly, for Tim, he indicated that he didn't "really know to be honest" but that throughout the data generation Map Making sessions, he started to give more thought to his future:

"Yeah, I've been actually thinking about it when I was walking at night about what am I going to do. I'm saying I think I might move up somewhere in the countryside maybe, maybe near [next county] or something like that, maybe not, or maybe move up and buy a proper house up in [city]. And then possibly not sure." (Tim, Mosaic Student)

When asked how he felt when considering his future he indicated "yeah, it's good to be honest with you" (Tim, Mosaic Student). This deeper consideration of post-school life throughout the data generation sessions was also observed with Ben. He described his feelings that arose as a result of the Mosaic sessions:

"...it feels so different for me. My life.... when I am growing up. All things, all the questions...Is my parents. Do you? Do you think my parents know what I doin? Do you know, do you? Do you know what parents are doing? Is that? Do my parents know what we're asking the questions here? I feel, I feel, I'm very impressed with myself, cause I would like that when I work in my life, too. Hmm! that's all my life, what I am doing." (Ben, Mosaic student)

When the session had concluded for the day, and the recording had stopped, Ben thanked me for "helping [him] think about [his] life". His mother supported this when she said that after one data generation session, he spoke with his best friend by phone at night saying:

"He was telling her [best friend] one night on the phone. 'I was talking to' (I don't think he can say your name) he was saying. 'I was talking to you know the girl Leanne, I think, you know about life', and [best friend] didn't have clue what he was on about. She said, 'oh ya, ya that's nice' you know." (Ben's mother)

A second area expressed in this subtheme was the participants views on parental support as a factor that influences transition. Students and teachers consistently cited the impact of perceived good or supportive parenting on the student. This type of parent was described as being actively involved in the student's education. Parents too gave examples of how they were preparing their child for life post-school, teaching them life skills and empowering them.

Students gave examples of how parents and family members were pivotal in sourcing work experience placements for them. For example, for his three most recent work experiences, Kit said:

“Well, it was up to me and my parents. Like me, I decided like my auntie works in [name of care home]. My cousin works in [name of coffee shop], and I just got into Co-op, because my dad knows someone.” (Kit, School Leaver)

Will, a Pre-School Leaver, also said that his “stepfather, he worked with the dealership, and he gave a word to the boss and the boss gave me the job for two weeks” and Tim who said:

“Well, my mother's friend is actually the one that got me into it, because he's actually the man one of the managers that work there...that's why how I got the job. She didn't ring him. She met him in person open the shop, up in town.” (Tim, Mosaic Student)

Speaking more generally, students provided examples of the influence of their parents on their lives. Tim, for example, spoke at length during his Mosaic sessions that his “mother mostly teaches me everything”, that he was “well tutored by my mother” and that his “mother really she just supports me” (Tim, Mosaic student). This has had an impact on his post-school aspirations stating that he would like to:

“...work or if I can't find a job. I try and find a job just to keep the house where I'm living with my mother tip-top shape with the money. It's like she was the one that minded me, reared me, and all did so. I want to help her in return, so I don't want her short of money, or anything like that ever, just not fair for my mother.” (Tim, Mosaic Student)

In Lisa's completed map, she noted her skills of shopping and paying for items at the checkout and gave examples of tasks she can complete at home, like making coffee for her father. When discussing the completed map with her parents, they stated that they are “drip feeding her parts of that as we go along, without her realising it” and that once they saw it on the map they said “maybe all those little bits did make a difference, and you wouldn't think it. Ok, ya, we'll be framing that” (Lisa's mother).

Teachers also commented on the importance of family support stating that Lisa's parents are “great family, and great support” (Lisa's teacher) and that for Tim, “he is lucky that mom is, will be quite forward, generally in, in, in, helping...mom would be a good help...” (Tim's teacher). Sally and Ben's teacher reiterated this

and stated that “there are certain kids that come through this school, and you just know like Sally is gonna be so minded” and she further stated in relation to transition planning that:

“...with Sally, I suppose you know there's a huge level of support from home and to date, I suppose my role has been more on supporting her right in the here and now. But and I know there's gonna be, you know. It's not like nobody's going to be doing. You know. If you don't do it you know, it's not going to be [end of the world]...for Sally, you just know, you know Mom is there and dad is there and that level of huge support probably couldn't even compare to mom, you know, and what mom would be able to do and support her with.” (Sally and Ben’s teacher)

In contrast to this, all five participating teachers provided examples where parental support was perceived as lacking and the impact of that on the students. This was typically expressed in terms of either souring work experience or preparation for transition. As already discussed in Theme Two, work experience was generally described by participants as a valuable transition preparation activity, particularly when aligned with the students’ interests. However, teachers expressed that it is the “parents’ responsibility and the students to get their work experience” (Ms. Taylor, Focus Group teacher), and that at times, it is not viewed as a valuable exercise by parents. Ms. Taylor explained:

“...like with the work experience, I think sometimes with some of the students, the support isn't there at home, and it's, it's very hard then, like I found one year like...we were nearly tramping into places to try and source the placement for them. it's very difficult, you know.” (Ms. Taylor, Focus Group teacher)

She expanded to explain the impact of this stating:

“You know the support isn’t there and the interest isn’t there and the motivation and I find that sometimes I’m nearly and you know you want them to go out on work experience and I find its nearly, you feel guilty, its nearly down to you, God he or she has nothing, where could you source...you know.” (Ms. Taylor, Focus Group teacher)

Mr. Dean and Tim’s teacher both shared this view, adding “that’s my experience as well” (Tim’s teacher) and “that kind of goes back as well to how strong they are at home, family wise, parents...” (Mr. Dean, Focus Group teacher). Mr. Dean also indicated that support for sourcing work experience during Senior Cycle was seen as a predictor of transition success, explaining:

“The ones that will push hard for work experience will be the ones that will probably have no problem with going forward with the transition to further education or there will be an interest. The ones you kind of have to follow up on, they’re the ones you do worry about when they finish.” (Mr. Dean, Focus Group teacher)

Sally and Ben’s teacher reiterated this, explaining the tension between equally supporting students who have and do not have parental support at home:

“You know, you'd have certain, like I'd have so many worries for others in the class that you know you have to give them way more kind of support. And the thinking about where they're gonna go afterwards...but you do feel like that for some of them that God, if I don't do this, if I don't kind of, you know, advise them, what are they? You know who's gonna do it for them?” (Sally and Ben’s teacher)

Lisa’s teacher echoed similar sentiments explaining that some students “don’t get out at the weekends” living “very sheltered lives”. She added that some parents would have been past pupils of the school and that “the ability, the wherewithal within themselves to organise it [work experience] and make sure that someone is getting there at a certain time and all those things yunno” would be a challenge (Lisa’s teacher). With regard to sourcing a post-school placement she described that a challenge for students and families was:

“...anxiety issues and like thoughts of ‘I have to start again someplace new’, and all of that, and yet are *well able* but just don't have support, and there is no support for them. You know. And mom and dad might not be able to do it either. So, they’re just kind of left off.” (Lisa’s teacher)

Tim’s teacher also noted factors that impact on parental support regarding sourcing a post-school placement, aligned with the setting of high aspirations when he described:

“You know as well as anyone that in many cases the parents of the kids in our school may have been past pupils or, you know, they would have qualified for to be a pupil of our school. They're probably, you know, in many cases, it's not that they don't have their child's best interests at heart, but do you know what I mean? They're, they're not really making them fully informed decisions like, you know. And you know they'll probably, you know, and then in in some cases, then they wouldn't have the ability, you know, they might be able to, and to push their, you know, their child in the direction where they should be going. And they might just say, look, you know, because there is, obviously you can, once you're 18, you know what I mean, you're, you're able to, to, to claim whatever social welfare. And I know a lot of our kids have their disability allowance as well, you know. And, and I'm just wondering, you know, it,

it just, you know. Sometimes they [parents] just don't have the ability, I think, to, to, to direct the child in the best way possible. That means we should be doing, maybe we should be doing more. But like I said, I, I have great faith in the teachers.” (Tim’s teacher)

Teachers’ attitude, skills and knowledge towards transition was another component that informed this subtheme. Their level of overall preparedness was seen as an important factor in facilitating transition. Teachers demonstrated a passion for supporting students and a significant desire to change their practice, giving examples of sourcing work placements for students with Tim’s teacher saying “I got them [two female students] into a creche. They hadn’t done anything themselves” and Ms. Taylor stating that she brought supported an LCA student with an interview for a job and brought a group to a manufacturing company because she was aware that if she didn’t bring them, that opportunity might not be open to them.

Teachers often spoke about the “guilt” (Ms. Taylor) they feel if students don’t secure a work placement for example, that they:

“...don't think we're probably doing enough for the kids before they move out of the school setting, especially looking at and listening to the questions that the HSE Officer placement officer would have asked us about the social side of things.” (Mr. Dean, Focus Group teacher)

They discussed how they worry about how past school leavers have settled into new placements with Lisa’s teacher explaining:

“I guess for myself, I'd often be thinking about like, I'll be thinking about my students from last year and how they are, are they struggling? And is there anything I could do to see like, you know, if there was, you know, a way of getting around it or whatever you know? And it, like while they come back like for the one day, and we get chat or whatever for the QQI Awards, some of them don't even come in for that then.”

She went on to say that they are:

“The nicest young people, well, it's just it's just like it's not their fault, you know. I Just really feel for them. Yeah, you know, really, really, good guys and girls who wouldn't put in or out on anybody. And you just feel it's kind of the system that just failed them like doesn't want, doesn't...your fine up to 18 then, after that, best of luck.” (Lisa’s teacher)

Teachers gave some clear examples of the importance of getting to know their students, such as Lisa’s teacher who explained that she takes time every morning to have a check in with them:

“They are so important, because that's how you really, if you, if I delve straight into teaching and not ask them anything about...that's the other thing you actually have to know who you have in front of you, and the only way of knowing is those little conversations. And it isn't just enough to say on the yard. And how was your day? You know you actually need to give them the time to talk and to say what they did and what they what they liked. But you know you have an idea then, of their personality...” (Lisa's teacher)

However, despite teachers supporting students, and parents describing the “wonderful school, like these are wonderful teachers who, you know, only want the best” (Sally's mother), there are several challenges in relation to teachers' knowledge and skills in transition planning. Teachers consistently cited that they are a “complete rookie” in supporting transition and that the process is “a bit learning curve” as it is his “first year in leaving cert” (Tim's teacher). Sally and Ben's teacher expressed that she is “new enough to QQI” and that she “kind of came into QQI, not actually even knowing a whole lot about QQI” and that she was “kind of landed in” as a “position came up here” in the senior end of the school. She further described how she is also “learning my way through” and she is trying to identify “what my job here has to be and the next steps on” to support her students in transition. She indicated that the “more experience I have with this, the better I'll be getting at thinking that way” about transition (Sally and Ben's teacher).

This term being “landed in” to a “leavers class” was also used by Lisa's teacher when she described how the teachers are not informed enough about post-school transition, stating that “no, we're not. We're definitely not. And we will keep going on the way we're going if we don't try and do something about it” (Lisa's teacher). The allocation of teachers to Senior Cycle classes does not appear to be supported by induction or support in terms of sharing of good practice for transition. Tim's teacher explained this when he said “I don't know. I think sometimes we don't use our Croke Park hours, maybe like, in the way we should yunno, I mean, for CPD [Continuous Professional Development] in areas like this.” He went on to suggest that:

“Getting us [Senior Cycle teachers] all in the same room together and thrashing it out, this thing out, yunno. There are six, is it six, you might know as well as I do, six leavers – there's four QQI classes and is there two Leaving Certs?” (Tim's teacher)

When asked if there was any support available to him in navigating transition, he responded:

“No, not that I’m aware of, like just collegiate support. Ms. Taylor is fantastic, and the, the teacher, [name], who retired, who was in my room before me, and I know that she's available. You know, she’d meet me at the drop of a hat, you know that kind of a but, and officially, you know, I suppose not, you know. But now, who knows, like, you know, like I said next year I will be. I suppose that's the way. Luckily there's two, there's two of us, so next year I'll be the sixth-year teacher, Ms. Taylor will be the fifth-year teacher. So, there's less stress on me this year. You know what I mean. She's, she's under a bit more pressure than I am. So next year you know what I mean, and she'll have couple of, she's done a couple of cycles of this...And you know, like, I be tapping her for information. Then...what's happening with her guys this year, I'm kind of seeing in action for the first time as well, because I know she has a smaller class. She has about eight or nine or whatever, but I know them, because you know what I mean. We're in the same part of the school, so I'll see what happens, how this goes and I'm sure that would be a big talking point, like, you know, I mean coming up to the end of the year, you know.” (Tim’s teacher)

## A desire for change

This second subtheme builds upon the previous one, by exploring the necessary supports that were expressed by teachers and parents in this study to enhance transition. In general, parents indicated that information was the main type of support that they desired. Parents expressed the various forms that this information could take such as “career path or an information path” as a desirable option (Lisa’s father) and:

“A guidance document or pamphlet or a mini book to say this is what’s available in this region or even a website attached to the school website with resources, this is what’s there” (Lisa’s mother).

Sally’s mother agreed that information evenings would be a support to families, particularly if they were held in the second last year of schooling to support families in considering transition earlier:

“An information evening, and not necessarily on the evening of 6, you know, on the final year. But in fifth year. So, as we have that time to start thinking....so to give us the options and to give Sally the options and to see where we need to focus our time focus our energy.” (Sally’s mother)

Information evenings were also noted by Tim’s mother, who also appreciated the value of jobs fairs, from her time with her former employer and believes that

giving students an opportunity to showcase their skills to potential employers would be valuable:

“Parent evenings would be great and have what they normally do in jobs fairs. Because I used to do them for the [business] that I worked with, and you go in and you get all the different companies that would be looking for these children. We call them children. There's one thing I have noticed above my two lads. If they do a job, it's done right and extra right, even more than it should be done. If that makes any sense, because whilst someone refer to them, they might, they might have special needs, but they were actually very special, and it means that they take care of whatever job they're tasked at doing, a hundred times better than a normal run of the mill person. So, there is, there is opportunities there. If, if the employers realize all this...” (Tim's mother)

Three of the families indicated that at the very “least a career guidance teacher would be” a valued support (Tim's mother), with some parents not aware that guidance counsellors were not typically available in special schools. When it was discussed with Sally's mother that there was no guidance counsellor in this school like most other special schools, she responded with “ok, imagine that” and Tim's mother stated “right so, would I be right in saying that there's actually no guidance counsellor, for special needs schools...It's not good enough. I'm sorry, it's not good enough” (Tim's mother). She expanded further to state that a guidance counsellor should be available:

“...on site, that is available during the school of terms. You know I mean someone that should be on board. It should be full, full employment, really and truly, especially for the likes of me.” (Tim's mother)

Ben's mother indicated that with a guidance counsellor, students may be in a better position to achieve their post-school aspirations stating that:

“I think school should definitely have a, a Guidance Counsellor. You know this, all these children, what's going to happen them when they reach 18 or 19, you know. I mean, they should be able to fulfil their, their desires as much as possible.” (Ben's mother)

Another support that parents desired to enhance transition planning is that students would be allocated the same teacher for their years in Senior Cycle. Lisa's father outlined the importance of this in his example:

“...cause I would say, and I don't know if it's practical, feasible to do in the school like this. Certainly, for the last two or three years that the child is in the school, that they have the same teacher that it doesn't change. I don't know if that's practical or feasible to do. But at least that person, then that teacher knows the child knows their ability, and may

be able to guide them better rather than having, cause Lisa has had a teacher every single year, hasn't she? She's never had same teacher twice...I'm not blaming the teachers, I'm not, it's just if the system was able to, or even the last two years, if they had the same teacher that could work with them, but Lisa next year would most likely have another change again. So now we're starting all over again you know. So, yeah but I suppose that's down to school policy and resources and teachers and all that." (Lisa's father)

Teachers express a desire for change to enhance transition in two main areas: School structure and practice and Teacher Support. Aligning with the suggestions from Lisa's father, teachers too indicated that class allocation is factor that could enhance transition planning. Sally and Ben's teacher indicated that teachers often don't know what class they will be allocated to until the start of the academic year, explaining that:

"...we don't know, we really don't get that information until, either the end of the school year, or possibly at times it has been the beginning when you come back on that school year." (Sally and Ben's teacher)

This supports teachers' previous comments regarding being "landed in" to a Senior Cycle class and being on a "learning curve". This was also reflected in comments from Tim's teacher, who indicated that as he was new to teaching LCA, he hadn't "looked ahead actually, to be honest in the VPG [Vocational Preparation and Guidance] course, you know what I mean. I'm kind of sticking with what we're doing now..." (Tim's teacher).

As outlined in Theme Two, work experience is viewed as a valuable transition preparation activity by the participants with access to work experience being determined by the curriculum being accessed by the students. Teachers expressed an interest in changing their current work experience model to enhance its value. Currently, students accessing certain levels and certain modules within QQI and those accessing LCA can engage in work experience. This is typically accessed in a block of two weeks, for example, the two weeks prior to the October midterm break. Teachers noted that there is a difficulty with capturing student feedback on work experience as by the time they return to school, they have "forgotten about it" (Lisa's teacher).

Taking the idea from how mainstream schools structure work experience, Ms. Taylor suggested that the school changes the practice to "one day a week". She extended on this stating that:

“The benefit attached as well, talking amongst ourselves, would be that we could talk to them in the following day rather than have them gone for two weeks, and they come back, and you have five-minute conversation, and they don't really want to talk about it anyway.” (Ms. Taylor)

The teachers agreed that this may suit some students much more in terms of sourcing a work placement and be more balanced for some students that might find it difficult “to be away for a full week” (Lisa’s teacher). When it was discussed with the teachers in the Focus Group, that Sam and Kit in the Leavers Focus Group felt it was inequitable that not all students got to access work experience, teachers agreed that this process needed to change their current practice of “if we're doing the work experience module, you go on work experience. If we're not, you don't” (Mr. Dean, Focus Group teacher).

Lisa’s teacher suggested that it needs to be built into a school policy, adding that contingency plans need to be in place for students that may not have the parental support to organise a work experience:

“Like you know you had mentioned before, about how we should probably have a policy, and I think we should, on work experience, like do all of our leavers do work experience regardless of doing a level three, you know, because some of my class they're not level three, but they'll be like going –‘How come’, you know? They'll be looking to say, well, ‘I could do it, because he's doing it. So why can't I?’ And you kind of feel like you're holding them back? And yet every year, even if we have a policy, we're still gonna have the same problem of depending on who's in front of you and like the parental support, the background, how are they going to get from A to B, it's just going to be. It's difficult. And that needs to be kind of in, built into a policy. What we do then? Do you know what I mean?” (Lisa’s teacher)

Teachers expressed a desire to be support for transition planning in numerous practical ways within their school. Firstly, teachers indicated that dedicated time for transition planning, as well as informing themselves about relevant post-school services was required. Teachers repeatedly cited time as a barrier to visiting post-school settings:

“I'm sure, I would *love* the idea of every single path being investigated. And as would I like, sure all of us would. But I guess there's a major time issue. It's not factored in in the beginning of the year how we best can go about educating ourselves and not having the time to go, I suppose to really experiment with what's there and getting people to come to tell us.” (Lisa’s teacher)

This was also noted by Sally and Ben’s teacher who indicated that:

"I've never had the opportunity to go to the training centres and see what they're like...I guess it's about getting the time off to be able to go you know, look it, I'm hoping that will happen this year, just to get out and I feel you need to see it so you can, it would nearly influence what modules you pick." (Sally and Ben's teacher)

Lisa's teacher identified that it would also be valuable to the students to visit the range of post-school settings as a class, to raise awareness of what is available:

"...then it's all time as well, then, you know time constraints, but it would be nice if we'd if they would all have like even the opportunity in the beginning of the year, that we'd all go down in a mini-bus and go in and see the place and have a nice and casual and not delay too long, but just to see it." (Lisa's teacher)

To support this, a dedicated "full time person", a "staff member" (Lisa's teacher), a teacher "trained in career guidance" with "professional training" (Tim's teacher) was suggested as a desired support:

"Ideally, you'd love like for like a staff member, and their job is solely for that year. Cause you'd need it for all of them that are going to leave, and to be able to figure out where, would be the best place for them to go, go visit, bring them out. Liaise with the parents, liaise back with. You know. There's an awful lot to it to really do it properly." (Lisa's teacher)

Lisa's teacher drew on experience of a family member who worked as a career guidance teacher in a mainstream post-primary school, noting the importance of the training and knowledge on how best to support transition:

"[Family member] organizes for people to come in because he's the time to do that then. And if there is a college awareness week is his big week, then where he would have had, and I mean, he would have brought in a *range* of different people from a range of different backgrounds. And some like you could have some years where you have some that are really good at carpentry, and they could actually take yeah, if they got into an apprenticeship or something like that, whereas like that, we'd never have entertained those ideas like, because we wouldn't know where to begin, where would you start?" (Lisa's teacher)

Building on this, professional development and collaboration was cited by Tim's teacher who stated that "professional development" would be supportive and that he feels in-school training time and Croke Park hours could be better utilised to support the Senior Cycle teachers.

Transition meetings and development of individual transition plans was also a desired support mentioned by the teachers. Lisa's teacher indicated that the Mosaic approach and the development of the Mosaic map with the students

was a very valuable experience and expressed a desire to engage in similar transition mapping:

“Wouldn’t it be lovely for me to have to time to be able to do this with everybody. You know, you draw so much. That’s what I’m saying, you need to have like someone who would be able to go through everybody and do this work with everybody, you know, for LCA everything because and visuals, and this like a mind map like and that’s how they learn and how they can get things down on paper...That’s really good, and like as well like, you know, it’s try to get [principal] in on board as well, to see can we be like kind of be pushing. This is what we need to do like. That’s, that’s why, really, it’s it’s great that we get that with yourself.” (Lisa’s teacher)

Sally and Ben’s teacher had a similar response to the completed Mosaic maps, stating that at present, without dedicated time “as a class teacher, you just don’t, with the best will in the world, and you would love to be able to get this detail, but you just don’t” (Sally and Ben’s teacher). She expanded to say that if teachers were able to capture this information at an earlier stage, it could help inform the curriculum and modules that students engage with:

“I don’t know but I’m just, you know, but it’s lovely to get that information that you would say, it’s actually even as you were talking, I’ve seen wouldn’t be lovely to have this sort of a meeting with, you know, or the, the resources to do that with each and every one of them. You know, at the earlier stage, you know, knowing this kind of stuff at this stage, knowing that she still has two to three years left in the school, three probably. You know, and then you can kind of build around her. But like with the best will in the world, do you know you, you pick up on it as the time goes on, but I suppose busy, busy classes with, you know.” (Sally and Ben’s teacher)

In addition to this, Sally and Ben’s teacher indicated that individual transition planning templates would be supportive, suggesting that could be a resource provided to the teachers at the end of the research, “...maybe you have a template that we can say and know the right questions to ask, and maybe because we aren’t resourced enough, maybe, to do it...” (Sally and Ben’s teacher)

She added that parents could be a valuable resource in completing the template:

“Maybe that template is completed at home for the people that can, not everybody will have those support then we can do it. And then maybe we can look at who needs it to be, you know, done in school, but you know, to get that kind of information early into their QQI journey

would be amazing. So, I'm sure there is lots more, but that would be a start." (Sally and Ben's teacher)

She also identified that including transition related goals into the existing IEP process would be a welcome first step:

"If there is a transition element, maybe the suggestion is, and maybe it's on ourselves to do that. But maybe when it comes in and black and white, that part of an IEP for every senior student is a section 'What's the transition year plan here?' And you know now that I'm involved in this that makes you think that. Oh, I should do that. But maybe it should be part of the overall kind of planning for QQI as opposed to, you know, one individual teacher saying I'm going to do a transition plan." (Sally and Ben's teacher)

## 5.5 Summary of Findings

Chapter Five presented the findings of Phase Two of the research, which aimed to explain the results of the quantitative surveys in more detail. Through capturing the voices of students, their teachers and their parents in Phase Two, a deeper understanding of the transition preparation and transition planning practices in Irish special schools was formed. The contextual factors that impact upon transition within one special school were described. Students vision for their lives post school was illustrated and their voices amplified through the Mosaic map consultations with their teachers and parents. Chapter Six presents a discussion on the findings of Phase One and Phase Two in the context of the research questions and the literature review.

## 6 Chapter Six: Discussion

### 6.1 Introduction

This study aimed to capture the views and experiences of students, parents, teachers and principals of special schools towards transition preparation and transition planning in order to identify what schools require to support the development of autonomous post-school choices. The study was conducted in two phases, employing a participatory social justice mixed method design.

This chapter draws together the literature review, findings from Phase One and Phase Two and discusses them in the context of the conceptual framework and the research sub-questions. The research questions continually developed throughout this study and following reflection on the data generated across Phase One and Phase Two, in conjunction with the literature review, the research sub-questions were refined. Sub-question two was broadened to capture the voice of the student and teacher alongside the parent with sub-question three being amended to include the factors that impact upon teachers views of transition, in contrast to the previous focus on what teachers require. This led to sub-question five broadening to reframe the needs on a whole school level and sub-question four to consider the existing practices that are embedded in Irish special schools.

The five research sub-questions were:

1. What are the post-school aspirations of Senior Cycle students with an intellectual disability in special schools?
2. How informed are students, parents and teachers in special schools on the range of post-school options available to students with an intellectual disability?
3. How do Senior Cycle class teachers in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and what factors impact upon their views?
4. What are the existing transition preparation and transition planning practices in special schools in Ireland?
5. What do special schools require in order to engage in more effective transition preparation and transition planning?

## 6.2 What are the post-school aspirations of senior cycle students with an intellectual disability in special schools?

### Student voice

The UNCRC (1989) sets out that consultation with students and young people should be an ongoing process where students views are not only heard but used to shape the outcome of the process. In schools, this should effectively include meaningful engagement in decision making in decisions that will directly affect their lives (Kazmierczak-Murray et al., 2024). Similarly, Simplican et al. (2015) view the level of knowledge of individuals with disabilities and the use of goal setting by them as enabling conditions for social inclusion, aligning with Article 1 of the UNCRPD (2006).

A key aspect of this research sought to capture an insight into student participation in decision making in special schools, through both Phases of the study, aligning with Kohler's Taxonomy (2016) for transition programming. Within Kohler's pillar of student-focused planning, student participation is a key feature for effective transition planning.

Despite provisions in the UNCRC (1989) and the EPSEN Act (2004), student participation is not widely embedded in Irish policy or practice. Within the Phase One schools, while most teachers and principals declared that students are consulted on post-school goals and that IEPs facilitate considerations for transition, students were rarely in attendance at transition or IEP meetings nor involved in goal setting, supporting earlier Irish research on lack of student participation in educational meetings (Ní Bhroin et al., 2016; O'Brien et al., 2011; Rose et al., 2012).

The need to formalise the role of the student in educational decision making was highlighted by the Ombudsman for Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon who suggested that the revision to EPSEN should outline that children's views should be "sought as a member of the planning 'team' and those views form part of the education plan" (OCO, 2023, p.12). The recently published review of the Act supported Dr Muldoon's recommendation, indicating that any further legislation must support the child's participation in the process, while

recognising and affirming the “natural and imprescriptible rights of the child” (DEY, 2025, p. 21).

A challenge identified in this research, supporting Strnadová et al. (2016), is the exclusion of students from education planning based on perceptions of ability to share their views. Participating teachers in Phase Two were hesitant to consider including students in future education meetings based on perceptions of ability and lack of knowledge of how to navigate students’ high aspirations with the teachers’ perceptions of realistic PSOs available.

In response to students’ suggestions to attend future meetings, the teachers indicated that attendance may be facilitated for a short period of time but that it would not be appropriate for them to attend the entire meeting. This echoes sentiments from McCall (2015) who reported that students were passive observers and not invited to make substantial contributions and Cavendish et al. (2020) who indicated that students in attendance at meetings felt “talked to” rather than actively involved (p.354).

Simplican et al. (2015) suggest that attitudes of social network members, in this case teachers, can be viewed as barriers or facilitators to social inclusion. The existing tokenistic involvement of students in their education planning is in direct contrast to how students should be engaged and consulted, as per the UNCRC (1989) and UNCRPD (2006). Therefore, to uphold children’s rights and facilitate social inclusion as proposed by the Simplican (2015) model, a shift in attitudes will be required.

While already identified that student voice is often excluded from education planning meetings, Phase Two of this study also highlighted that students’ views had seldom been sought in terms of other aspects of educational decision-making. Students described how choices of curricula, subjects and school activities were made by teachers and staff only. While there may have been other practices where students were consulted in the school, the students were not able to identify them.

In order for schools to become effective spaces for inclusion for students with SEND, they will need to take significant steps towards valuing the voice of the student. Recent policy frameworks published by the Department of Children,

Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2021, 2024) provide practical guidance and support to “ensure that best practice participation in decision-making can be fully inclusive and accessible to all disabled children and young people” (Kazmierczak-Murray et al., 2024, p.11). A range of specific methodologies are outlined in the Kazmierczak-Murray et al. (2024) scoping document which support schools and organisations to include the voice of the student with SEND, which include Photovoice, Sensory Stories and Talking Mats, as well as the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001).

Within the context of this study in facilitating and harnessing student voice, the Mosaic approach whose principles are derived from the UNCRC (1989), allowed students the dedicated time and space to consider their post-school aspirations and document them in a range of visual ways. Stage Two in the Mosaic approach allowed parents and teachers to review the completed Mosaic maps which centred the voice of the student and provided an opportunity for their views to be discussed and considered. Stage Three of the Mosaic approach, requiring changes to practice, was also an essential element of this research, and provided parents with a range of PSOs to begin exploring with their child and provided teachers with the impetus to change certain practices such as work experience within the school. Therefore, this study validated the use of the Mosaic approach as a way of centring student voice at the core of the process, upholding their rights and enabling their views to be captured in an accessible way.

Despite progressive steps in promoting frameworks for listening to the voice of the child such as the Mosaic approach, there continues to be a lack of coherence across government departments in the communication of this message throughout their publications. The DCEDIY frameworks (2021; 2024) aim to increase informed participation in decision making, however, this sentiment is not reflected in other relevant Strategic Frameworks. The National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance 2024-2030, which purports to provide inclusive and accessible guidance across the lifespan outlines as Action 2.7, to “increase informed participation of parents/guardians and the wider community to support students in educational and career decision-making” (p.4). The notable absence of the increased participation of student is in stark contrast to

the DCEDIY Frameworks and perpetuates a narrative that students are not key stakeholders in decision making processes in their own lives.

Despite the lack of consultation by teachers with students in this study, the participating teachers did indicate their surprise at the breadth and depth of information that was captured over four to six Mosaic sessions. Some Mosaic maps captured information that the teachers were not aware of in terms of post-school aspirations. As a result, the teachers indicated that they would like to engage in Mosaic mapping with all students in advance of transition to gain a sense of what they would like to pursue post-school. However, they cited practical implementation barriers of time and resources, along with the pressure of their current teaching workload in supporting students in attaining certification at QQI or LCA levels. Interestingly this finding was also noted in the recent Mc Coy et al. (2025) study, where principals expressed the challenge in offering multiple curricula in “a single classroom” and the “resource adequacy to support such tailored provision” to students accessing Senior Cycle curricula (p.71).

### Student aspirations

Article 1 of the UNCRPD (2006) sets out to ensure “full and equal enjoyment” of the rights that non-disabled people experience and to have all barriers removed so they can experience “full and effective participation” in society (p.4). When considering this statement in relation to post-school transitions, the basic aspects of participation in society must be considered: access to further and higher education; employment or self-employment; access to community networks and social interactions, and access to healthcare and welfare services. Therefore, within the context of the Simplican model (2015) and the UNCRPD (2006), it was important to capture the students’ vision for life post-school in the broad sense of full participation in life and society, rather than focusing explicitly on career or educational pathways.

Through the data generation sessions in Phase Two, it became apparent that students held a vision for their lives which was richer than merely a job or a course. Despite their lack of consultation on educational decisions and without access to appropriate guidance, students clearly articulated their aspirations aligned with Article 1 of UNCRPD (2006). As illustrated from the data analysis,

students held aspirations across three main areas: being an adult gaining employment and continuing their education.

### *Being an adult*

Students described their lives in terms of independence, through the desire to be able to drive, get a license and own a car. They want to be able to use this independent travel to visit friends, go shopping and socialise at the cinema. They expressed a desire to live independently, some within the grounds of the family home, while others expressed their wish to live in apartments, farmhouses and detached homes in the countryside. A number of the students speculated about the possibility of intimate relationships in the future, and the opportunity to become a parent.

A key challenge to the realisation of those aspirations which emerged in this study, was the reality of the lack of supports available to people with disabilities as they progress from childhood to adulthood. The evaluation of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy 2015-2024 by the National Disability Authority (2025) observed that despite initiatives in the Make Work Pay report (DSP, 2019), the numbers of people with disabilities in receipt of disability related social welfare increased substantially over the lifetime of the policy (NDA, 2025, p.14). This illustrates the absolute necessity for lifelong supports beyond the compulsory age of education to meaningfully and practically enable young people with disabilities to bridge the transition gap from education to adult life.

### *Gain employment*

This study highlighted the stark reality that the vast majority of students with SEND are not progressing from education to employment, supporting much of the already published data on disability employment rates in Ireland (European Disability Forum, 2023; Kelly & Maitre, 2021). Of the 340 special school graduates from nine categories of special schools surveyed, only five students transitioned to employment in 2021 and 2022. This extremely low figure was supported by teachers in Phase One of this study who viewed students' understanding of their right to employment and awareness of the range of employment options available to them as very limited. Additionally, less than half of the teachers surveyed felt parents held an aspiration for their child to be employed.

Employment is a key feature of independent living for all, with a lack of access to employment resulting in exclusion of people with SEND from their wider community (Irish Business and Employers Confederation [IBEC], 2021). School and family culture of high aspirations for students with SEND to access mainstream employment is essential and are seen as enabling or constraining factors for inclusion depending on how they are applied (Simplican et al., 2015). High aspirations, supportive staff and families can be enabling while stereotypical views on people with SEND (Milner & Kelly, 2009) can constrain a person's opportunity to meaningfully achieve social participation (Simplican et al., 2015).

The notion of how inclusive accessible education employment and self-employment are central to the quality of life of people with disabilities is set out in the EU Strategy 2021-2030 and UN Sustainable Development Goal Four (2015). As such, intersecting with Simplican et al. (2015) framework and Kohler's Taxonomy (2016), skill development is viewed as essential for employment for people with disabilities.

Research carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (2021) on Ireland's employment and education statistics show only 36% of those with a disability were in employment, with more recent findings from the European Disability Forum (2023) reporting that Ireland had the lowest rate of employment in the EU at 32.6% and the highest employment gap of 38.6%. Additional Irish research demonstrates that only 14.7% of people with intellectual disabilities were in employment (Kelly & Maître, 2021). An outcome of the publication of the EU Strategy 2021-2030 was that Ireland was tasked to set targets by 2024 to reduce this labour gap by 2030, which builds upon Ireland's preexisting commitments under Sustainable Development Goal Four (2015).

Working towards these targets, Irish policies and action plans such as the Comprehensive Employment Strategy (2015-2024), Make Work Pay Report (2019) and the Pathways to Work 2021-2025 Strategy were aimed at improving access and retention rates in Irish employment sector for people with disabilities. The CES 2015-2024 aimed to increase disability employment to 38% by 2024, however according to the Survey of Income & Living Conditions (SILC)

data, there was no substantial increase over the nine-year lifetime of the policy (NDA, 2025).

Further evidence from the Pathways to Work (2021-2025) strategy indicates that “young people who do not make a successful transition from education to employment or further education are shown to suffer long-term scarring with a high risk of entrenched long-term unemployment” (p.62). In response to the EU target, it aims to “increase employment rates to 33% by 2026 and in doing so to contribute to the realisation of the right articulated in Article 27” (p.65) of the UNCRPD (2006). However, the strategy failed to outline specific actions at supporting young people with an intellectual disability. Despite the range of strategies and initiatives in place, Irish literature suggests that persistent barriers to employment prevail (Scanlon et al., 2020) with the NDA (2025) suggesting that based on the failed implementation of the CES 2015-2024, there is no evidence to suggest that other policies will be successful.

Despite the extremely low progression to employment, echoed by McCoy et al. (2025), students consulted in Phase Two of this study expressed a desire to access mainstream employment, which centred around their current areas of interest and strengths such as childcare, working with animals, art and cleaning, something that was also observed by Scanlon and Doyle (2021). In contrast to Phase One, parents in Phase Two demonstrated a ‘whatever it takes’ attitude towards supporting their child in accessing mainstream paid employment. They frequently expressed a desire for their child to be fulfilled by their employment and to be a contributing member of society, accessing their rights under Article 1 and Article 27 of UNCRPD (2006).

If successful at sourcing employment, parental fears turned to their child’s ability to navigate employment due to parents’ perceptions of their child’s naivety. Employers too share concerns about supporting an employee with a disability. An IBEC (2021) report on Disability and Employment in Ireland, identified key barriers in Irish businesses such as lack of disability awareness, knowledge of reasonable accommodations, liability and litigation, managing risk, policies and procedures and recruitment and retention.

In support of this position, one participating parent in Phase Two of this study who was a business owner, cited challenges of insurance and risk as barriers to

employing people with a disability in his own small business, despite his openness to doing so. This was also observed by McCoy et al. (2025) and Scanlon and Doyle (2018) where despite employers demonstrating positive views towards employing young people with intellectual disabilities, they felt a range of practical factors would be supportive to them in accommodating the employment needs of people with intellectual disabilities. While some positive measures have been provided to employers in recent years (NDA, 2025), without an aspiration of employment instilled in students with SEND during their school years, or appropriate skill development as part of transition preparation, employment rates will continue to be extremely low.

#### *Access further or higher education*

Student progression rates to higher education continue to be significantly low for students with intellectual disabilities in Ireland with figures showing only 6% of those with an ID have a third level qualification (Kelly & Maître, 2021). According to the Central Statistics Office data from the 2022 Irish Census, 20% of people with an ID had no formal education, 14% had completed upper secondary education and 10% had completed education to a certificate, ordinary, honours or post-graduate level (CSO, 2025). Data from this study supports those findings, with principals reporting that only 40 of 340 graduates progressed to further education and no student progressing to higher education in 2021 or 2022. Teachers in Phase One of this study reported low levels of parental aspiration for their child to access further or higher education, while contrastingly most students in Phase Two of this study expressed an aspiration to attend a college post-school.

The concept of *going* to college was noted more specifically than accessing a particular type of course to facilitate future career options. There was very little discussion from students about the progression pathways that they would follow in further or higher education to achieve their goals as a result of lack of access to appropriate guidance. For example, one student held a clear vision for a future job in Montessori or childcare and she knew that this was the area she would pursue in further or higher education. However, she did not have specific knowledge of courses or educational settings which could help her achieve that goal, nor was this information being provided to her by any member of staff within the school. For other students, the goal was to go to the National Learning

Network because their friends, past pupils and peers attended there. In most cases, students held little knowledge of the courses available there.

This lack of knowledge of the range of post-school education options is an interesting finding as access to higher education for people with disabilities has received significant political and policy attention in recent years. Aligning with Ireland's commitments under the UN Sustainable Development Goal Four (2015) and UNCRPD (2006), Phase Two of the PATH-4 funding to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) facilitated the development of specific tailored pathways into university that bypassed the traditional points-driven and highly competitive entry route (HEA, 2024a). As a result, in February 2024 a range of courses specifically designed for people with autism and/or intellectual disability were announced, offered in eleven Higher Education Institutions across Ireland. The providers offer students a broad range of learning experiences with and without peers with intellectual disabilities from September 2024 on a pilot basis. This funding also provided student supports such as assistive technology, fee waivers, travel costs as well as personal supports such as occupational therapy and counselling (HEA, 2024b).

In addition, the Inclusive National Higher Education Forum (INHEF) Strategic Plan (2022) set out goals which include promoting the awareness of higher education as a realistic destination for those with intellectual disabilities among parents, school staff and individuals themselves, as well as highlighting the contribution that people with intellectual disabilities can make to society through accessing higher education. Preceding the INHEF Strategic Plan (2022), the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2022 identified the need to "raise awareness amongst persons with disabilities that further education and employment, post-school leaving, are viable and potential alternatives" with recommendations to "coordinate government policy to ensure effective transition from school to further and higher education" (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017, p.26).

As education is viewed as a multiplier to accessing other rights, promotion of access to inclusive accessible further and higher education should have positive impacts on participation rates in employment, further supporting the realisation of Article 27 of UNCRPD (2006) and Ireland's responsibilities under the UN

Sustainable Development Goal Four (2015). Despite this progress, parents and teachers remain largely unaware of these courses and without access to appropriate guidance, these policies and initiatives are unlikely to be impactful.

### 6.3 How do senior cycle class teachers in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and what factors impact upon their views?

Access to high quality teachers and information of transition planning are core features in Kohler's Taxonomy (2016), while access to training opportunities for staff are core features of Simplican et al., (2015) social inclusion model. Within the current Irish education system, special schools are not allocated Guidance Counsellors by the Department of Education, as they are in mainstream post-primary schools. This study sought to capture the views of teachers in special schools towards the role they play in transition preparation and transition planning against the backdrop of absence of the key appropriately trained professional.

The majority of teachers in Phase One indicated that they play a role in transition preparation and transition planning. Teachers described their roles as meeting with HSE Occupational Guidance Officers (OGO), liaising with parents and post-school services, implementing transition programmes, organising pre-transition visits to various settings, preparing reports and sharing information. This was supported by teachers in the Phase Two of the study who also identified these key activities as part of their role. However, their roles were described as more curricular focused, with pressure to complete the required coursework and prepare students for examination. This created a tension between obtaining exam certification and what teachers, and parents viewed, as more meaningful learning.

Only 20% of teachers in Phase One indicated that their current teaching qualifications prepared them to engage with transition planning, however two thirds of teachers indicated that they should lead the process, with almost 68% of principals agreeing that the Senior Cycle class teacher should be the lead person in this process. This is an unexpected finding, as currently there are no supports available for teachers in special schools to engage in this planning. This survey demonstrates that transition planning has fallen to class teachers in special schools, with varying qualification backgrounds, to engage in a role that arguably should not be assigned to them. While profiling occurs with the OGO, the transition preparation in the years prior to school leaving and support for the final transition planning are being facilitated by teachers. This study

captured examples of ad-hoc planning without any guiding frameworks, prior knowledge or qualifications, access to TPL, dedicated time, human resources to visit post-school settings, as well as barriers to accessing learning in their communities.

Teachers in Phase Two also found themselves making recommendations to parents on post-school placements without having the full knowledge or even having visited the setting being recommended. They explained that as parents are also unaware of the various options, they look to the school to support them in the decision-making process. As a result, the teachers in Phase Two indicated that they recommend normative transition pathways into either HSE day funded services or the National Learning Network, in the absence of knowledge of other alternative options, further demonstrating the impact of lack of training opportunities for staff as a barrier to social inclusion (Simplican et al., 2015).

Reasons for teachers suggesting that it should be their role are unclear. One possibility is that the structure of special schools in Ireland, mean students are allocated to a base class teacher in the same way that teachers are allocated in primary schools, therefore teachers spend a significant proportion of their time with the core group of students. Teachers in Phase Two expressed the importance of getting to know students on an individual level and provided examples of how they attempt to tailor learning experiences for them. They outlined how they developed professional relationships with parents, particularly those teachers that taught students for more than one year.

Despite these examples from the Phase Two teachers, they also described how with limited resources, time and TPL, they found themselves providing different levels of transition planning support to different students. Teachers felt that for students whose parents held high aspirations, a high level of willingness, financial and personal resources, students would transition successfully to a post-school setting with or without the teacher's involvement in the transition. Teachers were concerned that for students with limited parental support, low parental aspirations, and parents who may have a disability themselves, that transition may not be successful without the teacher's support for these students. Therefore, teachers described how they engaged in varying levels of

transition planning for different students, highlighting the perceptions of social capital of parents impacting the level of transition planning.

These findings reflect the reality that without access to appropriate guidance, students' rights as enshrined in the UNCRPD (2006) and the Education Act (1998) are not being equally accessed by all with regards to transition planning. Students are experiencing unequal preparation for life post-school as a result of the current structure of the Irish special school system. Students with SEND in mainstream schools have access to a guidance counsellor, and while Irish research demonstrates that this access is often ad-hoc (Banks et al., 2022), an appropriately trained professional is available to them, their parents and to the teachers.

Actions to address this inequality have been posited in government policy for nearly two decades yet most of them have not been implemented. As early as 2009, the NCSE began to consider the access and progression experiences of students with SEN to post-school pathways. The subsequent publication of the McGuckin et al. (2013) report informed the actions of the promising whole-of-government policy, the Comprehensive Employment Strategy 2015-2024. Specifically, it identified transition planning and the need to collaboratively work towards effective transition from school to further and higher education and employment (Action 1.5a) and to obtain and retain employment (Action 5.1).

In the decade since then, eight different government policies, strategies and frameworks have been published, all outlining 26 actions required to address transition planning for students with SEND. Table 35 illustrates the litany of commitments from the CES 2015-2024 to the most recent report on the review of EPSEN (DEY, 2025b). However, the NDA (2025) noted that "substantial gaps" in career guidance provision remain for students with disabilities and that based on the failed implementation of the CES 2015-2024, that any new strategies will take "several years to have an impact" (p.15). Without robust and comprehensive national legislation underpinned by human rights, as per Ireland's commitment under UNCRPD (2006) and specific legislation on transition planning in Ireland, it is difficult to foresee a substantial change to the current ad-hoc transition practice.

Table 35 - Existing Policy Commitments

2009	NCSE	NCSE commissioned research to explore the access and progression experiences of students with SEN from compulsory education to further & higher education
2013	NCSE	Publication of Moving to Further and Higher Education (McGuckin et al., 2013)
2015	Comprehensive Employment Strategy 2015-2024	NCSE recommendations from McGuckin et al. (2013) informed Comprehensive Employment Strategy 2015-2024 – Action 1.5 (a) Transition Planning & 1.7 – support for guidance counsellors to support students with SEND including CPD
2016	National Skills Strategy 2025 (published 2016)	Action 1.3 – “Carry out a review of guidance services, tools and careers information for school students and adults and recommend changes to improve the services available.” (via Indecon)
2017	National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2022	Action 46 - “Raise awareness amongst persons with disabilities that further education and employment, post school leaving, are viable and potential alternatives. -Coordinate Government policy to ensure the effective transition from school to further and higher education for students with special education needs. -Assist persons with disabilities, by providing proper guidance concerning further education, training and career options”
2019	Indecon Review of Career Guidance	15. “Introduce a specific module on career guidance as part of training for teachers in special schools  17. Provide additional specialised ongoing CPD supports for teachers in special schools.”
2024	NCSE Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes, ‘An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society’	Recommendation 3.2. “Teacher professional learning on inclusive assessment processes to identify the learning strengths and needs of students based on the continuum of support and informed by a student’s response to intervention, and to effectively use this data to inform decision making in reviews of students’ placements and also to assist in transition planning when required.”  Recommendation 5.2. “...Department of Education and the NCSE should enhance guidance to schools to ensure that teachers are competent and supported in assessing students’ strengths and needs, implementing appropriate education programmes to support the development of students’ skills for life and effective transition to adulthood. This

		includes inclusive guidance to support students' decision making on post-school options in collaboration with a student, their parents, guardians and the school. An accompanying programme of teacher professional learning should be developed to support this."
2024	National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance: Strategic Action Plan (2024-2030)	2.6 "Ensure provision of guidance supports to students in special schools delivered by appropriately trained professionals.  2.7 Explore measures to increase the informed participation of parents/guardians and the wider community to support students in educational and career decision-making.  2.9 Develop supporting guidance material to embed the learnings from existing programmes in special schools...to support transition planning and positive transitions to further education, employment or disability day services, as appropriate."
2025	Programme for Government	Ensuring our education system works for all: "Enhance guidance services in schools to ensure that all students have access to high-quality guidance" (p.68)  Supporting students with additional educational needs: special educational needs who are transitioning to new stages of school e.g. pre-school to primary, improve data sharing between schools and provide career guidance in special schools" (p.69)
2025	Education Plan for 2025	Pillar 3: Action 54 – "Improve transitions from pre-school to primary, from primary to second level and from post primary to higher and further education or to the world of work"  Action 54.2 "Engage with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research and Innovation and Science, and relevant stakeholders, to identify next steps in relation to transitions and appropriate alignment with the current Senior Cycle Pathways work by the NCCA"  Pillar 3: Action 55 "Improve pathways into higher and further education, and employment, including through a focus on career guidance and work placement"

		<p>Action 55.1 “Work collaboratively with schools to facilitate sharing of experience across schools in regard to aspects of Transition Year (TY) programmes such as access to FET/HE/workplace “taster” or “sampling” experiences”</p> <p>Pillar 3: Action 58 – “Review of career guidance provision and conduct a mapping exercise to identify gaps and areas for improvement”</p> <p>Pillar 5: “Supporting students and all those who work in the education sector”</p> <p>Action 77.6 – “Work to ensure provision of guidance supports to students in special schools is delivered by appropriately trained professionals”</p>
2025	Report on the Review of EPSEN Act (2004) Published 2025	<p>Recommendation 9 – Transitions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Transition processes should be standardised with a rights-based approach within education, including the improvement of planning and data sharing.</li> <li>-Coherent transition policies should be established across Government Departments</li> <li>-Clear processes for planning and supporting students as they transition between different stages of education should be developed.</li> <li>- Consistent data collection methods should be implemented.”</li> </ul>

## 6.4 How informed are students, parents and teachers in special schools on the range of post-school options available to students with an intellectual disability?

Kohler et al. (2016) state that knowledge of PSOs, pathways to qualifications and providing families with all necessary transition information are key indicators for successful transition. Supporting this, they state that it requires high quality teachers with access to knowledge and skill development for effective transition planning. An individual's own level of knowledge as well as the knowledge of parents and staff supporting that person are also key enablers for social inclusion (Simplican et al., 2015).

This knowledge of their rights to education and employment (UNCRPD, 2006) becomes particularly important considering PSOs for students with intellectual disabilities internationally are not as broad as for neurotypical peers (EU Treaty 2021-2030; Smyth et al., 2019). In Ireland, they are very limited, with a historical dominance of health-funded day services (HFDS). This study, supporting findings from McCoy et al. (2025), found that health funded day services (HFDS) remained the most accessed option for students leaving special school.

Teachers in this study consistently stated that they were not fully aware of the range of PSOs available. They cited challenges of following normative pathways for post-school progression to traditional settings such as HFDS and NLN in their area, with one teacher stating that "it's where our students go" (Lisa' teacher). This supports previous research by Almalki (2021), who noted that teachers became disaffected with transition planning due to the reality of only one or two options available to their students, with teachers considering "what is the point" in creating transition plans (p.6). Teachers in Phase Two of this study cited a lack of access to TPL in transition planning with teachers explaining that their dedicated in-school professional learning time, should be used to greater effect to work collectively to upskill in the area. Many principals, teachers and parents suggested that the school was in need of a dedicated on-site career guidance teacher, aligning with much of the Government's policy commitments already described (Table 35).

For students in Phase Two, their knowledge of PSOs was found to be very limited and was influenced by the settings they were brought to for pre-transition visits by parents and interested teachers. For some students, invited speakers from local services also played an important role in understanding their setting as an option. Students were also influenced by observing where past graduates have attended, with students having a general understanding that most graduates all transition to the same post-school service. Without sufficient information, knowledge and skills to challenge these normative pathways, students will continue to be influenced by the pathways that they see their peers attending and where the teachers are selecting or advising parents to bring students on pre-transition visits.

This study demonstrates that the lack of awareness of the range of PSOs for students with SEND persists despite numerous government strategies (Table 35) and initiatives that aim to address it. The CES Phase One Action Plan 2015-2018 stated that its goal was to “raise awareness of training and employment options among school-goers via parents, schools, occupational guidance officers and guidance counsellors” and aimed to “raise expectations that education and employment are real post-school options” (Action 1.2 a). Following this, the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2022 also aimed to “assist persons with disabilities by providing proper guidance concerning further education, training and career options” (Action 46, p.26). This strategy lapsed in 2022 with the publication of a revised strategy which “provides a whole-of-government framework for the advancement of rights” expected in Summer 2025 (Minister Naughton, 2025). Despite the lack of practical policy support, schools must ensure that they are promoting a broad range of PSOs which represent the aspirations of the students to ensure that students do not continue to be pigeon-holed into traditional routes.

Further evidence of the continued progression from special school to health funded day services is seen in recent figures from the Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026 in Ireland. This states that approximately 20,000 adults in Ireland currently attend health funded adult day services with the prediction that an additional 1,200 places per year will be required for future school leavers (Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026). This Action Plan outlines as one of its strategic goals to provide “supports to pursue education and employment

ambitions, as an alternative to entering day services for life” (p.12), further demonstrating that once young people enter the HFDS system, they remain there for life, with little opportunity to move into education or employment.

Parents in this study, similarly to those in Scanlon and Doyle (2021), continually expressed their dissatisfaction with the HFDS as an option and wanted to pursue more meaningful options for their child. They were lacking in knowledge of PSOs and described themselves as “hungry for information” (Sally’s mother). Parents held high aspirations for their children and as already noted, displayed a ‘whatever it takes’ attitude to supporting them in realising their goals. Teachers described parents as being in the dark and stated that “whatever amount we know, they know less and that’s a problem” (Ms. Taylor) as it results in both parents and teachers’ feeling disempowered. Parents typically felt that it was their role to source the information yet indicated that they did not know how to access the information, a finding which is consistent with Cavendish et al. (2020) and Lo and Bui (2020). One parent commented about the inequality of information that is available. Sally’s mother gave the examples of how post-school transition is portrayed and discussed in the media for neurotypical students graduating in normative pathways of Leaving Certificate to College. Yet, the same cannot be said for PSOs for students with SEND.

Additionally, for transition into the workforce, parents and teachers described how they were unsure of the pathways into employment outside of having local personal and community contacts. This highlights the importance of both teacher and parental social capital as a facilitator of social inclusion (Simplican et al., 2015). If parents do not have the contacts or local resources, access to the community for employment or development of employability skills becomes more limited. If teachers do not have access to their school communities to develop relationships for work experiences, accessing the Community layer of social inclusion becomes challenging (Simplican et al., 2015).

It is noteworthy that in this study, parents viewed their role as the one to source this information, use their social capital and progress PSOs themselves. Yet for the participating parents who had children progress through the mainstream education system, they clearly articulated how the guidance counsellor supported their child in identifying PSOs. While one parent noted that the

recommendation from the counsellor was not in any way aligned with their child's interests, she commented that the recommendation in itself started a conversation about alternative options.

Despite the Government's attention to the lack of guidance counselling available in special schools, the current provision for students with SEND within mainstream schools is also found to be severely lacking. The need for inclusive guidance supporting all students within post-primary schools is clear, particularly against the backdrop of the significant increases in special class provision. Recent Irish studies demonstrate that for students in special classes (Carolan & Slattery, 2025) and students with SEND in the mainstream classes of post-primary schools (Banks et al., 2022), guidance provision was ad-hoc with a lack of clarity roles between the class teacher, SENCO and guidance counsellor. Additionally, a lack of professional learning opportunities available to guidance counsellors specifically on transition pathways for students with SEND was noted (Banks et al., 2022) supporting earlier findings (McGuckin et al., 2013) and further demonstrating a lack of overall progress in the past decade despite the policy commitments.

As cited by the EU Strategy 2021-2030, guidance counselling will be important in supporting the realisation of education and training goals and translate them into increased participation in labour markets (Union of Equality, 2021-2030). This needs to be in the form of provision of guidance counsellors to special schools or specific and tailored TPL for teachers in special schools. Despite new initiatives and government funding for additional pathways into universities through the PATH-4 programme, this information is not being accessed by schools, families and students. This again highlights that despite the range of government assurances of increasing employment and education rates for people with disabilities, more practical changes to realise those goals need to be implemented on the frontline within schools.

## 6.5 What are the existing transition preparation and transition planning practices in Irish special schools?

This research drew upon the Kohler's Taxonomy (2016), a framework of evidenced-based and promising practices for use by schools and practitioners. It was designed to support the realisation of post-school goals for students with SEND. The Taxonomy framework supports schools and stakeholders to identify their current best practices in transition planning and reflect upon areas of their practice that require attention to ensure that it is supportive to the students and their families (Kohler et al., 2017).

Through the Phase One survey and the in-depth qualitative data generation in the Phase Two school, the range of transition preparation practices that currently exist in Irish special schools was identified, along with areas that school stakeholders wish to address and will be discussed under the headings provided by the Kohler et al. (2016) framework.

### Student-focused planning, program structures and student development

Student focused planning should map out the big picture for the students' life post-school, identifying the steps and practices that are required to be put in place to achieve that goal (Kohler et al., 2017) thus enabling them to achieve full and equal participation in society (UNCRPD, 2006). It should equip students with skills necessary to access their right to education and employment (UNCRPD, 2006) and work towards meeting the students own life aspirations.

#### *Student-focused planning & development*

For students in mainstream schools, the planning of pathways occurs right throughout their post-primary years (Banks et al., 2022). Activities in mainstream post-primary schools include choosing subjects for Senior Cycle that would align best with their strengths and interests, attending open days for various post-school settings and engaging with a guidance counsellor (Smyth et al., 2011). Individualised support from a guidance counsellor also supports students in understanding entry requirements, subject choice and subject level, which some research has argued should occur even earlier in their academic journey (Smyth et al., 2011).

Still, what is being described here is a level of choice and engagement of student voice. The same level of planning or opportunities for choice are not available for students in special schools. Students in this study explained their lack of consultation on day-to-day matters within the school and were not included or consulted in education planning. Their explicit requests to access different curricular levels were denied. Nonetheless, schools in Phase One provided some excellent examples of effective student-focused planning, with high levels of indication that they consult students on post-school goals and select appropriate curricula to support transition planning. In contrast, Phase Two illustrates that school culture can significantly impact transition preparation practices regarding how teachers dedicate their teaching time. The Phase Two school demonstrated a value on certification with teachers describing the culture as one of supporting all students to graduate with some level of certification. While positive in principle, they described the tension they experience as a result of this focus on certification only.

Within the Phase Two school, teachers indicated that current practice of progression pathways through the school was based on various factors, but predominantly the perception of ability of the students once they entered Junior Cycle. Students were allocated to Junior Cycle Level 3 or Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) and then progressed in Senior Cycle to a two-year programme of QQI Level 1, 2 or 3, with those perceived as most capable, accessing LCA. They indicated that due to the lack of focus on student centred planning, that for some students, they access higher level curricula such as LCA because of a vacancy in a class or because they are perceived to be a well-behaved student. Teachers indicated that decisions were made for logistics reasons rather than based on information about post-school goals. Another teacher queried the value of their current approach, pondering how many graduates were actually using their LCA qualification post-graduation.

While a focus on certification within the school culture can be positive as it should support students should they wish to progress to further and higher education, building on their current level of qualification of QQI or LCA. However, within this school setting, participants suggest that it is at the cost of the development of the other key skills required for full participation in society such as basic living, social and communication skills.

Within mainstream schools, most students in Ireland take the optional Transition Year (TY) programme post Junior Cycle. Upon completion, they have an option of progressing to leaving certificate or to leave school and enter employment (DE, 2022). The TY programme “provides students with an opportunity to experience a wide range of educational activities, including work experience, over the course of a year that is free from formal examinations” (DE, 2022, p.1). Therefore, most students in post-primary schools engage in a three-year Senior Cycle programme. In contrast to a student in mainstream school, students in special schools are not afforded the same space and time within their academic journey resulting in teachers having only two years of Senior Cycle to achieve certification and develop the skills alongside it. Teachers in this study noted that they felt an obligation to achieve certification with one teacher stating, “I’m here to get them there, whatever their mark in the Leaving cert, and if I don’t do that, we’re all a failure like you know what I mean, and that’s not the way it should be” (Tim’s teacher).

This denial of a universal access to the third year of Senior Cycle is a result of the problematic issue of special schools being designated as primary schools (Banks, 2024). The current Rules for National Schools (1965) state that special schools, as designated primary schools, cater for students from age four until the end of the school year in which they turn 18 (Rule 64). An exemption to Rule 64 (1) is permitted under certain circumstances, allowing a student to avail of an additional academic year. Schools must apply annually for any student they wish to enrol for an additional year beyond their 18th birthday, and the criteria for approval from the DE stipulate that the student must be:

- “pursuing a course leading to accreditation on the National Qualifications Framework (e.g. Junior Certificate/Leaving Certificate Applied/QQI Level 3);
- the student requires one additional year in order to complete their course;
- retaining the student in the school for another school year will not prevent a younger pupil being enrolled there and;
- plans are in place to transition the student to a post-school setting at the end of the academic school year”. (Minister Moynihan, 2025)

Recent requests as part of this study to the statistics section of the DE (Nov 2024; Feb 2025; May 2025) for current numbers of students in special schools that have applied, been granted and refused an additional year under the exemption,

were not fulfilled. Without recent statistics, it is unknown how many students are afforded or denied this opportunity. Within this study, it was also unclear in the Phase Two school if parents were aware of the option of the exemption with teachers citing that the decision to apply for the additional year was made by the principal in consultation with the teacher. Additionally, it is concerning that the criteria for which a student's application can be considered is the attainment of a level three qualification, as aligned with the NFQ. Given recent advances in the provision of curricula for students with intellectual disabilities at level 1 and level 2 of the NFQ at Junior Cycle, the rationale for this exemption at level three achievement only is worrisome, outdated and does not reflect the current educational landscape at post-primary curricular level.

This outdated practice again places the emphasis on qualifications, rather than preparation for life as described in the Senior Cycle Programme Statement (DE, 2024) and the EPSEN Act (2004). It illustrates the unequal value being placed on academic attainment and disadvantages students who would likely benefit from an additional year of development of their personal, social and independent living skills. It is also denying them the same rights as those afforded to students with and without special educational needs in mainstream post-primary schools, where there is no obligation to have completed schooling by the age of 18. Therefore, there could be a case for indirect discrimination under Article 3 S1 (a) of the Equality Act 2004 (McLafferty, 2016).

These equality concerns were also shared by Deputy Eoghan Kenny in March 2025, when he questioned Minister Moynihan on whether this practice presents a barrier to students with moderate or severe/profound intellectual disability in accessing programmes such as Transition Year in special schools, akin to their counterparts accessing mainstream education. He further queried if legal advice had been sought from the Attorney General regarding the legality of such restrictive criteria, specifically if it is a denial of a student's rights under equality legislation. However, the response provided did not directly address the question posed (Minister Moynihan, 2025).

Similar concerns were raised in other Irish research, where special school principals criticised the lack of flexibility with this exemption to Rule 64 (1), particularly for students who present with more complex needs who the school

deemed as “not ready to leave” (McCoy et al., 2025, p.80). Participants in that study identified the significant impact the Covid-19 Pandemic had on many of its students, with prolonged school closures which affected students’ progress and development. Supporting this, parents and teachers in both phases of this current study also identified the negative impact that Covid-19 Pandemic had on the students, with one parent suggesting that an additional year should have been provided to her son due to the “detrimental” impact it had on his education (Ben’s mother). However, due to the rigidity in the existing exemption criteria (McCoy et al., 2025) her request was denied as her son was deemed unsuitable for a level three curricula by his teacher.

At a policy level, this has been noted in the recent review of EPSSEN (DEY, 2025b) as a rights-based issue. Under recommendation six, “rights of the child”, the report outlined that:

“the age requirements for children with Special Educational Needs in special schools should be reevaluated...to address the anomaly that students in special schools are at present only entitled to statutory education to the age of eighteen, whereas this limit does not apply to students in mainstream schools” (p.95).

This recommendation indicates that the current practice is not in line with equal entitlement to education and therefore any future iterations of the EPSSEN Act (2004) should legislate for that change. However, this may be challenging to achieve given the significant resource implications of allowing all students in special schools to remain beyond 18 years of age. It would result in a requirement for substantial financial investment from the Government as well as sourcing suitably qualified teachers, given the current nationwide teacher shortage.

#### *Programme structures: Curricula*

Phase One illustrated positive practices regarding programme structures and curricular provision in special schools. Principals in the survey rated that transition practices were largely embedded within their school, with assessment and personal skill development the most common practice, followed by independent living skills and academic skill development. It was also noted that high levels of consultation with students and carefully selecting curricula that would support transition planning were well established in the Phase One schools. Interestingly, many of those schools offered the L1LP and L2LP to their

Senior Cycle students which are student-centred curricula contrastingly to certification focused curricula.

By adopting those curricula, it could be argued that those schools were placing a fundamental value on the development of those key life skills and meaningful learning, preparing them to access their rights to participate in society. It is interesting to note, that for almost half of Phase One schools, they had developed their own school-based curricula for Senior Cycle, opting to place their value on life skills rather than certification. This illustrates the gaps in curricular provision that have developed in recent decades which has resulted in high levels of curricular autonomy within special schools, who have even employed curricula from other jurisdictions in the absence of a DE approved programme of learning.

In comparison, the Phase Two school retained a focus on QQI and LCA certification, leading parents and teachers questioning the schools value system, viewing it as “too academic” in its focus. Concerns were shared about how students would cope with the adjustment to life after school due to the lack of emphasis on life skill development within existing school practice and within the current Senior Cycle structure. Interestingly, concerns regarding curricular development were also noted by McCoy et al. (2025), which may imply that the current curricula available at post-primary does not adequately support and prepare students to develop essential life skills to enable them to access their rights to a full and equal enjoyment of Article 1 of UNCRPD (2006). In support of this, the recent review of the EPSEN Act (DEY, 2025b) stated that only 13% of school staff agreed that the goal to prepare young people to “leave school with the skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity, in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives” was being achieved (DEY, 2025). This shows that considerations for transition preparation activities, including identifying a suitable curriculum, learning and skill development pathway are not being considered in special schools. In order to live independently, students in Phase Two described the life skills that they had already acquired such as cooking, personal care and independent travel, and others that they wished to continually develop to support them in the next phase of their lives. It is acknowledged that these skills

are necessary for successful transition into employment (Almalki & Alqahtani, 2021).

Teachers frequently gave examples of the tension between curriculum and life skills, such as teaching concepts like trigonometry versus making a cup of tea. Their comments about school culture and climate of the preference for “being in your class and doing your work” (Lisa’s teacher) permeated through the data generation sessions and appeared to be a significant perceived barrier to progressing their vision for greater emphasis on life skills. It also presented a barrier to teachers being responsive to the needs of the students and hindered their autonomy to tailor learning experiences for students, an issue that has previously been observed in mainstream schools (McGuckin et al., 2013).

#### *Programme structures: Work experience*

Work experience is frequently cited in the literature as a practical and essential support for students transitioning into the workplace and for the development of employability skills (Scanlon and Doyle, 2021) and is common practice in mainstream schools (McCoy et al., 2025; O’Brien et al., 2011). Aligning with government policy to “seek to support all individuals including those who are marginalised or have disabilities to access person-centred opportunities such as work-shadowing or work-experience” (Action 3.4, p.5), progress has been made in the consideration of work experience within post-primary curricula.

Building on the foundation of learning units “preparing for work” and “being part of a community” at Junior Cycle L1L2, the new Senior Cycle L1L2 Programme Statement (2024) outlines that:

“Work experience is an important aspect of Senior Cycle education as it supports many students on their progression pathways after Senior Cycle. Work experience is encouraged for students but is most beneficial when it is appropriate and meaningful for the student’s needs, interests and ambitions.” (p.14)

This statement provides schools with a solid foundation upon which to establish their own work experience practices that are suitable for their cohort of students, supported by members of their school and wider community. Despite this, it is not universally established in special schools in Ireland (O’Brien et al., 2011).

While it may be a central feature of transition preparation in some schools (McCoy et al., 2025), it was noted in Phase One of this study that only 35% of principals and 21% of teachers indicated that it was embedded within their school. In the Phase Two school, it was facilitated but only for those students accessing QQI Level 3 or LCA, therefore it is not accessible to all students. This demonstrates the unequal opportunities being afforded to students, even within the same school. Teachers in Phase Two cited the pressure within their school culture to achieve certification for students was a barrier to accessing work experience. Even for students who accessed work experience, the teacher's role was minimal, citing lack of time and opportunity to visit potential workplace settings, build relationships and connections with local businesses. While the responsibility for organising a work experience fell solely on the parents, teachers saw low parental motivation, lack of personal resources and contacts as barriers to successful work experience outcomes. As a result, similarly to the approach to transition planning, teachers supported some students in sourcing work experiences if their parents were unwilling or unable.

Similarly to sourcing post-school placements, parental social capital (Simplican et al. 2015) is viewed as a major contributing factor in the success or failure of accessing work experience. This results in unequal access to skill development opportunities which support students to enter into and retain employment (Article 27, UNCRPD, 2006) and enjoy full participation in society (Article 1, UNCRPD, 2006).

This study has already demonstrated that students all shared an aspiration to be employed, however, they experienced varying levels of preparation to achieve this aspiration within the one school setting. Students, parents and teachers noted their dissatisfaction with this current practice which was embedded in their school culture. They provided multiple examples of the benefits of work experience from gaining independence, self-advocacy skills and some gaining part-time employment as a result. However, without sufficient guidelines or policies in place to support a more inclusive system of work experience for all students, teachers in the Phase Two school, failed to see a way forward.

Students too cited the inequality of opportunity available to them and felt aggrieved by the selectivity of access to work experience, something that was

not unique to this study (Davies and Beamish, 2009). Some students that had attended the school for many years described examples of historical practice of work experience being facilitated within the school setting, for example, working alongside a school caretaker and longed for such an opportunity. However, in-school work experiences were no longer facilitated. In the focus group, two school leavers, Sam and Kit, discussed the inequality that permeated Senior Cycle, when Kit had engaged in five work experiences since Junior Cycle and Sam had never been offered the opportunity to do so. It is concerning that within a special school, whose school culture should be the epitome of inclusive values and inclusive practice, that such exclusion exists, particularly in the context of the UNCRPD (2006).

Teachers, students and parents unanimously agreed that for those that accessed it, work experience was most valuable when aligned with the students' interest areas and were critical of its value when it is sourced for reasons of convenience rather than preference. While it is positive that work experience has been noted as an important practice in the new Programme Statement (2024), guidance or practical support have not been provided to schools on how best to facilitate this nor is there any current evidence that this will be advanced or developed in the very near future. Current indications from the DE suggest that schools will have the autonomy to choose to offer the Senior Cycle Programme at level one and level two. While this autonomy may be welcomed, particularly by schools who created their own Senior Cycle programme, it may further exacerbate the variation in practice within and between special schools. This may result in students receiving different levels of preparation for life beyond school and impact negatively upon their ability to access their rights to further education and employment, as well as participation in society.

## Family Engagement

This study has already demonstrated that transition planning within special schools, and in particular in the Phase Two school, was occurring on an ad-hoc basis, with teachers viewing parental social capital (Simplican et al. 2015) as a determining factor on whether teachers would engage in transition planning for their students.

Parents play a key role in supporting the realisation of post-school dreams and aspirations and should be engaged in all aspects of transition preparation and transition planning (Carolan & Slattery, 2025; Mogensen et al., 2022). Teachers in Phase One viewed parental advocacy as essential for successful transition planning and most teachers agreed that parents play an active role in it. As already highlighted, this study demonstrated that parents lack the required knowledge to lead the transition planning process.

Best practice in transition planning is for it to occur early in the student's post-primary education, and in many jurisdictions no later than 14 years of age (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018;2022). Much of the literature illustrates that this is not the case (Carolan & Slattery, 2025) with this study illustrating that it typically occurs in the final six to eighteen months, which parents and teachers felt was too late. This study demonstrates that transition planning meetings typically do not occur, and post-school transition is only sometimes discussed at parent-teacher meetings. This has led to anxious parents who are waiting for the school to commence the transition planning process, despite the clear lack of structures and frameworks available to schools to do so. Teachers described the parents as "completely in the dark" (Lisa's Teacher) echoing much of the literature on parental involvement which shows that parents are not invited to participate in the process (Almalki, 2021) and left feeling unprepared and stressed (Ellman et al., 2020).

With regard to transition preparation, parents in Phase Two described the lack of consultation regarding the curriculum their child was accessing, with one parent's request for their child to access a higher-level curricula being denied. Another parent was unaware of the opportunities or limitations of a QQI level two for her daughter in terms of progression routes until she had already commenced the course. This parent had resorted to exploring options such as hiring a private tutor to supplement this qualification to ensure that it didn't create access barriers for her in the future. This lack of information disempowers parents to make informed decisions or to support their child in choosing PSOs. The lack of access to a suitably qualified professional within special schools to advise and support parents is a significant barrier to supporting young people in realising their rights to education, employment and participation in society under UNCRPD (2006).

## Interagency Collaboration

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy 2015-2024 set out to ensure interagency cooperation, seamless support and a coordinated policy approach to post-school transition. Following this, the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2022 identified the need to coordinate government policy to ensure effective transitions. Additionally, the report on the review of EPSEN (DEY, 2025b) recommended the need for coherent transition policies across government departments.

Despite the multitude of policy commitments, participants in this study noted that the coordinated provision of services before, during and after transition were an area of concern. A notable barrier to interagency collaboration frequently cited by participants were the delays to the allocation of placements by the OGO to new settings. Principals in the survey indicated that just weeks prior to the end of the academic year in May/June 2022, 27 students were still awaiting confirmation that a placement had been sourced for them by the HSE OGO. Participants consistently cited the challenge of placement delay and provided examples of students waiting more than six months post-graduation without a placement, something which was also noted by parents (Raghavan et al., 2013) and principals (McCoy et al., 2025). Therefore, while visits to post-school settings are the common transition planning practice in special schools (O'Brien et al., 2011), teachers criticised the current system, questioning how best practice in transition can be facilitated without knowledge of where the student will transition to. Their current use of evidence-based practices such as using visual supports, social stories, etc. were redundant as they had no information to prepare the student.

Once a placement had been identified, teachers reported the absence of a formal structure for sharing information, supporting more recent findings from Carolan & Slattery (2025) who noted there was “no systematic method of sharing student information with [Post Leaving Certificate] PLC providers prior to students leaving school” (p.13). This issue had previously been noted by O'Brien et al. (2011) with a recommendation that a formal avenue for such request, explicitly supported by the DE would be required. Teachers also provided examples of some post-school settings not interested in receiving student files, with teachers describing the frustration that having built up the

knowledge of student strengths and preferences that this information was not perceived as valuable by the new setting. This demonstrates a failed implementation of policy initiatives across education settings, where key messages of upholding students' rights to access further and higher education and employment (UNCRPD, 2006) are being ignored by some providers.

Availability of, and access to appropriate services such as disability support services are key community level conditions with the Simplican et al. (2015) framework for social inclusion. Parents consistently cited challenges in accessing health and educational services, such as therapeutic and multi-disciplinary support services and from their experience to date, described them as abysmal. They stated that the overall services did not have the required resources, staffing or skillsets. They feared that once their child left the school, it would become a "black chasm", a "Bermuda triangle" (Lisa's father) as they did not feel that the HSE disability services would play any role in the transition or be in a position to support their child after they left school. Similar issues were highlighted in a previous Irish study where parents viewed the lack of continuity between school-aged and adult disability services as the biggest barrier in managing transition (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018).

The experiences of these parents represent a significant challenge with the current collaboration between the education and health system in Ireland. Disability service provision to students in special schools in Ireland underwent a substantial change in 2020 under the Progressing Disability Services (PDS) Model. In reality, the new model has been regressive rather than progressive with the withdrawal of therapeutic and multi-disciplinary services to many students. Persistent failures to meet recruitment targets for specialist positions such as occupational therapist, speech and language therapists and physiotherapists have resulted in none of the 16 special schools announced in the pilot scheme receiving services (Hussey, 2024). As a result of mounting pressure from parents, many politicians acknowledged the failures of the PDS model, with the Tánaiste at the time, Micheál Martin stating that it "has not worked, in my view, and has resulted in the decline in therapists from special schools" (McGlynn, 2024). The HSE apologised to families for the delays in access to vital services, citing recruitment issues, a growth in the number of children with complex needs and a greater demand for services due to increased

referrals (Hussey, 2024). The failure of this pilot has further compounded parental fears regarding continued access to services beyond school-going age.

Links with community and business partnerships have been found to be highly effective in supporting students in gaining skills and facilitate transition to the workplace (Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021). Teachers in this study felt that developing community links with businesses was essential for effective community participation, which is the central conceptual goal of the Simplican et al. (2015) framework. Petry et al. (2005) identified that community involvement can increase a person's social network and interpersonal relationships can increase their access to and engagement with their community. This increased social engagement can result in increased respect and trust and increased social capital for people with SEND (Simplican et al., 2015). Community engagement in this study was exemplified by existing practices such as visiting the local library and local businesses, however teachers indicated that they were typically only permitted by the principal, when the visit was directly linked to a specific curricular task in the Leaving Certificate Applied Curriculum (LCA). Teachers spoke fondly of historic practices of links with business in their locality which resulted in part-time employment for some students and the development of social and independent living skills for many others. However, they cited the Covid-19 pandemic, increased price of transport, as well as dwindling resources such as SNA support for school outings into the community as challenges, echoing findings from McCoy et al. (2025). A school culture of value placed on "being in your classroom and doing your work" (Lisa's Teacher) affected their autonomy to engage in meaningful learning in their community.

## 6.6 What do special schools require in order to engage in more effective transition preparation and transition planning?

### Legislation

This study has illustrated that while special schools demonstrate some effective transition practices, aligned with Kohler's Taxonomy (2016) which help prepare students to access and participate in society (UNCRPD, 2006), substantial legislative and practical implementation changes are required to ensure that all students equally access transition preparation and transition planning.

Table 35 has illustrated the breadth of commitments already made by successive Irish Governments to make the required changes to existing practice. While Ireland is lacking domestic legislation, it already has an obligation under the UNCRPD (2006), UNCRC (1989) and UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (2015) to provide an inclusive education system and uphold the rights of people with disabilities for education, employment and societal participation. These international agreements could act as a starting point for the creation of domestic legislation, which should give legal footing to the range of policy commitments already described.

Aligning with the socio-political layer of the Simplican et al. (2015) framework for social inclusion, policy and legislation play a vital overarching role in the future direction of education and inclusive culture in Ireland. It has already been demonstrated through the EPSEN Act (2004) that failure to enact and fully commence education legislation has led to the development of ad-hoc practices. Future legislation must learn from this failed implementation to ensure that robust domestic legislation is swiftly commenced and enacted. This undoubtedly will require substantial financial investment on the part of the Government to ensure that schools are adequately resourced to fulfil their obligations within any new legislation. The litany of current and previous government commitments as illustrated in Table 35, demonstrates that without a solid domestic legislative foundation and consequences for inaction, the Government will likely remain in a perpetual cycle of frameworks, policies and initiatives, without any meaningful or impactful effect.

Ireland has an opportunity to embed transition planning within the future revision to the EPSEN Act. It would be essential that if it was included, provisions for it remain distinct and separate to any requirement to create IEPs. This study has demonstrated that students' aspirations are broader than education and employment and therefore planning for their future requires a broader framework to enable and engage in transition planning. While it could be catered for within a revision to EPSEN, it would need to be specific and distinct from IEPs, relating solely to transition preparation and transition planning.

As identified in the review of EPSEN (DEY, 2025b), the voice of the student must be captured and meaningfully incorporated into decision making. Alternatively, and akin to some other developed countries, Ireland could develop separate legislation for transition preparation and transition planning, which should clearly set out timelines for its commencement, and aligning with best practice should begin from age 13. Regardless of the future format of the legislation, it will need to be fully supported by adequate resourcing in terms of qualified personnel, teacher professional learning, supports for schools, continued flexibility within curricular offerings, community level supports and supports for employers.

Within the context of upholding the rights of people with disabilities, revisions to other existing legal frameworks are required to ensure equality legislation is being fully adhered to. As already discussed, the current designation of special schools as primary schools has resulted in inequality of opportunity in accessing the post-primary school years, including Transition Year. Opposition politicians are already challenging the Government, asking them to demonstrate that their current practices are aligned with existing Equality legislation, while the review of the EPSEN Act (Department of Education and Youth [DEY], 2025b) also identified the classification of special schools as primary, resulting in the upper age limit anomaly, is not in line with the rights of the child.

## Curricula

Participants in both phases of this study illustrated the need for a range of curricula that were specifically aligned with the development of a range of skills that would meaningfully and progressively support the transition to adult life. This included the development of life skills, work readiness skills, communication and personal and social development skills.

The students in this study demonstrated a desire to enter the workforce post-school, accessing their rights under Article 27 (UNCRPD, 2006). However, the lack of development of workplace skills at school level is a barrier. Provisions for the development of such skills have begun to emerge in Junior Cycle L2LP curricula through the priority learning unit “Preparing for Work”, however there are no equivalent modules available at Senior Cycle L1LP/L2LP to date. Comparatively, there are some modules with QQI and LCA which directly support preparation for employment such as the “Vocational Preparation and Guidance” module in LCA.

Additionally, the current ad-hoc access to work experience within special schools illustrated in this study, results in inequality of opportunities for students. Work experience should be accessible to all students and schools should be provided with the flexibility to provide various permutations of workplace-based learning depending on the needs and profile of their school and their student. While the Phase Two school placed an emphasis on certification, rather than life skill development, future iterations of curricula should promote and provide for a balanced curricula which recognises the value of workplace-based learning and aim to combine this with certification. If Ireland is to meet its labour force targets for people with disabilities, the emphasis on life skills and work-based skills will need to shift from the current certification focus. While much investment has occurred at mainstream post-primary level regarding the promotion of apprenticeships and non-traditional post-school options, combined with the opportunities to develop work-based skills in Transition Year, the same progress has not been made in the special school sector.

At present, special schools are not supported by the DE to develop work experience practices, despite encouraging mentions of it within the new Senior

Cycle Programme Statement (DE, 2024). There is a dearth of information, policy templates or guidelines for its implementation. Additionally, more practical supports will be required by employers to ensure that attitudes at community level of Simpican's (2015) framework fully support inclusive workplaces, further supporting the realisation of the rights of people with disabilities under Article 27 of the UNCRPD (2006).

## Transition programme

Participants in this study expressed the need for a dedicated transition programme to follow, particularly in the absence of the provision of guidance counsellors to special schools. This research demonstrated that class teachers in special schools are taking on the role of transition planning, without the required qualifications or supports. This concurs with previous Irish research (Indecon, 2019) and despite the multitude of government commitments (Table 35) to either provide TPL to special class teachers or allocate guidance counsellors to special schools, these commitments have yet to be honoured. As a result, teachers continue to play a leading role in transition planning.

As a result of the lack of supports provided to them, they cited the immediate need for a dedicated transition programme to follow. One such model explored in an Irish study of the Career Employment Facilitator (CEF) through the Walk Peer programme could be particularly useful framework for special schools in Ireland (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018). As a result of the initial success of the programme as evaluated by Scanlon and Doyle (2018), in 2023 the DE funded an expansion of the programme on a pilot basis to three mainstream and seven special schools in Ireland as one of two pilot programmes aimed to address this issue. It is anticipated that outcomes from the model will demonstrate the immediate necessity for supporting transition from school through the use of a dedicated programme supported by a CEF and the DE aims to use this evaluation to inform future policy advice in the area. This CEF role would also act as a link person between schools and employers, something that was identified in this study that would act as a support in developing collaborative practices.

Teachers across both phases indicated that in order to engage in more effective transition planning, dedicated and protected time would need to be made available to do so. Teachers in Phase Two welcomed the Mosaic approach and

expressed a desire to engage in this type of planning with their students, if they were accommodated with time to do so. They also identified getting out into their community, building up professional networks with businesses and visiting the range of post-school settings as a priority to stop the cycle of normative pathways. Most teachers in Phase Two had never visited the main post-school settings that their students typically transition to. Supporting this, many principals cited logistical challenges of releasing teachers from their classes to accompany students on work sampling or visits to post-school settings. Practical supports in the form of substitute cover for teachers during this essential transition time would be a welcome support from special school principals, along with additional human resources in the form of SNAs to accompany students who may require additional support to work placements or post-school settings.

One way in which the DE have attempted to provide dedicated time for transition planning in special schools is through another pilot programme, commenced in late 2022. In collaboration with the NCSE, the Comprehensive Employment Strategy Transitions Programme Pilot supported 20 mainstream post-primary and special schools in Dublin and Galway in year one and 41 special schools in year two. The support was in the form 12 hours per school in year one and six hours per school in year two for a lead teacher to engage in skills audits, identify skill gaps and supports that students require to transition, along with the development of an individual transition plan for each student. External evaluation of both pilot programmes will inform future directions of the provision of supports to schools (DE, 2022; Minister Naughton, 2024).

### Collaboration and information sharing

Interagency collaboration is a key feature of Kohler's Taxonomy (2016) and in order for there to be more effective collaboration, teachers and principals in this study cited a significant challenge of the delay in the allocation of placements for students transitioning from special school. They indicated that this greatly impacted their ability to meaningfully prepare the student and their family on what to expect after they graduated from school. Multiple examples were provided by teachers and principals in this study of cases where students were often left without a placement for months into the new academic year. Similar findings were by described by McCoy et al. (2025), therefore this normative

practice cannot continue, as without the support of the school, families and students will be left to navigate this complex transition alone.

As described in the Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026 and in the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance 2024-2030, the HSE Occupational Guidance Officer will play a key role in raising the aspirations of school leavers to pursue education and employment options, therefore there should be a noticeable move away from a health funded day service model of provision. As of yet, it is not clear in which way this will happen. However, given that it is currently in the Programme for Government (2025), monumental change will be required to provide students from special schools with autonomy and choice.

A similar pattern of a desire for increased information, collaboration and engagement with parents was seen in this study by responding teachers and parents, mirroring findings from Lo and Bui (2020). Parents suggested information evenings, clear timelines for transition and opportunities to plan for more timely transition, something that was also noted by Wilcox et al. (2019). They wish for their children to fulfil their aspirations and access mainstream education and employment, and when provided with the information and resources, parents demonstrated a determination to support their children's transition goals.

Students in this study indicated that they would like more information about available post-school placements, they wished to visit a range of post-school settings and expected an increased level of equity in terms of access to work experiences when in Senior Cycle. Teachers in Phase Two also indicated that a policy framework to support an equitable work experience model would be a practical and welcomed support to them. They also indicated a desire for greater collaboration between Senior Cycle teachers in the school, to ensure that class allocation for students was more in line with their transition goals than for logistical reasons. This was also echoed by parents, who wished to have more information about the curriculum their child was accessing, but also that there would be teacher continuity for the Senior Cycle years which would allow for greater transition planning.

## School culture

Simplican et al. (2015) describe the organisational layer of their social inclusion model as one that can either affirm inclusion, thereby “intensifying the effectiveness of individual and interpersonal conditions” or constrain inclusion, limiting the effectiveness of the other layers (p.26). Inclusive school ethos is also essential for effective transition planning (Aston et al., 2021). It has been clearly demonstrated within this study that the ethos and culture of a school can be a determining factor in the approach to inclusive education. While the schools in Phase One demonstrated some highly inclusive practices related to transition preparation, planning and fostering of student voice, the practices in the Phase Two school appear to be less developed owing in part to a different school culture.

A school culture of high student aspirations observed in three quarters of responding schools in Phase One, contrasts with perspectives shared by teachers in Phase Two who felt constrained by school culture, lack of autonomy and lack of knowledge of the range of post-school options. For schools to become effective enablers of social inclusion, a shift in culture and ethos will be required.

## A clear vision for support

A challenge as described in this study, is the lack of the provision of suitably qualified professionals to lead transition planning within special schools. Table 35 highlights the litany of policy commitments, however, there is a stark lack of coherence and strategic direction illustrated across the range of promises, which range from upskilling existing class teachers to providing guidance counsellors to special schools. Access to high quality tailored guidance counselling is required for highly effective transition planning (McCoy et al., 2025; Shevlin et al., 2020). While guidance counsellors are available to students in mainstream post-primary schools, a lack of specific knowledge of post-school pathways for students with SEND (McGuckin et al., 2013), a lack of timely development of transition planning (Shevlin et al., 2020) and role ambiguity (Aston et al., 2021) impact upon its value for the student. Therefore, if guidance counsellors were provided to special schools without the required supports, similar issues would likely prevail. Alternatively, if class teachers in special schools were allocated

dedicated time to engage in transition planning, substantial investment would be required in order to upskill them in best practice in guidance provision.

In order for the Government to honour their policy commitments, a robust and comprehensive strategic plan for future guidance provision to all students with SEND regardless of school setting will be required. Models of inclusive guidance are already being established in other developed countries. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), responsible for the development of vocational and education training policies in Europe, aims to support its Member States to “develop the right policies to provide the right skills” (CEDEFOP, n.d.). A Polish project established under CEDEFOP, called “Careers Without Barriers” aims to empower students through targeted career planning. This is achieved through training of teachers and career counsellors to provide inclusive and tailored guidance counselling, supporting schools to facilitate inclusive teaching and learning strategies and the provision of resources to support informed decision making (CEDEFOP, 15 April 2025).

Upon conclusion of the current pilot projects from WALK PEER and the NCSE, along with the ongoing revision to the EPSEN Act and in line with Ireland’s commitments to UNCRPD (2006), the Government must consider how legislation, policy and research can support the provision of inclusive guidance to all students with SEND in the future.

## 7 Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This chapter presents the main conclusions of this study, the limitations of the research, as well as the recommendations and implications for practice, policy and research. The research centred around gathering perspectives of the key stakeholders involved in post-school transition. For the purposes of this study, the key stakeholders were Senior Cycle students in special schools in the Republic of Ireland, their parents, their teachers, and their principals. The overarching aim of this research was to answer the following questions:

*A) What are the views and experiences of students, parents, teachers, and principals in Irish special schools of transition preparation and transition planning*

*B) How can the teacher support the development of autonomous post-school choices?*

In aiming to answer these overarching questions, five sub-questions guided the study development:

1. What are the aspirations of Senior Cycle students with an intellectual disability in a special school for life post-school?
2. How informed are students with an intellectual disability, their parents and their teachers on the range of post-school options?
3. How do Senior Cycle class teachers in special schools view their role in transition preparation and transition planning and what factors impact on their role?
4. What are the existing transition preparation and transition planning practices in Irish special schools?
5. What do special schools require in order to engage in more effective transition preparation and transition planning?

This study was guided by pragmatic constructivist paradigms and was grounded and informed by participatory social justice. The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach utilising a quantitative survey followed by qualitative data generation. The Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) was a participatory tool applied within a participatory research design.

## 7.1 Concluding summary

The role of student voice in educational decision making is embedded in rights-based legislation. The Mosaic approach was proven in this study as a suitable and desirable approach which meaningfully harnessed parents', teachers' and students' voice. However, for student voice to be meaningfully captured and their views acted upon within the education system, will require a change in societal attitudes towards the value of student voice and perceptions of ability.

This study found that students hold aspirations for life post-school that align with social inclusion and community participation under Article 1 of UNCRPD (2006). The majority of students leaving special schools represented in this study are not progressing to employment therefore are limited in accessing their right to employment under Article 27 (UNCRPD, 2006). In order to progress these aspirations significant lifelong supports are required which should be facilitated through a national legislative framework. Given that Ireland has obligations to increase employment rates of people with disabilities, an increased focus on employment preparation skills and high aspirations for students to become employed are required along with supports for employers and individuals to retain and transition between employments. Of note, this study found that teachers in special schools are currently fulfilling the role of transition preparation and transition planning without access to appropriate qualifications, supports or resources. Notwithstanding that, teachers also indicated their willingness to undertake this role in the absence of key appropriately trained professionals such as guidance counsellors. They will require substantial practical supports for implementation such as protected time, teacher professional learning, and resources.

Students, teachers and parents in this study are unaware of the range of post-school options available to students with SEND. This lack of knowledge has led to a school culture of normative transitions and an attitude of "it's where our students go". This in turn, has affected student aspirations as their own ambitions are heavily influenced by observations of transition of their peers to the limited range of post-school options (PSOs). This lack of awareness of the range of PSOs persists despite numerous government initiatives to address it. While there have been positive developments in the creation of inclusive

pathways into further and higher education through the PATH-4 initiative in recent years, participants in this study were unaware of the initiatives and traditional normative health funded day services remained the most dominant option.

Supporting much of the previous transitions research, this study illustrated that neither parents, nor students are involved in transition planning within schools, disempowering them and limiting their ability to make autonomous decisions from the range of PSOs. Parents also noted the lack of visibility of the post-school options in the public, particularly in the media unlike the variety of advertisements for mainstream options. A clear and coherent public information campaign from the Government would be supportive to schools and the families they support in understanding the options available to them.

The fact that teachers in this study described that their perceptions of parent's social capital influenced the level of transition planning they engaged in, illustrates a notable inequality in accessing transition planning even within the one school setting. Parents in this study lacked knowledge about PSOs, however they demonstrated high aspirations for their child, something that was in contrast to much of the literature. Despite the absence of protected time and resources including access to a guidance counsellor, schools in Phase One of this study demonstrated many highly effective transition practices. Placing the student at the centre of the process, teachers and principals described fostering the voice of students, student-focused planning and aligning curricula with post-school goals. In contrast, the school in Phase Two described the constraints of their current school culture, which did not appear to foster the voice of the student in decision making. Additionally, the lack of consultation with students or parents regarding curricula along with practices of allocation of students to classes based on perceived ability, resulted in inequality of opportunity and a mismatch of student aspirations and goals to real life choices and pathways.

In particular, the challenge of special school categorisation as primary schools was evident in this study. Ambiguity regarding the year in which a student would graduate was added another layer of complexity to the already ad-hoc nature of transition planning. This anomaly combined with the lack of access to a Transition Year programme in special schools, akin to their peers in mainstream

school, results in students having less time to develop key skills for life post-school. While schools in Phase One reported a strong focus on life skill development, the Phase Two school instead focused on certification, something that parents and teachers found to be problematic.

Students in this study discussed the inequality in relation to the development of these essential life skills, for example, accessing work experience being limited to students accessing certain levels of curricula. While work experience is described by the new Senior Cycle Programme Statement (DE, 2024) as an important aspect of Senior Cycle, this study demonstrated that it is not a currently embedded practice in special schools. This may be a result of the challenges with links to the curricula or the lack of support, guidelines and lack of resourcing to facilitate it in special schools. Additionally, parent social capital was viewed as an important determining factor in the successful sourcing of host settings for work experience, which further compounds the inequality of access for all students.

Delays to allocation of placements to post-school settings was found to have a significant negative impact on schools' ability to provide for a smooth and effective transition to the post-school settings through student preparation and handover of essential information. Teachers cited the lack of communication from post-school settings and a lack of desire to engage in transition planning on their part, supporting much of the recent Irish literature (Carolan & Slattery, 2025; McCoy et al. 2025). This study illustrated that students held a vision for life post-school of "being an adult". Families indicated their fears regarding their vulnerability in society, particularly in the workplace and fears regarding access to other disability services once their child transitioned from school. Previous negative experiences in accessing disability services meant parents had little faith that their child would be suitably supported by services or society as they begin to navigate adult life.

The EPSEN Act (2004) describes appropriate education as supporting students with SEND to "leave school with the skills necessary to participate...in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives" (DEY, 2025, p61). Critically, this study demonstrate that this goal is not being achieved. Special schools require access to curricula that will support the

development of life and employability skills. This should be aligned with attainment of progressive certification which will support students in accessing the varying levels of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). While the provision of specific curricula at Junior and more recently Senior Cycle for students with SEND have been welcomed, the issue of progression remains. Advancements in development of curricula which support the development of life and employability skills beyond Level 2 of the NFQ will support students in bridging the qualifications gap that exists between current curricula and employment or higher education entry requirements. Supporting the findings of this study, the review of EPSEN (DEY, 2025b) outlined the immediate need for a curriculum centred on life and vocational skills for students transitioning from post-secondary education to better prepare them for adult and independent life.

The essential concept of collaboration featured highly in this study including with wider school communities and the development of business partnerships, both to support work experience and accessing community services. It is clear that teachers and parents valued community-based learning and identified the tension between “being in your classroom doing your work” with the opportunities being missed as a result. This was found to be associated with the need for an inclusive school culture where teachers are enabled to employ student centred planning. The provision of curricula which support and enable community-based learning to develop life and employability skills is required.

Currently special schools in Ireland, and mainstream settings supporting students with SEND, require an extensive overhaul in policy, practice and provision to promote equity regarding their human-rights under UNCRPD (2006) to education (Article 24, 5), employment (Article 27) and to fulfil their potential (Article 1). In the first instance, robust domestic legislation, underpinned by the Ireland’s commitments under international human-rights legislation, is required to ensure that the education system is truly inclusive. Students with SEND are entitled to access their rights to education and employment and enable them to participate fully in society and become autonomous citizens.

The concerning, anomalous and legally questionable issue of the upper age limit in special schools, has been illustrated in this study as unnecessary, unjust and

creating an artificial barrier to accessing a third year of Senior Cycle education. The current criteria to accessing an additional year are outdated and do not reflect the current educational landscape at post-primary curricular level. It is a clear denial of equal rights of students accessing mainstream post-primary education. Supporting the recommendations in the EPSEN review (DEY, 2025b), an immediate re-evaluation of such age limits must be progressed.

Crucially, schools require a national framework of transition support including transition preparation activities, rooted in student voice and student focused planning. They also require support, in the form of provision of guidance counsellors or suitably qualified teachers to engage in inclusive guidance practices, from as early in their academic journey as possible. A formal transition programme should be created for schools to implement, which would include access to work experience as standard.

## 7.2 Limitations of the research

While this study has highlighted the critical components required to enable sustainable transitions for students from special schools to post school life it is not without its limitations. Firstly, limitations in employing a mixed method approach include requiring a broad researcher skillset to effectively manage qualitative and quantitative datasets and analytical approaches. Additionally, the time required to generate, analyse and implement multiple phases can be a challenge. Within this study, the decision was taken to conduct Phase One through online distribution of the survey as the most time efficient method. However, this itself posed challenges with response rates and gatekeeping. Within Phase One of the study, while the principal response rate of 33 was positive and represented 27% of eligible special schools in Ireland, the teacher's response rate was low. A challenge faced in this study was the lack of available data of how many teachers were teaching in special schools, along with the lack of statistics available of the number of students in Senior Cycle within those schools.

This study was an explanatory sequential design, meaning the analysis of Phase One informed the development of Phase Two. This meant that the responses from Phase One could be explored in more detail with a smaller number of participants. While findings from the one single site cannot be generalised, they

did illustrate a strong similarity and consistency between the findings from schools partaking in Phase One. Despite this, there were a number of aspects of the findings that were unique to the Phase Two school, and this has been noted throughout. Additionally, while a single site was used for Phase Two, the methodological triangulation of the voice of students, teachers and parents ensured a broad voice and geographic characteristics, a point which has been highlighted in previous research (Scanlon & Doyle, 2021).

Researcher positionality has been described in detail in previous chapters. This “insider-outsider” or “in-between” positionality (Chhabra, 2020, p.307) as a former special school teacher and now teacher educator and researcher could have posed challenges in building a rapport and authenticity with the participants. To mitigate against this, the approach of being open about positionality provided clarity to the participants about any potential for bias. Additionally, transparency in the data analysis processes was carefully documented and the use of the reflexive diary and memos allowed for moments of bias to be recorded, noted and challenged within the analysis process.

This study employed participatory tools for data generation within the context of a participatory research study. As documented previously, researchers must exercise caution when labelling their research as participatory, ensuring accuracy in the representation of their approaches. Significant time and professional learning were spent in understanding the nuances of employing participatory tools and engaging in truly participatory research. After much consideration and examination of the methodological literature, this research is described using Silva’s (2023) and Brown’s (2022) continuum as embedded within the research, sitting at a point between *individuals participating in the research* and *participants as co-researchers*. Participatory choice points were clearly identified in order to ensure an accurate representation of the research approach. While this research could be criticised for not employing a truly egalitarian approach, it was identified in the literature review that a very small number of studies included the voice of the student and therefore within the context and limitations of a PhD, this embedded approach was deemed appropriate and worthwhile as it captured a voice seldom heard.

## 7.3 Recommendations for practice, policy and future research

### Recommendations for practice

**Special schools require a range of curricular options that support students to develop skills required to lead fulfilling, independent lives.**

This research identified that tailored opportunities for students to engage with curricula which aligned with their post-school goals was important. The concerns of special schools of the limitations of current curricula on offer at Senior Cycle require urgent attention. Schools have the autonomy to offer a range of curricula however, it was consistently cited within Phase Two of the research that a focus on independent living, personal and social development skills are key aspects for development for people with SEND. Curricula must continue to be developed with a specific focus on preparation for life post-school for all students, including students with SEND

**Special and mainstream schools require support to ensure equitable access to work experience for all students with SEND.**

Work experience was one aspect in which the participants in Phase Two expressed the need for a more coherent approach to be taken by schools to ensure that equitable opportunities were afforded to *all* students, irrespective of the type and level of curricula they were accessing. Additionally, in order to apply these findings to the broader special school network in Ireland, the National Association of Special School Principals (NASSP) were approached to explore the possibility of a collaborative project which would harness the current experiences of special school principals and co-create a policy framework which seeks to support schools in offering work experience to their students.

One of the outcomes of this research, has been the development of a set of practical work experience guidelines for special schools and special classes in mainstream schools to support the equal access to work experience for *all* students (Appendix S). The purpose of these guidelines is to encourage schools to consider how work experience might best align with students identified areas of strength, interests and priority learning goals. The guidelines should also be a

support to students, their parents and to hosts of work experience in understanding the purpose, remit and learning opportunities that it can provide.

The document includes some policy and legislative background and context to support schools in understanding Ireland's obligations under Article 27 of the UNCRPD (2006) along with current national policy commitments. It provides guidance on situating work experience within the context of Senior Cycle curricula, best practice guidelines, supports for recruiting host settings along with a range of templates for student profiling, goal setting for work experience, reflection on work experience and sample letters to host settings for Student Showcase/Recruitment Fairs.

**Community level and employer-based supports are required to enable the development of inclusive societies and workplaces.**

Participants within both phases of this study cited a number of societal and employer related barriers, particularly when sourcing work experience. Teachers also cited the lack of collaboration on the part of the post-school settings, specifically with regard to the sharing of information on students. Supporting previous recommendations (Carolan & Slattery, 2025; O'Brien et al., 2011), a formal process for sharing information is required. In addition, employers and work experience hosts require clarification and support with regards to insurance queries and other perceived barriers to facilitating work experience and employment for people with SEND.

### Recommendations for policy

This research has demonstrated that there are many implications for policy development arising from the findings.

**Future educational provision must be in line with Ireland's commitments and obligations under international legislation including the UNCRPD (2006).**

Ireland's continued segregated multi-track system and current policy advice from the NCSE (2024) are not aligned with Ireland's commitment under the ratification of the UNCRPD (2006) in 2018. Observations from the Ombudsman for Children (2022;2024) outline serious concerns regarding Ireland's provision of educational and multidisciplinary services for children with SEND and his concerns were echoed by parents in Phase Two of this study. Additionally, the

upper age limit issue within special schools requires immediate attention to ensure students with SEND experience equal access to a third year of Senior Cycle. Future educational provision and legislation must uphold Ireland's commitments to international human-rights legislation and be the foundation for any domestic legislation.

**National policy and a legislative framework mandating post-school transition planning are required.**

It has been illustrated in this study that successive Irish governments have made political commitments to address the lack of transition planning in special schools for almost two decades, without any tangible or meaningful implementation. National policy and a legislative framework mandating post-school transition planning are required to support schools and stakeholders progress post-school outcomes for students with SEND. Ireland has been tasked by the EU to increase employment rates for people with disabilities and despite a litany of action plans and strategies, as of yet little or no progress has taken place.

Ireland has an opportunity to embed transition planning in the revision to EPSEN (2004). However, it will need to remain independent of and distinct from any requirement to create IEPs. Additionally, any revisions to EPSEN (2004) or separate legislation for transition planning will require swift commencement and enactment.

Future policy must ensure that all students with SEND access the same level of transition preparation as students without disabilities, have access to suitably qualified professionals to support them in informed decision making, All students with SEND must be meaningfully included in educational and transition related decision making, through the use of appropriate student voice frameworks. Accountability frameworks must be put in place for government departments regarding monitoring, oversight and delivery of actions in future policies, initiatives and frameworks.

**A broader range of post-school options are required to support students with SEND to realise their rights under Article 1, Article 24 (5) and Article 27 of the UNCRPD (2006).**

This research supports previous literature which demonstrated the significant dominance of the health-funded day service sector and the disproportionately low numbers of students progressing to further and higher education and employment, comparatively with their neurotypical peers. Considerations for future policy must first be rooted in international human-rights legislation, with clear oversight and reporting frameworks to prevent lost opportunities to increase the rights for all young people with SEND in Irish society. Initiatives such as PATH-4 should be expanded and further opportunities for students to access further/higher education should be explored at a local geographic level. Information regarding post-school pathways must be accessible to stakeholders, including via the media akin to traditional normative post-school pathway information.

## Recommendations for future research

**Student voice should be captured in research at earlier timepoints in transition planning.**

Future research in this area should focus on the voice of the student and their educators at an earlier timepoint in transition. This research captured the perspectives of students at two timepoints; ready-to-transition and pre-transition. However, the findings of this and other literature on the timing of guidance provision (Smyth, 2011), as well as key transition legislation in other developed countries continue to indicate that transition planning should occur from the early teenage years. This study demonstrated that student voice is not considered for transition planning purposes, nor does it inform what curricula the student can access. Earlier research could explore if transition planning informs the curricular decisions and access and facilitates lifelong aspirations and ambitions.

**Researchers should be encouraged to consider the Mosaic approach and participatory research approaches with students with SEND.**

This study successfully adapted the Mosaic approach for a diverse population of teenagers with SEND. Future research could explore the application of this approach to students with more diverse communication and SEND profiles. Additionally, this study employed a participatory approach to research, described in this case as “embedded” in the research. Further research could explore the possibilities of expanding the participatory approach to be the “driver” (Silva, 2023) of research, moving towards a more egalitarian process (Brown, 2022).

**The role of work experience in facilitating access to the community and employment should be explored.**

Future research should explore the role of work experience in accessing the community (Article 1) and employment (Article 27, UNCRPD, 2006). Work experience was seen as a supporting factor in transition preparation in responses across both phases, however, challenges in accessing placements, sourcing suitable and relevant type of work and supports for students with more complex profiles were cited. Subsequent research could explore the relationship between work experience during compulsory schooling and obtaining future employment.

**Research should closely monitor the awareness of, and transition rates to further/higher education programmes and their impact.**

With the development of more inclusive pathways to higher-education, future research should closely monitor the awareness of, and transition rates to these programmes, as well as the long-term impact on individual students in terms of progression to further study or employment. This echoes previous recommendations on the creation of a robust and accurate database of tracking post-school destinations of students with SEND (McCoy et al., 2025).

**With respect to curricula, given the current ongoing developments in Senior Cycle provision, in particular the SCL1LP and SCL2LP, evaluation of their impact will be important.**

The programmes have been described by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) as “follow on programmes for students who are progressing from Level 1 Learning Programmes (L1LPs) and Level 2 Learning

Programmes (L2LPs) at Junior Cycle” (DE, 2024, p.4). However, the programmes do not provide for a follow on in terms of progression aligned with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Therefore, students are essentially engaging in new learning at the same achievement level as their Junior Cycle qualification. This may have significant implications in bridging the qualifications gap that persists between level two and the levels offered at many further and higher education institutions. Therefore, evaluation of their impact will be important which may include longitudinal tracking of their progression into further/higher education and employment.

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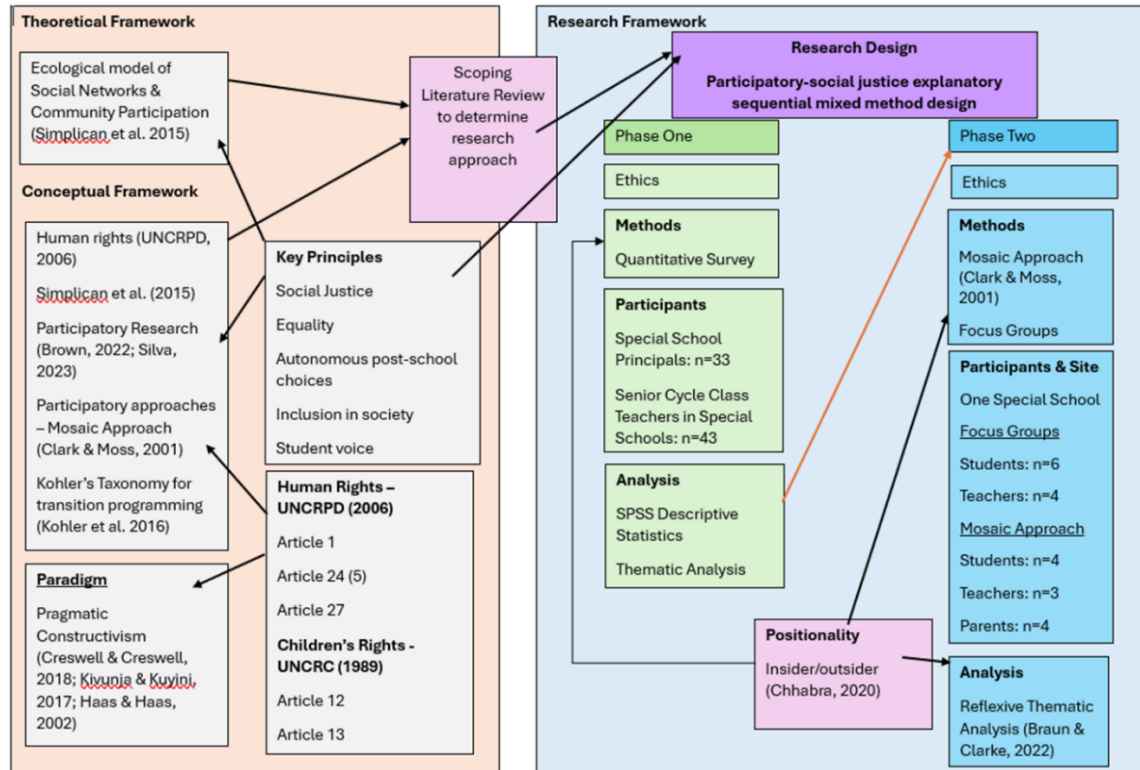
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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Research design



*Appendix B: Structure of surveys*

<b>Section No.</b>	<b>Teachers' survey</b>	<b>Principals' survey</b>
1	Details about you	Details about you
2	Details about your school	Details about your school
3	Post-school options	Post-school options
4	Transition Preparation	Transition Preparation
5	Transition Planning Practices	Transition Planning Practices
6	Your role in transition planning	Roles and responsibilities
7	Student Engagement	Further supports
8	Parent Engagement	--

*Appendix C: Special Schools by designation at time of survey*

<b>Hospital schools</b>	<b>Visually Impaired</b>	<b>Hearing Impaired</b>	<b>Autism (with/without complex needs)</b>	<b>Mild GLD</b>	<b>Moderate GLD</b>	<b>Severe/Profound GLD</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Emotional disturbance</b>	<b>High support Unit</b>	<b>Specific learning difficulties</b>	<b>Literacy difficulties</b>	<b>Physical disabilities</b>	<b>Multiple handicap</b>	<b>Youth encounter project</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Early intervention/ Autism</b>	<b>Community Special School</b>	<b>Behaviour support</b>	<b>Special care unit</b>	<b>Newly established schools</b>		
<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>		

*Appendix D: Phase one ethical approval*

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City University



Leanne Connolly  
School of Inclusive & Special Education  
Dr. Geraldine Scanlon  
School of Human Development  
Dr. Deirdre Corby  
School of Nursing, Psychotherapy and Community Health

29<sup>th</sup> March 2022

**REC Reference: DCUREC/2022/059**

**Proposal Title: Transition preparation and transition planning for students in Irish Special Schools**

**Applicant(s): Leanne Connolly, Dr. Geraldine Scanlon, and Dr. Deirdre Corby**

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to notification review, DCU REC are pleased to issue approval for this research proposal.

DCU REC's consideration of all ethics applications are dependent upon the information supplied by the researcher. This information is expected to be truthful and accurate. Researchers are responsible for ensuring that their research is carried out in accordance with the information provided in their ethics application.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Melrona KIRRANE Chairperson  
DCU Research Ethics Committee

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## Online Survey for Principals and Senior Cycle Class Teachers

### Transition preparation and transition planning for students in Irish special schools

This research project is being conducted as part of a PhD thesis with the School of Human Development in Dublin City University. Transition preparation and transition planning for life after school has been identified in Irish and international literature as an area requiring further research. This research project has multiple phases and aims to build on the recommendations of key literature to raise the aspirations of teachers, students and parents through the development of a programme of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in transition planning for teachers in Irish special schools.

Phase one of this research is an **anonymous online survey**, which aims to capture the current transition preparation and transition planning practices in special schools and to gather the views, attitudes and experiences of teachers in those transition practices.

### Participant involvement

These surveys are aimed at **Principals of Special Schools** and **Senior Cycle Class teachers** (typically supporting learners age 15+). Information will be gathered in the following areas:

1. Basic information regarding school type, student cohort, teaching qualification
2. Current transition preparation and transition planning practices
3. Views on the role of the teacher in transition planning



Principals' Survey (15mins) link or scan the QR Code on the right:  
[https://dcueducation.fra1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_29PdtKAUPywloc6](https://dcueducation.fra1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_29PdtKAUPywloc6)



Senior Cycle Class Teacher Survey (20mins)  
link or scan the QR Code on the left.

[https://dcueducation.fra1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_0NktbC63mk7HGom](https://dcueducation.fra1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0NktbC63mk7HGom)

It is hoped that your participation in the online survey will:

- Contribute to the identification of principal and teachers' views and knowledge regarding transition planning in special schools
- Scaffold the next phase of the research which will explore the views expressed in a more detailed manner with a range of stakeholders (parents, students and teachers in special schools)
- Support the final creation of bespoke CPD for teachers on supporting transitions in Irish special schools.

**Principal Investigator: Leanne Connolly,**

PhD Candidate

Assistant Professor in Inclusive and Special Education, DCU

[Leanne.connolly29@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:Leanne.connolly29@mail.dcu.ie)

**Supervisors** Dr. Geraldine Scanlon

[Geraldine.scanlon@dcu.ie](mailto:Geraldine.scanlon@dcu.ie)

Dr. Deirdre Corby

[Deirdre.corby@dcu.ie](mailto:Deirdre.corby@dcu.ie)

*Appendix F: Teacher's letter of information- Phase One*

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City University



16-05-2022

Dear Teacher,

My name is Leanne Connolly and I am a PhD candidate with the School of Human Development in Dublin City University, under the supervision of Dr. Geraldine Scanlon and Dr. Deirdre Corby. My research study explores transition preparation and transition planning for students in Irish special schools as they prepare to leave school.

Key literature acknowledges that Irish special schools, as part of their ongoing work, engage in transition preparation and transition planning activities, without any formal training or supports.

We would like to capture your views and experiences of the role teachers and principals play in supporting students and their families in planning for the final transition from your school to a post school setting.

The research study has multiple phases and aims to build on the recommendations of key literature to raise the post school aspirations of teachers, students and parents through the development of a programme of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in transitions for teachers in Irish special schools. Phase one of this research is an anonymous online survey of teachers and principals which aims to capture the current transition preparation and transition planning practices in special schools and to gather the views and experiences of their role in those transition practices.

This letter invites you, as a senior cycle class teacher in a special school (**\*typically supporting learners aged 15 and over**), to participate in the anonymous online survey which should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. Questions will be asked in a variety of categories:

- Basic information regarding school type, student cohort, qualification sector
- Current transition

preparation and transition planning practices

- Views on the role of the teacher in transition planning

It is hoped that your participation in the online survey will:

- Contribute to the identification of principal and teachers' views and knowledge regarding transition planning in special schools
- Scaffold the next phase of the research which will explore the views expressed in a more detailed manner with a range of stakeholders (parents, students and teachers in special schools)
- Support the final creation of bespoke CPD for teachers on supporting transitions in Irish special schools



I would appreciate it if you could complete the teacher's survey, which should take approximately 15-20 minutes, available at the following link

[https://dcueducation.fra1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_0NktbC63mk7HGom](https://dcueducation.fra1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0NktbC63mk7HGom)

or by scanning this QR code.

The Plain Language Statement is available to view by clicking on the survey link. All responses are anonymous, and no identifying details of the school, students or teachers are being gathered.

Thank you for considering this request.

Regards,

Leanne Connolly Principal Investigator

[leanne.connolly29@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:leanne.connolly29@mail.dcu.ie)

Appendix G: Phase one survey – Codebook - Principal

Variable number	Variable name	Variable label	Value label
1	PrQL	Primary Qualified	1 = Yes 2 = No 99= Missing/invalid
2	PPQL	Post Primary Qualified	1 = Yes 2 = No 99= Missing/invalid
3	PPSub	Post Primary Subjects	2 = No 99= Missing/invalid
4	MonQL	Montessori	1 = Yes 2 = No 99= Missing/invalid
5	OthQL	Other Qualification	1 = Yes 2 = No 99= Missing/invalid
6	OtherSPc	Specified Other Qualification	2 = no
7	GCQL	Guidance Counselling Qualification	1 = Yes 2 = No 3 = Currently undertaking qualification 99= Missing/invalid
8	PrinRole	Principals' current role	1 = teaching Principal 2 = Administrative Principal  99 = Missing/invalid

	Name	Type	Width	Decimal	Label	Value	Missing
1	PrDI	Numeric	8	0	Primary Qualified	1=Y; 2=N	99
2	PPQI	Numeric	8	0	Post-Primary Qualified	1=Y; 2=N	99
3	PPSUB	String	250	0	Post Primary Subjects	1=Y; 2=N	99
4	MonQI	Numeric	8	0	Montessori Qualified	1=Y; 2=N	99
5	OthQI	Numeric	8	0	Other Qualification	1=Y; 2=N	99

PrQL	PPQL	PrQL	PPQL
No	Yes	2	1
Yes	No	1	2

*Appendix H: Phase Two ethical approval*

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City University



Ms Leanne Connolly  
School of Human Development



17<sup>th</sup> August 2023

**REC Reference: DCUREC/2023/150**

**Proposal Title: Transition preparation and transition planning for students in Irish special schools**

**Applicant(s): Ms Leanne Connolly, Dr Geraldine Scanlon, Dr Deirdre Corby**

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to full committee review, DCU REC is pleased to issue approval for this research proposal, subject to the school Board of Management written approval being in place.

DCU REC's consideration of all ethics applications is dependent upon the information supplied by the researcher. This information is expected to be truthful and accurate. Researchers are responsible for ensuring that their research is carried out in accordance with the information provided in their ethics application.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. As part of DCU REC's ongoing monitoring process, during your research you may be asked to provide DCU REC with a progress report. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Dr. Melrona Kirrane in cursive script.

Dr. Melrona Kirrane, Chairperson.

DCU Research Ethics Committee

*Note: Please retain this approval letter for future publication purposes (for research students, this includes incorporating the letter within their thesis appendices).*

## *Appendix I: Plain language statement - Parents of student - Mosaic Approach*

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City University



### **Introduction to the research study:**

#### **Research title:**

**Transition preparation and transition planning for students in Irish special schools DCU School of Human Development**

#### **Principal Investigator:**

Leanne Connolly (PhD Candidate)

#### **Contact details:**

[Leanne.connolly29@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:Leanne.connolly29@mail.dcu.ie)

#### **Supervisors:** Dr. Geraldine Scanlon

Dr. Deirdre Corby

#### **Contact details:**

[Geraldine.scanlon@dcu.ie](mailto:Geraldine.scanlon@dcu.ie)

[Deirdre.corby@dcu.ie](mailto:Deirdre.corby@dcu.ie)

### **What is this study about?**

Students with intellectual disabilities attending special schools typically transition to a range of service providers, further education or employment when they leave school. However, in Ireland there are no guidelines available to families, students or schools to support them in making the decision about the type of service the student will select or the implications of each choice. Teachers, students and their families often are unaware of the range of choices that are available to them. This research is about supporting and training the teacher, so that they can better support families in understanding the range of options available to them.

### **What are the aims of the study?**

The overall aim of this research is to support the student, their families and teachers to have high aspirations for what the student can achieve when they leave school. It wants to let students and their families know that the student has a right to participate fully in their community, a right to employment, a right to education. It hopes to do this by training the teacher on the wide range of options and how to support families in making a fully informed decision.

### **What questions am I hoping to answer?**

While there is an overarching research question, this phase of the research wants to answer the following two questions:

1. What do students want to achieve/do when they leave school? How do they think they will achieve that?
2. What do parents know about the range of options the student can choose from?

### **Who is funding the study?**

This project is being self-funded by the researcher with support from DCU.

**Why do you want my child and I to participate?**

This research wants to capture the views, knowledge and attitudes of the students themselves, towards leaving school and making a decision about what they want to do. It also wants parents and the teacher to hear about what the child wants to do and what they think they will need to do in order to achieve that. For this part of the research, the child **and** the parent both need to consent to participate.

**What do you want my child to do?**

Your child will be invited to meet with the researcher on five occasions for approximately 90min-2 hour sessions. Each of these sessions will take place in your child's school. A teacher or SNA can accompany your child if your child wishes them to do so. During these one-to-one sessions, your child will be invited to think about and tell Leanne about what they might want to do when they leave school. They will be invited to create a map to outline the journey it might take to achieve their goal.

This will be done using a range of methods and your child can choose which one suits them best, such as drawing, using images, writing, interviews with the researcher.

**What do you want me to do?**

You will be invited to attend and participate in a:

- one-to-one interview with the researcher, Leanne Connolly, in your child's school or online on Zoom, for approximately one hour.
- one consultation on the map that your child has created at the end of the process for approximately thirty minutes, which will occur in your child's school.

Leanne will give you a list of questions to help you think about what you might like to say one week before the interview. The interview and consultation will be audio recorded and transcribed. Before your data is put into the thesis, you will receive a copy of what we spoke about to make sure that you are happy with the meetings. Your child's teacher will also talk to the researcher about the final map.

**Who owns my child's map and items they create?**

Before your child's data is put into the thesis, they will receive a copy of what was spoken about to make sure that they are happy with the content. Your child will keep any items that they create and will hold sole ownership of them. The researcher will take photographs of them for use in her research and destroy the photos after five years. Any identifying information in the photos of the map will be blackened out so it cannot be seen and originals destroyed. Only the blackened out photos will be used in the final thesis.

**What is the Mosaic Approach?**

The Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) was designed as a method of capturing the voice of the child in research. It uses a variety of tools, such as images, map-making and interviews with young people and their relevant adults (family/teachers). In this research, interviews, images, drawing and writing will form the main menu of tools offered to your child along with interviews with the

parent and the teacher.

**What type of research tools will be used?**

**Is there any risk involved in my participation in this research study (if greater than that encountered in everyday life)?**

There are no potential risks to you through participation in this survey. There are no potential risks to your child through participation in this study.

**How will I benefit (directly or indirectly) from my child's participation?** It is expected that you and your child will

- Gain knowledge and understanding of a range of post-school options available - Gain knowledge of funding and allowances for post-school options
- Gain knowledge of their rights to education and employment (UNCRPD, 2006)

Indirect benefits:

- The school community will gain from the new knowledge gleaned through participating in the research

regarding post school options. They will be able to provide greater

Thought Journal	A physical or digital journal where learners can document their thoughts about what they want to do when they leave school, between meetings with the researcher
Child interviews/ conferencing	A short interview with the student; and conversations started by the student
Children's selection of images	Images selected from various sources (photos sourced themselves, images sourced online, magazine/newspaper cuttings) representing their post school goal
Drawing and annotations	Writing that students have added to images and drawings that the students create to represent post school goals
Writing	Samples of students writing in describing post school goals
Map making	A visual map created to represent the steps required to achieve the post school goal

support to families but also to colleagues regarding transition preparation within their school.

**Will their identity be kept confidential?**

Participant confidentiality is an important issue during data collection. Participants identify and other personal information will not be revealed, published or used in other studies. Direct quotes from the child's responses may be used in the final thesis document or related publications. All participants will be allocated a pseudonym and while every effort will be made to ensure anonymity, it can not be fully guaranteed.

**Is my participation in this study voluntary?**

Yes participation is voluntary and you/your child can withdraw consent at any time, up to anonymisation of the data without any issue or consequences. You can

withdraw consent for you/your child by contacting the researcher, Leanne Connolly. You/your child can also contact the researcher or independent person should you have any concerns or queries.

**Data Protection:**

In relation to the types of personal data being collected, it will be limited to:

a) paper-based records e.g., names, consent/assent forms, interview notes, observations during student conferencing and mosaic making, student participants age and number of years left in school

b) electronic records e.g. photos of student items/maps, photos of consent/assent forms, audio recordings of focus groups, interviews and child conferencing/Mosaic making sessions, transcript of audio recordings

**Names/consent/assent forms/interview notes:**

You & your child's personal data will be pseudonymised. A master code sheet (name/pseudonym) will be stored in hard copy in the researcher office in DCU. It will be destroyed by confidential shredding upon completion of the PhD research (kept for no longer than two years)

Consent and assent sheets will be photographed and uploaded to the researchers encrypted DCU Google Drive and the hard copies will be shredded using DCU confidential shredding services within one month of receipt. The digitised versions will be kept for a maximum of five years and then deleted from google drive by the researcher.

**Ages of students:**

The ages of students will be gathered but in line with data masking, will be presented as age ranges, for example, Mary (aged 15-17).

**Mosaic:**

The final map will be photographed and stored in the researchers encrypted Google Drive and deleted from the original device on the day of capturing the photo. Should any potentially identifiable details be included in the map, they will be redacted and only the redacted images kept and originals deleted immediately upon upload. Only the redacted images of the final mosaics will be used in the final thesis. The redacted versions of the maps will be kept for a maximum of five years.

**School details:**

The school name will not be included nor pseudonymised and the location will merely be noted as a geographic region (East/South/West of the country) (e.g. one special school in the East of the country)

**Audio recordings:**

Audio recordings will be made of all data gathering sessions using the Zoom audio recording feature on the researchers DCU laptop and DCU Licensed Zoom account. On the day the recordings are made, they will be automatically saved to the researchers DCU Licensed Zoom Cloud account. Upon completion of the recording, a transcript will be available for download in the Zoom account. This will be downloaded to the desktop of the encrypted laptop, uploaded to the researchers DCU Google drive and then deleted from the desktop and from Zoom. The audio recordings will be deleted once transcribed and checked for transcription accuracy.

**Zoom interviews:**

If using zoom for interviews, the meetings will be audio recorded only. On the day the recordings are made, they will be automatically saved to the researchers DCU Licensed Zoom Cloud account. Upon completion of the recording, a transcript will

be available for download in the Zoom account. This will be downloaded to the desktop of the encrypted laptop, uploaded to the researchers DCU Google drive and then deleted from the desktop and from Zoom. The audio recordings will be deleted once transcribed and checked for transcription accuracy.

At all times the DCU "Zoom & Data Protection: Guidance for DCU Staff" Section 3 - Guidance for Researchers will be followed.

**Security - the following features will be utilised to enhance the security of the Zoom meeting:** Accessing a Zoom meeting

- Participants are not allowed to join before the Host.
- Unique meeting IDs will be used for each scheduled meeting (rather than using a Personal Meeting ID (PMID)).
- Screen sharing will only be enabled by the Host

Recordings & Transcripts

- Participants cannot save a transcript of the call.
- Meetings are not recorded automatically: only the Host may do this and access these recordings.
- Recording to local files is not allowed (cloud only).
- Files cannot be transferred via chat.

**Along with the above security features, specifically for the Focus Group due to multiple participants, the following will also apply:**

- The use of breakout rooms will be disabled
- The use of private chat between

the participants will be disabled

**Transcription:**

Zoom audio recording will be used for all data gathering sessions. Upon completion of the recording, a transcript will be auto generated and available for download in the Zoom account. This will be downloaded to the desktop of the encrypted laptop, uploaded to the researchers DCU Google drive and then deleted from the desktop and from Zoom. The audio recordings will not be shared with a transcription service.

**Special Categories of Data:**

This project is not gathering or soliciting health/disability data. While it acknowledged that the students will have an intellectual disability, the student will attend one of 128 special schools in the country which cater for 8600 students (OCO report, 2022). Specific profiling information on the type of disability or comorbid diagnoses is not being gathered as part of this research.

**GDPR:**

This study will be conducted in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and if you have any concerns regarding how your data in this study has been handled, you can contact: DCU Data Protection Officer, Mr. Martin Ward – (data.protection@dcu.ie Tel: 01-7005118/01- 7008257) who will handle any data protection concerns arising from this research.

The Data controller is Dublin City University.

The data is being gathered and processed as part of a research study, approved by the DCU Ethics Committee.

Data will be stored electronically on the researchers encrypted DCU Google Drive

account, accessed through a password protected laptop. Data will be kept for a maximum of five years (unless otherwise specified) following the publication of the data and will be securely disposed of.

For the purposes of analysis, your data will be pooled with data from other participants (your child and the teacher) for thematic analysis.

It must be noted that protection of this data is subject to legal limitations. It is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

**Rights of the Data Subject:**

As the data subject, you have the following rights:

- The right to be given certain core information about the processing of the individual's personal data, including who holds it and why it is being processed (transparency);
- The right to access and be given a copy of the personal data (access);
- The right to rectify inaccurate or incomplete personal data (rectification);
- The right to have personal data erased (erasure – also known as the “right to be forgotten”);
- The right to obtain the personal data from the data controller and transmit this data to another data controller (data portability);
- The right to limit or restrict how the personal data is used (restriction of processing);
- The right to object to processing of the personal data (objection); and
- The right not to be subject to automated decisions which have legal/significant effect and which are made without human involvement (freedom from automated decision-making)

A request in respect of these rights, can be made to the Data Protection Unit in DCU at Data Protection Unit, Office of the Chief Operations Officer, Room A201A, Albert College, DCU Glasnevin Campus, Collins Avenue, Dublin 9 D09 V209.











They can also be contacted by email: [data.protection@dcu.ie](mailto:data.protection@dcu.ie) or by phone on 01-7005118 / 01-7008257










An individual also has the right to report a complaint concerning the use of personal data to the Irish Data Protection Commission: Data Protection Commissioner.

Should any participant wish to read the findings or examine the outcomes of the project, they can do so by contacting the researcher.







***If participants 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, e-mail [rec@dcu.ie](mailto:rec@dcu.ie)***

Appendix J: Plain language statement – Student - Focus Group











	<p>I am sharing this information with you because your parents/guardians and school have given me permission to share it with you.</p>
	<p>I am a researcher in Dublin City University. This means I work with people to find answers to important questions. I want to know about what students like you want to do when you leave school.</p>
	<p>I am looking for students to take part in a Focus Group. A Focus Group is when a small group of people come together to talk about something.  I would like you to read this page and think about if you would like to take part in a Focus Group about what you want to do when you leave school.</p>
	<p>Here is some <b>information</b> about how the Focus Group will work.</p>
	<p>Students in your school will be invited to come together to talk to me in a small group in October.</p>
	<p>At this meeting, I will invite students to talk about what they would like to do after they leave school.</p>
	<p>When I ask questions, you can choose to talk or just listen to the other students' answers.</p>
	<p>The Focus Group will happen in school, during the school day, and will last about one hour. Your teacher knows about the Focus Group and will allow students to attend.</p>
	<p>You will not have to do any writing or work during the Focus Group. I will give you some questions to think about one week before the meeting to help you think about what you might like to say.</p>
	<p>I will record what is said at the meeting.</p>











	
	If you do not feel comfortable taking part in the Focus Group, you can stop at any time. You won't have to take part in it after that.
	I will write about the Focus Group in the project but I will never use your name.
	Your information will be shared with some other people: my supervisor's Geraldine & Deirdre. The recordings of the focus group will only be listened to by me. I will give you a copy of what was said if you wish to have one.
	I will keep all of the information on her computer, which no one else can access.
	I will keep the information for five years in case I write other essays about the projects. After this I will safely delete the information.
	You can decide to take your information out of my project, even after the Focus Group has happened. You can tell your teacher, SNA, a parent or me directly that you want to take your information out.
 	If you and/or your parent(s)/guardian(s) have any questions about this project, please contact the researcher: Name: Leanne Connolly Work Address: F320, School of Inclusive & Special Education, DCU. Email: <a href="mailto:leanne.connolly29@mail.dcu.ie">leanne.connolly29@mail.dcu.ie</a>  <b>Or</b>  If you and/or your parent(s)/guardian(s) have concerns about this project 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, e-mail <a href="mailto:rec@dcu.ie">rec@dcu.ie</a>

Appendix K: Informed assent - Student - Focus Group

<p>I have had this research explained to me.</p> 	<p>I understand that I will be asked to be part of a group with other students and Leanne to talk</p> 
<p>I understand that I will receive the questions about the focus group one week before we meet.</p> 	<p>The focus group will be in my school. Other students will be there too.</p>
<p>I understand what is expected of me. I can talk or just listen.</p>	<p>I am happy to have the group audio recorded</p>
<p>I can take a break when I need to</p> 	<p>I would be happy to talk to another person if I have any big concerns.</p>
<p>I can take my information out of Leanne's project at any time, even after the Focus Group is over</p>	<p>I understand that my name and school name will not be used in Leanne's project. I understand that my age will be listed in Leanne's project</p>
<p>I can stop being in the group at any stage if I want to</p> 	<p>I agree to take part in this project</p> <p>Name _____</p> <p>Witness _____</p> 


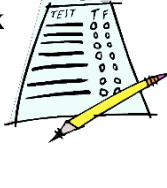





Appendix L: Plain language statement – Student – Mosaic Approach

	<p>I am sharing this information with you because your parents/guardians and school have given me permission to share it with you.</p>
	<p>I am a researcher in Dublin City University. This means I work with people to find answers to important questions. I want to know about what students like you want to do when you leave school.</p>
   	<p>I am looking for students to take part in some research called the Mosaic Approach. This means a student like you works with me to explore what you want to do when you leave school.</p> <p>You will use lots of interesting ways to do this:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Drawings</li> <li>- Pictures from books, magazines, the internet</li> <li>- Writing and stories</li> <li>- Interviews with Leanne</li> </ul> <p>When you have done some of these interesting things, you will be invited to create a Map. This map will show what your post school goals are and all the steps that might be taken to get there.</p> <p>After you create the map, your parent/guardian and teacher will look at it and talk about it.</p> <p>I will take a picture of it and write about it in my project. You will get to keep the map and the other drawings or pictures that you created.</p> <p>I would like you to read this page and think about if you would like to take part in the Mosaic Approach about what you want to do when you leave school.</p>
	<p>Here is some <b>information</b> about how the Mosaic Approach will work.</p>
 <p><b>Nov</b></p>	<p>Students like you in your school will be invited to meet with me on their own (or with a teacher/SNA) in October.</p>
	<p>At this meeting, I will invite students to talk about what you would like to do after you leave school.</p>
	<p>When I ask questions, I will show you lots of different ways to answer - like drawing a picture, writing, talking, finding a photo.</p>

	<p>The meetings will happen in school, during the school day. I will visit about 5 times. Each time the visit will be about 2 hours. Your teacher knows about the Mosaic Approach and will allow you to attend.</p>
	<p>I will give you some questions to think about before the meeting to help you think about what you might like to say. I will also give you a "Thought Journal" in case you remember things you want to talk about.</p>
	<p>I will record what is said at the meeting.</p>
	<p>If you do not feel comfortable taking part in the Mosaic Approach, you can stop at any time. You won't have to take part in it after that.</p>
	<p>I will write about the Mosaic Approach in my project but I will never use your name. I will use some pictures of the map you have created in her project but will make sure to take any information about you out of it.</p>
	<p>I will keep all of the information on her computer, which no one else can access.</p>
	<p>Your information will be shared with some other people; my supervisors, Geraldine and Deirdre. The recordings of the meetings will only be listened to by me. I will give you a copy of what was said if you wish to have one.</p>
	<p>I will keep the information for five years in case I write other essays about the projects. After this I will safely delete the information.</p>
	<p>You can decide at any time to take your information out of Leanne's project, even after the map making meetings have happened. You can tell your teacher, SNA, a parent or me directly that you want to take your information out.</p>
	<p>If you and/or your parent(s)/guardian(s) have any questions about this project, please contact the researcher: Name: Leanne Connolly Work Address: F320, School of Inclusive &amp; Special Education, DCU. Email: <a href="mailto:leanne.connolly29@mail.dcu.ie">leanne.connolly29@mail.dcu.ie</a> <b>Or</b> If you and/or your parent(s)/guardian(s) have concerns about this project and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:  The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin</p>

	City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie
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Appendix M: Informed assent form – Students – Mosaic Approach

<p><b>I have had this research explained to me.</b></p> 	<p><b>I understand that I will be asked to work with Leanne to explore what I want to do when I leave school</b></p>
<p><b>I understand that I will receive some questions to help you think about what you might like to say, one week before we meet.</b></p> 	<p><b>Leanne will visit five times and meet me at my school. Leanne will meet me for about 2 hours each time she visits.</b></p>
<p><b>I understand what is expected of me. I can have a teacher or SNA with me if I wish</b></p> 	<p><b>I am happy to have our sessions recorded</b></p> 
<p><b>I can take a break when I need to</b></p> 	<p><b>I would be happy to talk to another person if I have any big concerns.</b></p> 
<p><b>I can stop the meeting with Leanne at any stage if I want to</b></p> 	<p><b>I agree to take part in this project</b></p>  <p>Name _____</p> <p>Witness _____</p> <p>Date _____</p>

*Appendix N: Thought journal for students - Mosaic Approach*

<b>My Thought Journal</b>
Leanne has given me this "Thought Journal" to write down any ideas I have about leaving school. Leanne has written some questions I might like to think about. I understand that I do not have to write down anything if I don't want to. I understand that I don't have to discuss my ideas with Leanne if I don't want to.
<b>What do I want to do when I leave school?</b>
<b>Why do I want to do that?</b>
<b>What do I think that will be like?</b>
<b>What do I think I might need to do to achieve that?</b>
<b>Some other ideas I have...</b>
<b>Some pictures I wanted to draw...</b>

*Appendix O: Example of Mosaic sessions with Tim, Sally & Ben*

**Tim**

<i>Session 1</i>	28mins	Interview – focused on the semi-structured interview questions
<i>Session 2</i>	28mins	Questioning – mind maps dictated by student, written by researcher on mini whiteboard– focused vision for life in 10 years time, work experience that had recently taken place, skills/talents/attributes for a C.V., things the student wanted to get better at
<i>Session 3</i>	49mins	Map making- student reflected on printed photos of the mind maps and selected which items to recreate on the map
<i>Session 4</i>	50mins	Map making – Researcher questioning regarding goals for the final two years in school
<i>Session 5</i>	11mins	Recap on map and researcher questioning
	<b>Total time</b>	<b>2 hours 46mins</b>

**Sally**

<i>Session 1</i>	1 hour	Interview & drawing on sketchpad – focused on a small number of the semi-structured interview questions, used WidgitOnline.com to create images of skills/talents/attributes
<i>Session 2</i>	49mins	Questioning –student brought completed Thought Journal - map-making; focused vision for life in 10 years time, work experience options, skills/talents/attributes for a C.V., Using the printed off version of WidgitOnline.com images generated in Session 1, student selected which ones to include in the map.
<i>Session 3</i>	22mins	Map making- student identified things they wanted to get better at.

<i>Session</i> 4	16mins	Map making – Researcher questioning regarding goals for the final two years in school and final reflection on the map
	<b>Total time</b>	<b>2 hours 27mins</b>

### Ben

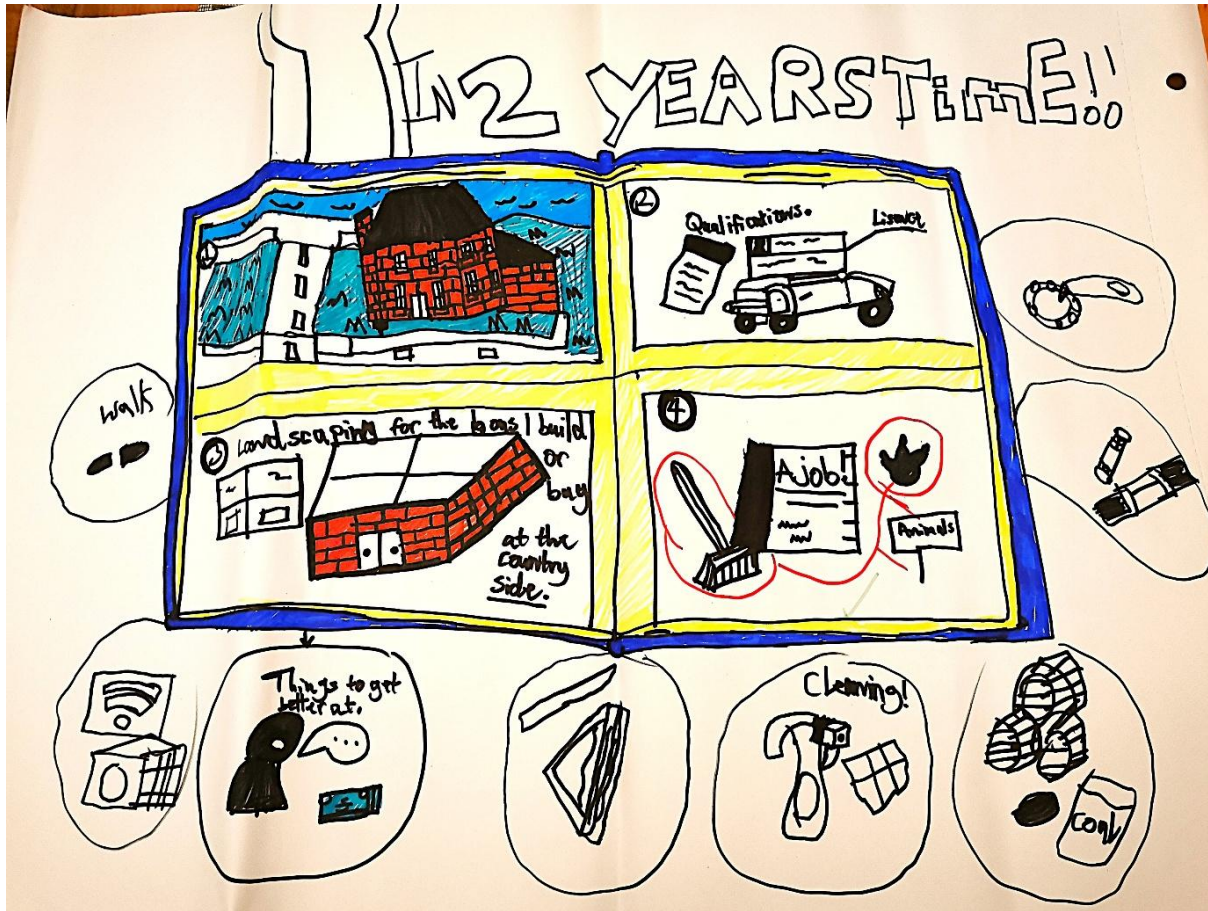
<i>Session</i> 1	36mins	Interview & drawing on sketchpad– focused on a small number of the semi-structured interview questions
<i>Session</i> 2	20mins	Questioning – student brought completed Thought Journal, drawing and mind maps dictated by student, written by researcher on mini whiteboard – focused on vision for life in 10 years time, one work experience that could be explored
<i>Session</i> 3	31mins	Used WidgitOnline.com to create images of skills/talents/attributes
<i>Session</i> 4	18mins	Map making –Using the printed off version of WidgitOnline.com images generated in Session 3, student selected which ones to include in the map.
<i>Session</i> 5	37mins	Map making – student drew links between his future life and current skills/talents
<i>Session</i> 6	38mins	Recap on map
	<b>Total time</b>	<b>3 hours</b>

Appendix P: Completed Mosaic Maps for Lisa, Tim, Sally & Ben

Lisa



Tim



Sally

music → Ed Sheeran → Little Mix  
 I saw Ed Sheeran in

get a job  
 childcare  
 go to college

have a job  
 have a job  
 stay with sisters to  
 with family night outs  
 ends

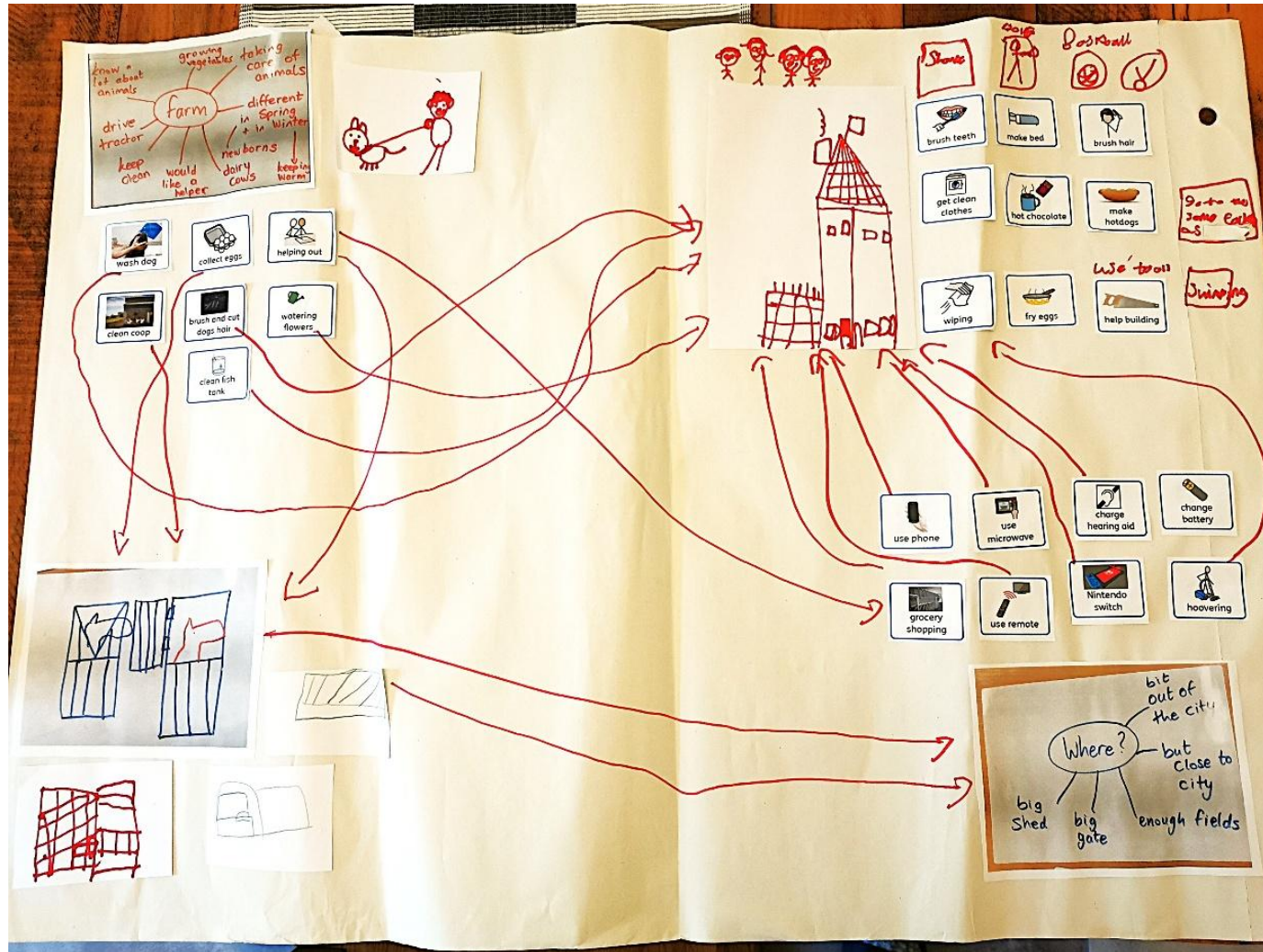
Teacher could teach  
 us about what college  
 we can go to after school.  
 I would like if if my  
 go clothes shopping.  
 play basketball in school.  
 learn how much something  
 costs.  
 brushing my hair  
 putting on socks pants knickers  
 and shoes under wear  
 make cheese on toast.  
 make tea.  
 learn how to tell the time

ask Mom what  
 did she learn

Swimming

make sandwich  
 computers  
 homework  
 wipe counters  
 people person  
 feeding ponies  
 tidy bedroom  
 taking clothes out of washing machine  
 brush teeth  
 get juice  
 empty dishwasher  
 cleaning  
 working independently  
 hurling  
 getting dressed

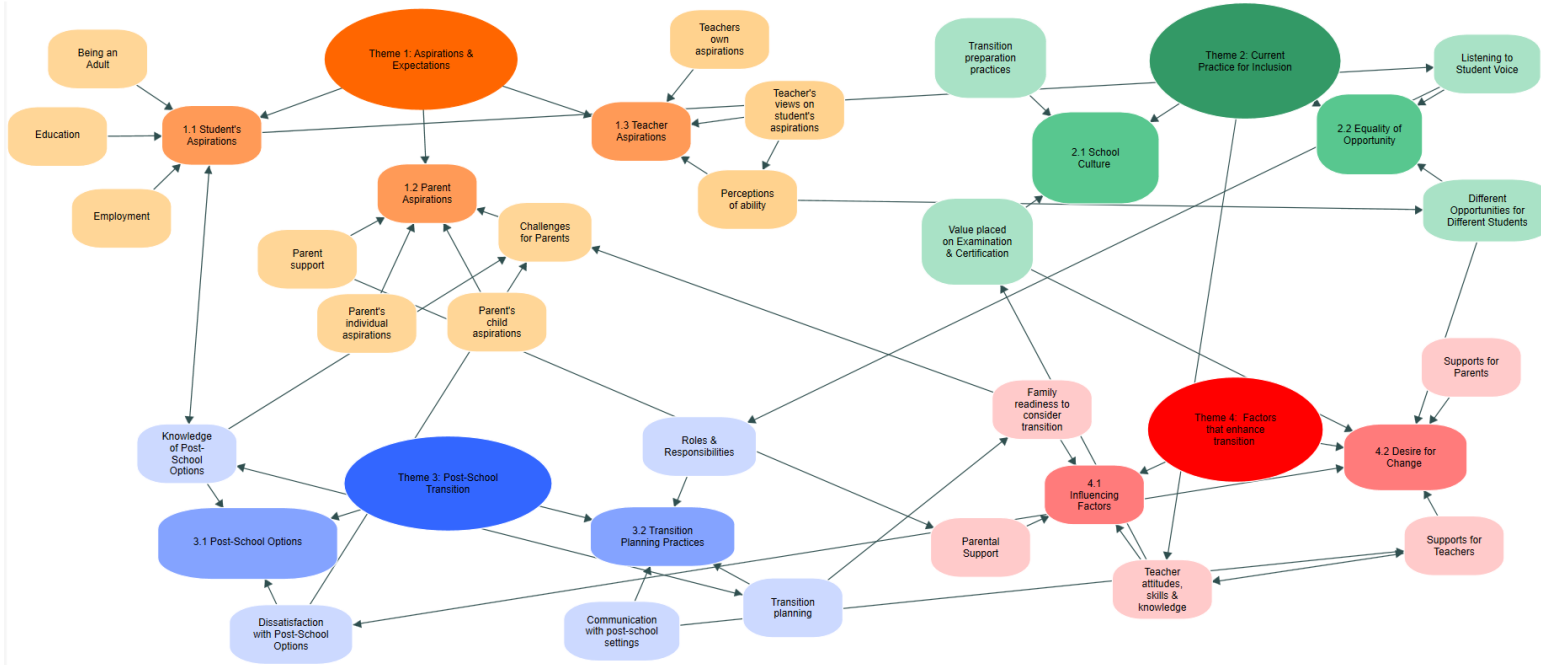
Ben



Appendix Q: Data retention periods

Data type	Storage	Retention	Justification	Disposal
Audio files	DCU Zoom account	until transcript was verified for accuracy (no longer than 6 months after recording)	Was only held until verification took place.	Digital deletion
Transcripts	DCU Google Drive	Five years	Identifiable data was deleted and only anonymised versions retained in case of further publication	Digital deletion
Interview / <a href="#">focus group notes</a>	DCU Google Drive	Five years	In case of further publication	Digital deletion
Mosaic Maps	DCU Google Drive	Five years	Photos of redacted versions were retained for five years in case of further publication. Originals remain the property of the student.	Digital deletion
Consent/Assent forms	DCU Google Drive	Five years	Hard copies were shredded once uploaded to Google drive	Hard copies shredded using DCU confidential shredding, digital deletion
Master code sheet (name/pseudonym)	DCU Locked Storage cabinet in <a href="#">researchers office</a>	Two years	Until completion of the PhD.	DCU confidential shredding

Appendix R: Phase Two thematic map





## **Guidelines for supporting work experience for students with special educational needs**

### **For special schools and mainstream post-primary schools**

May 2025

Leanne Connolly

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## Purpose

These guidelines are intended to support schools in providing work experience opportunities to students with special educational needs. This booklet should also be a support to students, their parents and to hosts of work experience in understanding the purpose, remit and learning opportunities that it can provide.



\*This booklet was created with the support of special schools in the Republic of Ireland in collaboration with DCU. Thank you to the contributors, staff, students and parents of the participating schools for their valuable insights.





## Background & Context


Research from the European Disability Forum (2023) demonstrates that the Republic of Ireland has the lowest rate of disability employment in the European Union at 32.6%. Additional Irish research demonstrates that only 14.7% of people with intellectual disabilities were in employment (Kelly & Maître, 2021).

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006), Ireland has been tasked with increasing employment rates of people with disabilities from 22.3% in 2016 to 33% by 2026. Working towards these targets, Irish policies and action plans such as the Comprehensive Employment Strategy (CES) (2015-2024), Make Work Pay Report (2019) and the Pathways to Work 2021-2025 Strategy were aimed at improving access and retention rates in Irish employment sector for people with disabilities. The strategy indicates that “young people who do not make a successful transition from education to employment or further education are shown to suffer long-term scarring with a high risk of entrenched long-term unemployment” (p.62).

However, the strategies often failed to provide specific actions to support young people with disabilities, in particular, people with intellectual disabilities to access employment. Despite the range of strategies and initiatives in place, Irish literature suggests that persistent barriers to employment prevail (Scanlon et al., 2020) with the National Disability Authority (2025) suggesting that based on the failed implementation of the CES 2015-2024, there is no evidence to suggest that other policies will be successful.

Additionally, Irish research demonstrates that students in special schools are not transitioning into employment upon leaving school, with principals of 30 special schools indicating that of the 340 students that graduated special schools in 2021 and 2022, only 5 transitioned to employment (Connolly, 2025).

While high parental aspirations (McCall, 2015; Fullarton & Duquette, 2015) family background and the complexity of the special educational need or disability (SEND) (McCoy et al., 2025) play an important role in shaping post school aspirations, we must explore the role that curricula can play in fostering a high aspiration of employment during student’s time in compulsory education.



However, research in Irish special schools shows that students are often not aware of employment options available to them and that there can be low parental aspiration for their child to be employed (Connolly, 2025).

## Work experience within the context of curricula

Work experience is a valuable opportunity for students to gain an insight into the world of work. While it may be well established in some schools through the specific senior cycle modules (e.g. QQI Level 3, LCA), it may not be widely accessible to students accessing other levels of curricula. In a survey of principals of Irish special schools, just over one third of the responding 29 principals indicated that work experience is an established transition preparation practice in their school (Connolly, 2025).

In order to support schools in facilitating work experience for **all** senior cycle students irrespective of the curricula accessed, this booklet is designed to highlight the valuable learning opportunities that can be provided by work experience and identify potential links to curricula within which it may not currently be embedded.


Aligning with Government policy drive to increase employment rates for people with disabilities, the NCCA Senior Cycle Programme Statement (2024) outlines that:

*“Senior cycle should establish firm foundations for students to transition to further, adult and higher education, apprenticeships, traineeships and employment, and participate meaningfully in society, the economy and adult life.” (p.3)*

And:

*“The goal of the senior cycle programmes is to prepare students for life beyond school, enabling them to be lifelong learners and to live more independently.” (p.4)*

This statement provides schools with a solid foundation upon which to establish their own work experience practices that are suitable for their cohort of learners, supported by members of their school and wider community.



Within the context of post-primary curricula, work experience could be explored through:

**Junior Cycle -**

- Level 2 Learning Programmes - Preparing for Work & Living in the Community
- Level 1 Learning Programme - PLU4 - Being part of a community

**Senior Cycle -**


- Senior Cycle Level 1 & Level 2 Programme Statement (2024)
- Transition Year Programme Statement (2025)
- Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) Statement (2022)
- QQI – NFQ Level 3 – Work Experience Module
- Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) - Vocational Preparation & Guidance Module

**Senior Cycle Level 1 & Level 2 Programme Statement:**

A dedicated module for work experience is not available at senior cycle L1L2, unlike in QQI, LCVP, Transition Year and LCA programmes. However, work related learning can support the exploration of the key competencies of senior cycle:

- Thinking and problem solving
- Being creative
- Communicating
- Working with others
- Participating in society
- Cultivating wellbeing
- Managing learning and self (p.9)

Building on the foundation of PLUs of Preparing for Work and Being Part of a Community at Junior Cycle L1L2, the Senior Cycle L1L2 Programme Statement outlines that:



*“Work experience is an important aspect of senior cycle education as it supports many students on their progression pathways after senior cycle. Work experience is encouraged for students but is most beneficial when it is appropriate and meaningful for the student’s needs, interests and ambitions.” (p.14)*

The following sections outline some best practice principles upon which schools can begin to establish their work experience practices.

## **Recruiting host settings**

Host settings play a vital role in the successful establishment of work experience. While students must source their own work experience in modules such as those in TY and LCA, for students not accessing those programmes, it may be beneficial to have partnerships created with a range of host settings.

Contributing schools recommended the following in successfully recruiting host settings:

- Making in-person visits to suitable host settings is most effective, compared to phone calls, letters or emails.
- Approach larger settings that may be in a position to take on multiple students e.g. large retailers such as supermarkets.
- Approaching settings within one central base such as a shopping centre may make support logistics of staffing, supervision and transport
- Where a host can take a limited number of students at one time, consider staggering placements and establish longer term partnerships. For example, the host may take three students for six weeks, followed by a new group of three students for the following six weeks.
- Consider approaching businesses that already have inclusive employment practices established and already employ adults with disabilities.
- Survey parents and members of the school community (SNA’s, bus escorts, BOM members) to identify small businesses that may be interested in partnering with your school.
- Hold a “recruitment-fair” where local business can visit your school and students can showcase their skills and abilities.



Practical ways in which hosts can support students are:

- Outline a list of tasks that may be suitable for potential students (Appendix 1)
- Identify a lead point of contact to liaise with school staff. Sometimes this may be someone whose role is human resources. It will be equally important to identify a key worker who the student will be able to liaise with during the hours of their work experience.
- Identify times of the day/week that may be quieter in the setting. It may be best to avoid times that are particularly fast paced/loud/overwhelming. For example, for a service station, it may be a lunchtime rush at the deli counter, the morning coffee rush, days where there are more deliveries than usual. Identifying quieter times may help the school and the student with scheduling.
- Hosts are encouraged to be flexible in supporting students in accessing suitable working hours. Within the context of the TYPS (2025), placements of between two to four weeks is recommended. However, special schools/classes may find it more beneficial to establish work experience on a one day per week basis. For some students, this may be a full working day, for other students, work experience may be in more manageable time periods, for example, one hour per week.

## **Insurance**

For many students, their 24-hour school insurance will provide sufficient cover for undertaking work experience provided it is an activity carried out with the full authority and knowledge of the Board of Management. Schools should check with their insurer with regard to cover for their students.

## **Transport**

Depending on the location of the school, some schools may find it practical to partner with businesses that are within walking distance of the school setting. For others, this may not be feasible and where possible, schools could explore public transport routes. Some school policies may provide for other arrangements such as the use of a School Bus or other modes of transport.

## Best Practice in Work Experience

- Adequate classroom-based preparation in advance of the work experience would support the student to gain maximum benefit from the work experience
- Align tasks with students' areas of interest and skill set – engaging with students and their families on profiling strengths and areas for development can be a beneficial resource in setting up work experience that is aligned with students interests and abilities. See Appendix Z for an example
- Agree with the host setting a set of clear task expectations - clear beginning, middle and end of task - provide visual supports where possible - consider the use of picture jigs and work samples
- Clear communication procedures between the school setting and the host – identify a key person for communication re student absences, someone to deal with queries as they arise, etc.
- Clear behavioural expectations - norms for eating breaks, toilet breaks, point of contact
- Identify a specific space the student can access for sensory regulation and designated break time space
- Ensure adequate reflection time after each session at work experience to support the students processing (See Appendix Z)
- Share procedures for fire drills and other emergency procedures (See Appendix Z).

## Appendix 1 – Profiling Sample

Using software such as WidgitOnline.com, students can create visual representation of the skills they have acquired. Independently or with support, a word can be typed into the software and a range of images will be provided for selection of the most suitable. In this way, students can select the image that best represents their understanding of the skill.

Take a look at Image 1 which one student in a special school created to capture her skills.



Image 40 - Images created with [www.WidgitOnline.com](http://www.WidgitOnline.com)

Prompt questions:

- What jobs can you do?
- What do you like to do at home?
- What food/drink do you like to eat/make?

These skills can then be presented to form the basis of a CV to share with a potential host setting. See another example below:



Name: \_\_\_\_\_



Jobs



I can



do:



Wipe table



Hoover



Laundry



Tidy



Up



Collect

Eggs



Feed

dog



Jobs



I



would



like

to



get better



at:



Empty Dishwasher



Make Tea



## Appendix 2 - One Page Profile

In order to best support the student during the work experience, here are some key pieces of information they wanted to share with you.

My name is \_\_\_\_\_

I communicate by/through \_\_\_\_\_

My preferred working environment is

---

---

I work best when given a task that is

---

---

---

These are my skills that I have refined

---

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---

These are some skills that I am still developing

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---

On this work experience, my goal is to/my goals are

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---

---

Some accommodations I may need are

---

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---

---

## Appendix 3 - Task sheet for host setting

In order to get a better understanding of the type of tasks that the student might engage in, and so we can ensure the tasks align with students' goals, please provide a brief outline of them below:

### Indication of possible tasks

Back of house tasks:


Front of house tasks:


### Example:

Indication of possible tasks: e.g. a supermarket

Back of house tasks:

- Stock take
- Cleaning e.g. sweeping floor, dusting shelves, mopping floors, wiping surfaces
- Date rotation of stock on shelves
- Unloading cargo

Customer facing roles:

- Responding to customer queries
- Operating the till
- Carrying items to customer car
- Bagging groceries

## Appendix 4 – Visual Supports

### Visual Support for Restocking Crisps

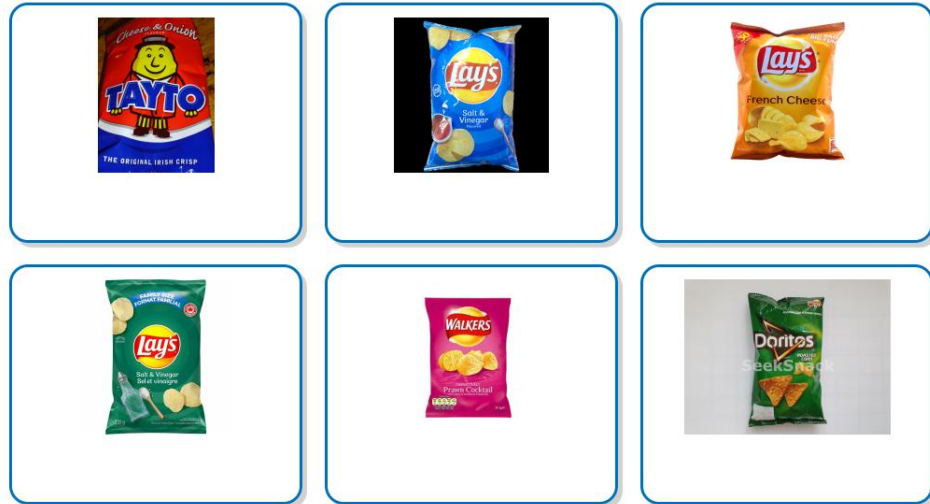


Image 42 - Visual support for restocking crisps/snacks. Created with Widgit Online

### Seed Packets



Image 43 - Visual support for restocking seed packets. Created with Widgit Online



Chips



Burger



Drink



1 Straw

Image 44 - Visual Support for fast food order – Created with Widgit online

### Functional Skills for Daily Living



Setting the table



Sorting cutlery



Christina Hannify, 2024

Image 45 - Visual support for table setting – Source: Christina Hannify - DCU

## Appendix 5 – Visual Supports – Sample Task Schedules

Window/Mirror cleaning		
1		Get a cloth
2		Get window cleaner
3		Spray in each square
4		Clean each square
5		Dry each square
6		Tidy up

Image 46 - Visual Support - Task Schedule - Cleaning


















Mopping floor 		
1		Get mop and bucket
2		Bring bucket to tap
3		Fill with water to the line
4		Add one cap of cleaning fluid
5		Squeeze Mop
6		Mop floor

Image 47 - Visual Support - Task Schedule - Mopping





## Appendix 6 – Break Time

 If  I  need  help  or  have  a question,  I can  ask

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 My  break time  is  at 

 I  take  my  break  in the \_\_\_\_\_

 My  break  is for  15 minutes.

 When  my  break  is  finished,  I  tidy  up  and  return to  work.

Image 48 – Visual Support - Break Time Story

## Appendix 7 – Fire Drill Procedures

### Fire alarm routine

	<b>listen</b>
	<b>walk outside</b>
	<b>Assembly Point</b>
	<b>stop and wait</b>
	Your fire warden will tell you when it is safe to go inside
	<b>return to work</b>

Image 49 - Visual Support - Fire Alarm Routine

## Appendix 8 - Work Experience Progress Recording Example

Table 36 - Work Experience Progress Recording Example

Date	Daily Goal	Task	Assessment Mastery/Emerging/ Yet to be Developed (M,E,Y)
14/04	Follow a simple three step written instruction	Using the task sheet (First, next, then) for wiping counters	
21/04	Follow instructions using a picture jig	Follow picture of cutlery set up for lunch serving (one knife, fork and spoon in a pre-folded napkin)	
21/04	Communicate needs to a familiar adult	Identify the point of contact and ask one question	
28/04	Categorise according to class/features	Sort stock into stock for fridge (perishables) and shelves	



Table 37 - Work Experience Progress Recording Template

<b>Date</b>	<b>Daily Goal</b>	<b>Task</b>	<b>Assessment</b> Mastery/Emerging/Yet to be Developed (M,E,Y)

## Appendix 9 - Student Reflection Template

Table 38 - Student Reflection Template

Date:
Student Name:
Today I attended:
These are the tasks that I did:
Something new I learned/achieved today is:
Next time, I want to....
This is how I felt today after work experience...



## Appendix 10 – Student Showcase Sample Letter

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

We are writing to you from \_\_\_\_\_ school which is situated in your community. Our school caters for students with \_\_\_\_\_.

Our students have developed a range of skills that we feel would be very beneficial to your business and we would love to have the opportunity to showcase them at our upcoming Student Showcase/Recruitment Fair.

We would love to develop a partnership with your business for potential work experiences for our students as they prepare to transition to adult life. We understand that you may have questions about how best to support individuals with disabilities in your workplace, and we would be happy to address those concerns at our Student Showcase.

Date:

Time:

Venue:

Yours sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_

## Policy and Practice Considerations

Table 39 - Policy & Practice Considerations

	Yes/No
Has our school considered what curricula we offer in senior cycle?	
Have we considered within our current senior cycle programmes, where work experience might support our students in achieving the key skills of senior cycle?	
In aiming for inclusion of all students in work experience, have we considered what age/stage of development our students should start work experience?	
Have we considered what preparatory work can support our students before they engage in work experience?	
Have we completed a risk assessment?	
Have parents been consulted on the work experience policy?	
Have students been consulted on the work experience policy?	
Have we engaged in student profiling to match work experience to their own development of post-school goals?	
Have we established links with a diverse range of host settings?	
Have we identified transport options for work experience, including the use of staff cars where this aligns with school policy?	
Have we considered supervision arrangements and staff ratios while students are on work experience?	
Have we included in our policy, the staff duties while on supervision of work experience? Does this include an outline of the level of interaction expected between host setting, staff and student? Does it outline the level of prompting/assistance/modelling that may be provided to the student by the supervising staff member?	
Have we considered protocols for safe transport and storage of medications while the student is on work experience?	
Have we considered our position if a host setting offers payment to our students?	
Have we considered the protocol if either the host setting or school wish to terminate the work experience partnership?	

## Helpful Links

STIAL Website – [www.stial.ie](http://www.stial.ie)

WALK PEER - <https://www.walk.ie/what-we-do/ability-funded-project-peer/>

### **NCCA:**

Transition Year Programme Statement (2025)

<https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/5849acbf-0326-487a-beec-3db6b5878470/TY-Programme-Statement-ENG-INT.pdf>

Senior Cycle Programme Statement (2024)

[https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/066ec71f-e00c-4df7-b082-3e2f5ecb9357/SC-L1-L2-Programme-Statement-EN\\_09.24.pdf](https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/066ec71f-e00c-4df7-b082-3e2f5ecb9357/SC-L1-L2-Programme-Statement-EN_09.24.pdf)

Key Competencies of Senior Cycle

[https://ncca.ie/media/mfhagys/key-competencies-in-senior-cycle\\_en.pdf](https://ncca.ie/media/mfhagys/key-competencies-in-senior-cycle_en.pdf)

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) (2022)

[https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/997056e3-2792-4ef6-8b6c-ef80c0dfccd8/Revised-LCVP-Programme-Statement\\_June-22\\_EN.pdf](https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/997056e3-2792-4ef6-8b6c-ef80c0dfccd8/Revised-LCVP-Programme-Statement_June-22_EN.pdf)

Leaving Certificate Applied – Vocational Preparation & Guidance Module

<https://www.pdst.ie/sites/default/files/Voc%20Prep.pdf>

### **Government policies:**

Pathways to Work (2021-2025)

<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/publications/pathways-to-work-2021-2025-mid-term-review-and-updated-strategy/>

Make Work Pay Report (2019)

<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/publications/make-work-pay-report/>