“I Want To Say…” Enhancing Rights Based Opportunities for Learners’ Voices To Be Included in Decision-Making Around Autism Class Placements in Irish Primary Schools.

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(MA, PGDSEN, MEd)

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Dad, I didn't regret not doing it.

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AAC	Augmentative and Alternative Communication
AoN	Assessment of Need
AS/HFA	Aspergers Syndrome/High Functioning Autism
ASD/C	Autistic Spectrum Disorder/Condition
ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder/Difference
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CDNT	Children's Disability Network Team
CoS	Continuum of Support
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DE	Department of Education
DES	Department of Education and Skills/Science
DEY	Department of Education and Youth
DSM-5-TR	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5 Text Revision
EPSEN	Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs
ICD-10	International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems
IFL	Identity First Language
IEP	Individual Education Plan
MMR	Mixed Methods Research
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
PFL	Person First Language
PDD-NOS	Pervasive Developmental Disorder- Not Otherwise Specified
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SIM	School Inclusion Model
SSP	School Support Plan
SERC	Special Education Reform Committee
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENO	Special Educational Needs Organiser
SNA	Special Needs Assistants
SSLD	Specific Speech and Language Difficulty
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences

SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TPL	Teacher Professional Learning
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities
UNCRC	United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UDL	Universal Design for Learning

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Abstract

"I Want To Say…" Enhancing Rights Based Opportunities for Learners' Voices To Be Included in Decision-Making Around Autism Class Placements in Irish Primary Schools.

Yvonne Hodgins

This research examined the extent to which autistic learners are included in decision-making around their special class placement across primary schools. In Ireland, there has been an exponential increase in the number of autism classes within mainstream schools, contradicting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) ratified in 2018 which stipulates a fully inclusive education system at all levels. Like all learners, autistic children have the right to have a say in their education and the right for their views to be taken seriously, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UNCRPD. However, Irish law positions parents/guardians as the primary educators giving them constitutional recognition for decision-making about their child's educational placement. Despite the requirement of schools to engage in placement reviews, there is limited evidence that annual reviews take place or that learners are included in the process.

This mixed-method investigation addressed the research gap on the inclusion of autistic learners' voices in decision-making on placement. First, online questionnaires were completed by teaching staff responsible for autism classes (*n*=189) across a diversity of primary schools with autism classes and analysed using descriptive statistics. Second, a multi-site case study was employed to ascertain the views of multiple stakeholders across three primary schools using semi-structured interviews with autistic learners (*n*=14), parents (*n*=3), autism class teachers (*n*=7) and principals (*n*=3). A range of participatory-based methods were utilised to elicit autistic children's voices. Reflexive thematic analysis was undertaken to generate four themes: Voices Heard and Unheard; Different Priorities, Different Styles, Different Experiences; Interdependence Not Independence and Different, But Not Always. Key findings from the quantitative data indicated that less than half of schools reviewed placement and from the qualitative data that none included learner voices. The findings informed the development of the PAIR (Partnerships Through Participation; Autistic Identity, Inclusion and Shared Understanding; Influence and Power; Rights-Based Education) Framework to support effective inclusion of autistic voices in decision-making about their educational placement. This research extends our understanding of the placement review process and offers important implications in upholding children's rights to be involved as part of this process.

Chapter One: Introduction

This study set out to explore the extent to which autistic learners are included in decision-making about their educational placement in the context of increasing separate special class provision in Ireland. It addresses a gap in the research on how decision-making processes in this area are implemented in Irish primary schools and the role of various autism special class stakeholders in those processes, including principals, teachers, parents and learners. The right of autistic learners to have a say in their education is enshrined in international and national legislative and policy frameworks. However, there is little evidence to show that this right is being meaningfully upheld in the Irish primary school system. This chapter will discuss the research aims and rationale, and my own positionality which underpins the approach taken. This chapter sets out the policy landscape for this research including the international policy context followed by the national policy context. While inclusive education policies affect the practice in autism classes, there are separate and additional policies for autistic students which must be examined in terms of the direction that the education system has developed. Finally, the chapter will address recent national policy developments in relation to the management of autism classes with a particular focus on the review of placement of learners, and enrolment, in special classes in mainstream schools.

Since the introduction of autism as a separate category of Special Educational Need (SEN) in the Education Act of 1998 (Office of the Attorney General, 1998) the Department of Education has pursued a policy of opening separate autism classes within mainstream schools in order to cater for the needs of learners who receive a diagnosis of autism and a recommendation for a special class placement (National Council for Special Education, 2024b). While there has been a plethora of research documenting various aspects of autism special class provision (Department of Education and Science, 2001; NCSE, 2009, 2015, 2016b; NCSE et al., 2016; Goodall, 2018a; Williams, Gleeson and Jones, 2019; DE and Inspectorate, 2020; Travers, 2023) little in the set-up or implementation of policy around review of placements appears to have changed in the twenty-five years since autism classes in mainstream schools became increasingly common. Placement in this study is understood to be the enrolment of a learner in a special class for autistic children. While learners from the autism class may spend some time in mainstream classes, they have met criteria and have applied for a place in an autism class (NCSE, 2024b). Enrolment criteria for placement in an autism class consist of:

> Diagnosis of Autism: DSM IV/V or ICD 10/11 (psychologist, psychiatrist, multidisciplinary report)
>
> AND • A demonstration of the understanding of complexity of the child's overall level of need/s evidenced in the professional reports

> AND • Given the severity or complexity of the child's support needs, a clear professional recommendation as to what educational placement type would be most appropriate to best meet the child's needs, along with the rationale for same
>
> AND • A letter from the NCSE confirming that the child is known to them and that the child has the required diagnosis and recommendation for a special class for autism.

(DE, 2025).

Staffing for classes remains the same. There is still a year-on-year increase in demand for new autism classes (Kearney, 2024; NCSE, 2024b) with no significant increase in permanent transitions from autism classes to mainstream classes for the majority of autistic students nor regular reviews of placement occurring in the majority of schools (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2025; Department of Education and Youth, 2025f; Department of Education and Youth Inspectorate, 2025). This is coupled with an increase in the reported prevalence rates for autism rising from 1.5% in 2016 to 3.38% in 2022 with 5% of school age learners now receiving special education supports (NCSE, 2016b; NCSE et al., 2016; NCSE, 2024a; NDA, 2025). However, the increase in prevalence rates is not as significant as the growth of classes which stands at 99% since 2020 (DEY, 2026a). This study addresses an important gap in the research on the inclusion of autistic learners' voices in relation to their placement in, and experiences of, autism classes, in the context of the exponential increase in such classes. At the outset of this work, it is important to address the language used around autism class provision as it is an important part of inclusive education. It will be discussed briefly in this chapter and more fully in Chapter Two with particular relevance to autism education and the autistic community.

Language Use

The language used in research should be respectful and considerate of the preferences of the participant community. Recent research has highlighted that identity-first language (IFL), e.g. an autistic person, is preferable to the autistic community as opposed to person-first language (PFL), a person with autism (Kenny et al., 2016; Botha, Dibb and Frost, 2022; Botha, Hanlon and Williams, 2023; S. M. Bury et al., 2023; Ward and Gormley, 2025). Identity first language prioritises autism as an integral part of the person, not something that they have, or is added on; person first language puts the person before the autism (Papadopoulos, 2026). There is debate amongst the research community about which term is most respectful with some arguing that PFL puts the individual first (Vivanti, 2020), however, the current consensus amongst the autistic community and researchers is that IFL is preferable (Kenny et al., 2016; Botha, Hanlon and Williams, 2023; Taboas, Doepke and Zimmerman, 2023; Gormley et al., 2024). It is important to recognise that individuals may differ in their preferences, and that there is disparity across the varying

stakeholders (Gormley et al., 2025). For the purposes of this study Identity First Language will be used except in instances where a participant has used different terminology or has stated a preference for such.

As society moves towards a space where differences in neurotypes are valued rather than othered, it is important that there is a move away from medicalised and deficit-focussed language when talking about autism (Pellicano and Houting, 2022; Koehler, 2024; Papadopoulos, 2026) to a position where strengths-based language is prioritised. The terms 'autistic spectrum disorder' (ASD) or 'autistic spectrum condition' (ASC) are becoming less widely used as society adopts neuroaffirmative language (Botha, Dibb and Frost, 2022; Botha et al*.,* 2024; Papadopoulos, 2026). The neurodiversity paradigm will be further discussed in Chapter Two, as will definitions for inclusion and inclusive education which lack consensus.

The Department of Education and Youth (DEY, 2025) has undergone various name changes in the policy timeline of documents discussed in this research. The referencing and acronyms reflect the correct usage at the time the documents were published.

Research Aims and Rationale

This research aims to understand how autistic learners are currently included in decision-making around autism class placement and how they can be effectively included. Since the publication of 'The Report of the Task Force on Autism' (DES, 2001), the number of autism classes in Irish primary schools has risen from approximately 50 to 3000 in the intervening 25 years (NCSE, 2024a) with a further 399 being sanctioned for the school year 2025/26 (DEY, 2025b). Underpinning this continued rise in autism classes lie three key contradictions. Firstly, there is little empirical evidence to support the efficacy of autism classes in providing a better education for learners than a mainstream class (NCSE, 2024a) with very little movement of learners from autism classes into mainstream classes once they have been placed there (Department of Education and Skills, 2020; Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023; Travers, 2023a; NCSE, 2024a; DEY, 2025). However, it is important to acknowledge the emerging evidence regarding autistic learners' reported preference for their autism classes over their mainstream class setting (Goodall, 2018b, 2018a; Horgan, 2025; McNally, Sweeney, Keenan, Lynam, Ramsbottom, Ciarán, et al., 2025). Recently, researchers have been seeking autistic voices around school experiences (Bond et al., 2016; Goodall, 2018b, 2018a; Jordan et al., 2019; Courchesne et al., 2022; Cunningham, 2022; Ward and Gormley, 2025) however, the research to date tends to be with secondary school students and not always with learners who are enrolled in autism classes. This research addressed this gap. Learners in primary schools were asked about their

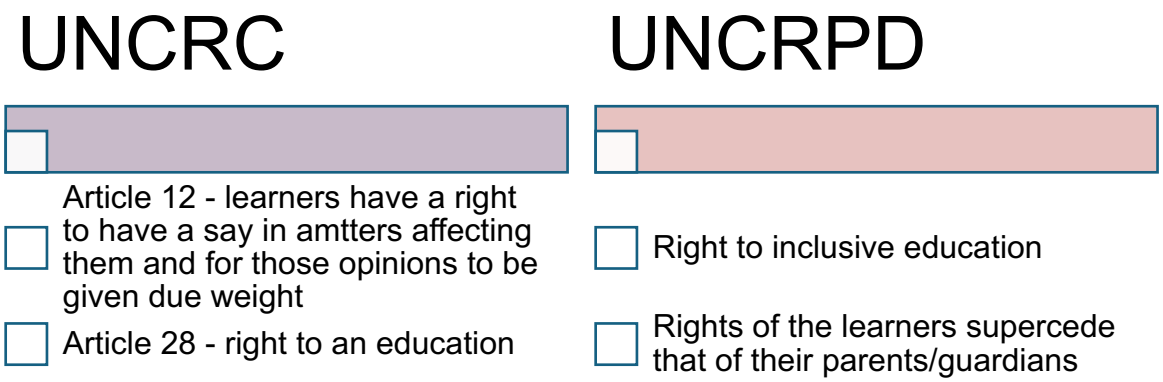
experiences of autism classes and their school experiences. Parents, teachers and principals also took part in interviews about autism class choice, placement and review. These examples of autistic voices shaping researcher knowledge school experiences will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

Secondly, it could be argued that the continued provision of separate classes for autistic learners runs in direct contravention with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (Rice, Kenny and Connolly, 2023; Travers, 2023; Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020). The UNCRPD states:

> parties must ensure the realisation of the rights of persons with disabilities to education through an inclusive education system at all levels without discrimination and on equal terms with others (Article 24).

Finally, children have a right to have a say in matters of importance and relevance to them. under the United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child (article 12, UNCRC, 1989). Education is a significant aspect of children's lives and they have a right to education through Article 28 (article 28, UNCRC, 1989). They also have a greater right than their parents in determining where they are educated. This is also highlighted within UNCRPD Article 24 explicitly stating "*parental rights are in this regard subordinate to the rights of the child*" (UNCRPD, 2016, p. 20). The two sets of rights are separate and different (Figure 1.1) but autistic learners have rights under both conventions:

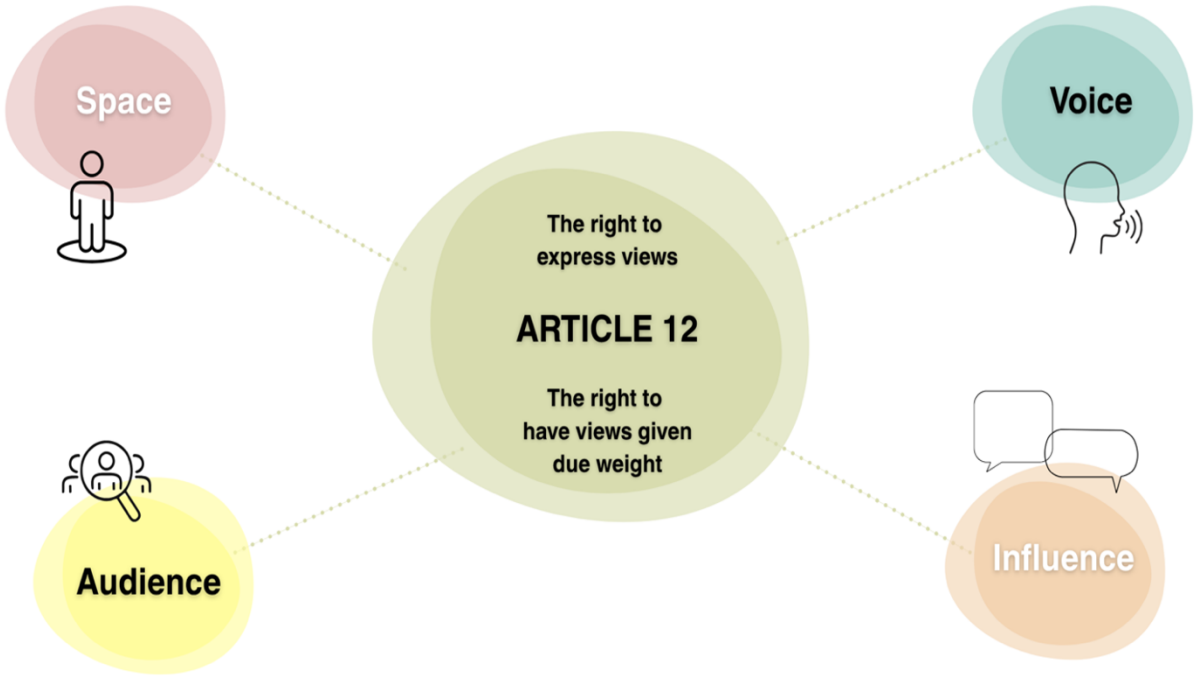
Figure 1.1: Autistic Learners' Rights Under UNCRC and UNCRPD



Moreover, while learner voices are embedded in many policy and curricular documents (DES, 2019b; DE, 2024b; DEY, 2024a; NCSE, 2025b) eliciting learner voices is not firmly embedded in practice (Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Holquist et al., 2023). The lack of learner voices in matters around their own education is concerning (Skerritt, Brown and O'Hara, 2023). The role of the parent or guardian in deciding educational placement for their child is

also central to many decisions and this is supported in the Education Act (Office of the Attorney General, 1998). As will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two children have the right to be heard and for their views to be given due weight in all matters relating to them (Lundy, 2007). If autistic learners are not asked for their views on autism class placement or their retention in autism classes then they are not being given the space to exercise their rights both as children and as learners with a diagnosed educational disability, this could be seen as a double denial of their rights (Lundy, 2007). National frameworks for eliciting and enhancing participation in education (and other) settings have been produced in Ireland (Department of Children,Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021; DCEDIY, NDA and Dublin City University, 2024) utilising Lundy's Framework (Figure 1.2):

Figure 1.2: Lundy's Conceptualisation Of Article 12 UNCRC

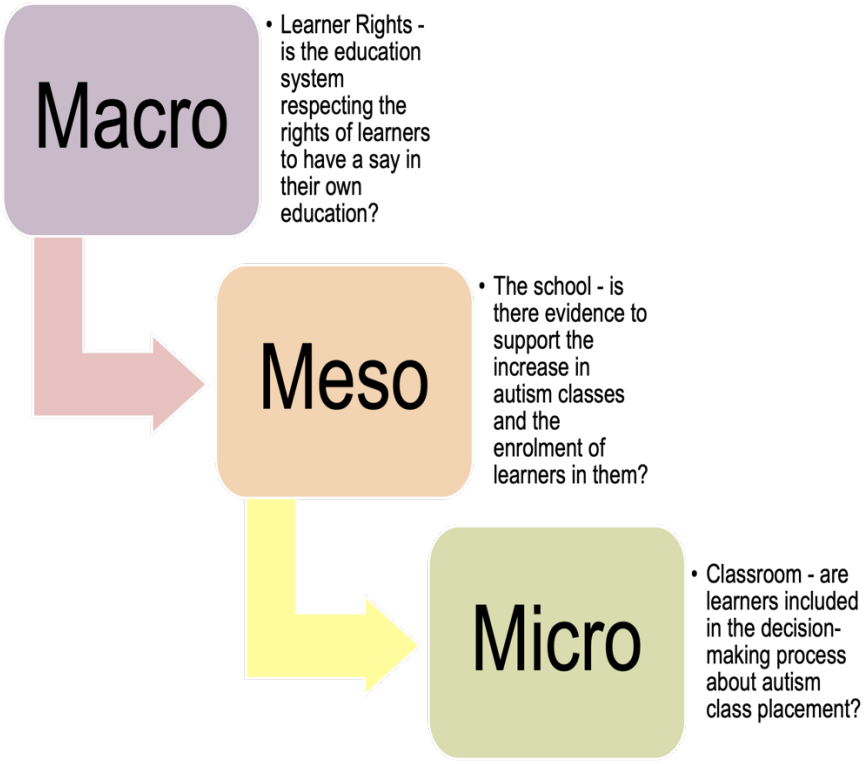


Positionality

It is critical to state positionality at the outset of this research. Positionality has often been defined in binary terms, with researchers being 'insiders' if they have personal or professional experiences of the area they are researching, or 'outsiders' if the focus of their

research has up until that point been unknown (Morrissey et al., 2026). However, how close, or embedded a researcher is within their research area affects not only how research is conducted but also influences how discourse and findings are analysed and the lens through which they are viewed (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). The area of researcher positionality will be further addressed in Chapter Three when considering methodological stance, especially in relation to research into autistic voices being conducted by a non-autistic person (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Pellicano and Houting, 2022). As stated in the introductory paragraphs above, there exist a number of contradictions in the area of autistic learners in autism classes at the micro, meso and macro levels (Figure 1.3):

Figure 1.3: Micro, Meso And Macro Levels Of Contradiction In Autism Classes



Even the use of the word 'contradiction' implies positionality. I worked as an autism class teacher for 12 years between 2009-2021, before becoming an autism advisor with the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). The role of advisor involves providing Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) for school staff – either through large seminars or in smaller staff groups - in how best to support autistic learners. As part of my role I visit many schools. The experience of both teaching in an autism class and working as an advisor has undoubtedly shaped my positionality in this research. As such, I come from the position

whereby the need to understand why learners are not being asked about their placements or encouraged to participate in decision-making is to the forefront of my professional curiosity. The tensions between how placements were decided; who decided the placements and how autism classes fitted in an inclusive education system continue to concern me. Schools each seem to interpret policy advice, policy and circulars differently. This may be due to the diversity of schools in terms of size, geographical setting and patronage, or the lack of specificity about what constitutes inclusion. The variance in approaches was captured in the Inspectorate published a document in November 2025 which clarified the role of the autism class 'Special Classes for Autistic Pupils in Primary Schools – Towards a Coherent, Inclusive System' the variety of admission policies for autism classes contrasted across settings evidencing a gap between policy and practice. The provision of external services such as Speech and Language Therapy (SaLT); Occupational Therapy (OT); National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and Child and Mental Health Services (CAMHS) vary widely across the country, but are generally scarce (NCSE, 2006, 2009, 2015, 2024a) and yet each are referenced as critical to the success of autistic learners (NCSE, 2015, 2024a; Bond et al., 2016; DES and Inspectorate, 2020; Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023). Some autistic learners may thrive within a mainstream class where diversity and difference is valued but there is little evidence of transition out of autism classes into full-time mainstream education (Travers, 2023; NCSE, 2024a).

In order to examine how autistic learners are included in decision-making around class placement, international and national educational policies around inclusion must be examined in addition to the specific issues which affect the education of autistic learners.

Inclusive Education – International Policy Context

Inclusive education is promoted across significant international legislative and policy development. However, there are many challenges to successful implementation across the globe and in Ireland. One such challenge is the inclusion of learner voices, which has only recently been highlighted as a policy priority in the Irish context (DE, 2025). A child's right to an education has long been enshrined as a human right. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) stated that everyone had a right to education. This right was strengthened with the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) which conferred rights not only as a person but additional rights by virtue of childhood. The UNCRC defines a child as "*every human being below the age of eighteen years*" (UNCRC, 1989, p. 2). Like many countries, Ireland categorises autism as a separate and distinct disability, therefore, autistic learners have a further layer of rights (Government of Ireland, 1998; UNCRPD, 2007). It is the interplay of the selected

international policies that have determined the rationale for the underpinning of this research. While all of the selected works are far more complex than what can be examined here, key features from each are woven together to provide a coherent rationale for their importance with regard to this research. Five key international policies are detailed in Table 1.1 in terms of the strands they contribute to the rights-based approach; inclusive education and equity of opportunity which are core components of this research.

Table1.1: International Educational and Rights-Based Policies

International Policy	Rationale for Inclusion in this Research	Key Quote
UNCRC (1989)	The UNCRC marked a shift in international policy regarding inclusion. Children were given additional rights based on their age. Articles 12 and 28 are particularly important: the right to education and the right to have a say in matters affecting them and for those opinions to be given due weight.	Article 12: State parties [..] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due it in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. Article 28: State parties recognise the right of the child to education [..] and on the basis of equal opportunity (Appendix A)
UNESCO - Education For All (EFA) (1990)	The EFA movement grew from the UNCRC. This movement which began in 1990 called for six goals to guide educational policy. Goals one and six are the most critical in relation to this research covering early childhood care and education quality.	Goal 1: Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education particularly for the most vulnerable children. Goal 6: Improving all aspects of the quality of education to achieve recognised and measurable learning outcomes for all.
Salamanca Statement (1994) (UNESCO, 1994a)	The Salamanca Statement gave a broad definition of special educational needs (SEN) as all children whose needs arise from disability. The statement highlighted the need for a societal shift away from placing the deficit within the learner to a place where educational practices adapt and evolve to meet the increasingly diverse range of learners and schools. Fundamental to the framework was that education should be for all learners, and that	The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive school must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organisational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships

	schools should be a place of adaptability allowing all learners to be educated in mainstream schools. As can be seen from the key quote, the focus very much moves from a deficit-based position, to one where educational systems and schools should change to overcome challenges learners may face. A key component of the statement for this research is the aim that all children should learn together.	with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school (UNESCO, 1994, p. 7).
UNCRPD (2007) (UNCRPD, 2007; UNCRPD/C/GC/4, 2016)	The UNCRPD grew from the Salamanca Statement with the 2007 convention focussing on the rights of those with disabilities. As will be discussed in the next section on domestic education policy, autism was categorised as a disability in the Education Act (1998). Therefore the UNCRPD conferred an additional level of rights to autistic learners by virtue of them having a recognised disability under national policy. General comment No. 4 on Article 24 (the right to inclusive education) contains two critical clarifications of interest to this research. The first highlights that learners should be educated without discrimination and on equal terms with others. The second runs in contradiction with national policy	Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (article 1, p. 7). State parties must ensure the realisation of the rights of persons with disabilities to education through an inclusive education system….without discrimination and on equal terms with others (UNCRPD/C/GC/4, 2016, para. 8, p. 2). [..] education is the right of the individual learner, and not in the case of children, the right of a parent or caregiver. Parental responsibilities in this regard are

	about who has the greatest say in educational placement. Irish law would state it is the parents, but UNCRPD/C/GC/4 would clearly state that the learners rights supersede the parental wishes.	subordinate to the rights of the child (UNCRPD/C/GC/4, 2016, para.10a, p. 3).
Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (2015)	SDG4 is the goal which sets out educational policy for ensuring equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities. While there are eight targets within this goal, three are arguably more important in terms of this research (as shown in next column). By providing equitable education free of discrimination and within the structure of inclusive and effective learning environments, the learning preferences of all learners should be accommodated for. As the SDGs are explicitly underpinned by both the UNCRC and the UNCRPD, the rights of autistic learners to have their voices included; their decisions given due weight and attention and their rights around educational experiences respected then the inclusion of this international policy is merited within this research.	Target 4.1: Free Primary Education [..] equitable and quality [..] education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. Target 4.5: Eliminate All Discrimination in Education [..] ensure equal access [..]including persons with disabilities. Target 4.8: Build and Upgrade Inclusive and Safe Schools [..] inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

These five documents when taken together provide the international policy context underpinning this research. The UNCRC (1989) and UNCRPD (2007) set out the rights of autistic learners both to an inclusive education; to have a say in that education and for those opinions to be given due weight and attention. The EFA movement (1990); Salamanca Statement (1994) and the SDGs (2015) underpin the rights of the learners to have an equitable and inclusive education with their peers where any differences are valued and accepted, without discrimination. The Salamanca Statement in particular, and the progress report of same (UNESCO, 2024a) highlights particular issues for Ireland around the continued segregated or dual education systems of mainstream and special classes. This is the case in Ireland where special classes for autistic learners continue to increase and new special schools are continuing to open (DEY, 2026a). An issue which will be addressed further in Chapter Two is the conflict between conceptualising autism as a disability versus difference in neurotype with many advocates indicating a preference for the latter in recognising autism as part of the natural variation among humans. This discordance has led to the neurodiversity paradigm which will be interrogated further in Chapter Two. The UNCRPD has its roots in a medicalised view using language which could be construed as negative or deficit-focused. The neurodiversity paradigm recognises autism as a specific neurotype and emphasises difference over deficit, a term which many in the autistic community prefer (Baron-Cohen, 2019; AsIAm, 2025a).

Each of the international policies discussed are reflected in the national policies in Ireland (DES, 2019a; DCEDIY, 2021; DE, 2024a; NCSE, 2024b, 2024a; DE Inspectorate, 2025; DEY Inspectorate, 2025a). While the UNCRC has been ratified since 1992, it is only in recent years that student participation has started to become embedded in national policy (DES, 2019b). The UNCRPD was not ratified in Ireland until 2018 and efforts to implement inclusive education rights were quickly overshadowed by COVID-19 and widespread school closures (IHREC, 2020; Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021). Disquiet is beginning to be expressed in academic research around the continuous annual increase in autism classes (Shevlin and Banks, 2021; Travers, 2023) which is in contradiction with UNCRPD as it contravenes the obligations to move towards a fully inclusive system. The most recent NCSE policy advice (policy advice no. 7) detailing how Ireland could move towards ‘An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society” (NCSE, 2024) is contradicted by the Department of Education policy which focuses on increasing special school and special class provision (DEY, 2024b, 2025f, 2026a). The overall policy context for inclusive education in Ireland will now be discussed in the context of its implications for the education of autistic learners.

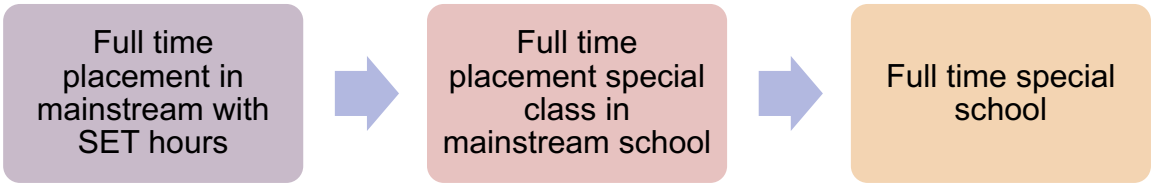
Inclusive Education – National Policy Context

As discussed in the international policy section, there has been a focus on ensuring and promoting inclusive and equitable education for all learners in international education policy. Irish education policy and legislation was slow to address inclusive education. The ratification of the UNCRC in 1992 was the first significant step towards inclusive education, which was followed by the Special Education Reform Committee (SERC) Report was set up to examine:

> the arrangements which should be put in place in order to provide for the educational requirements of such children {those with special needs} through complete or partial integration in ordinary schools (DES, 1993, p. 15).

This review was set up in light of a move internationally towards greater inclusion in the education system. These international policies previously discussed highlighted the importance of children with special educational needs being included as much as possible within mainstream provision. SERC (1993) examined how inclusive education could be advanced in Ireland although the wording of this was ambiguous "*as much integration as is appropriate and feasible with as little segregation"* (Government of Ireland, 1993, p. 22). It recommended a continuum of provision for learners with special educational needs (SEN) which ranged from full-time placement with additional support within mainstream classrooms to full-time placement in a special school. This continuum of provision remains today although the range of placement options have reduced as outlined in Figure 1.4:

Figure 1.4 Continuum of Provision



The SERC Report advocated an inclusive model of education where children with SEN would be provided with an individualised education through the use of resource and/or learning support teachers, more specialised teacher training, and the increased involvement of other professionals such as psychologists (Government of Ireland, 1993). While the SERC

Report would now be considered outdated, it provided the basis for including more learners with their peers instead of segregating them due to their disability category and highlighted the need for these improvements to be sufficiently resourced. Until the SERC report there had been little attention given to inclusive education in Ireland (Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley, 2008). While the SERC Report advocated less segregation because of disability the diagnosis of a disability entitled the learner to additional support, typically through the provision of learning support or resource hours. The slow progress in inclusive education resulted in litigation against the state, highlighted by the case of Paul O'Donoghue which brought into focus the issue of the education of children and young people with special educational needs. O'Donoghue was initially denied a primary school education on the basis that the one organisation that could provide an education for a 'mentally handicapped child' (Public Interest Law Alliance, 1993) did not have space. The subsequent ruling found that the State had a constitutional right to provide a free education for children, and that this entitlement included the education of 'handicapped' children. This right to education was central to the Education Act (1998) which provided that every child "*including any person with a disability or who has any other special educational needs*" (Government of Ireland, 1998, p. 5) had a right to an appropriate education, with autism being classified as a separate and distinct disability for the first time. The Act also provided for equality of access and the right of parents to send their child to a school of their [the parents] choice. While this meant that autistic learners could attend mainstream schools, the language was caveated with the phrase "*having regard to the rights of patrons and the effective and efficient use of resources*" (section 6). This wording resulted in some schools drafting admission policies which stipulated that resources for learners with SEN must be in place before enrolment thus preventing some children with SEN from attending their local mainstream school. The Equal Status Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) sought to address this anomaly by prohibiting schools from any form of discrimination in their admission policies. However, the wording is ambiguous as evidenced by the fact that in 2025, the DEY published further guidelines on preventing schools from having enrolment criteria which discriminated against the enrolment of autistic learners in autism classes (DEY Inspectorate, 2025b), this issue still being evident in the follow-up publication in 2026 (DEY Inspectorate, 2026a). Further legal action was brought by the Sinnott family (Supreme Court of Ireland, 2001) on behalf of their son, arguing that the government had an obligation to provide an education to their son for as long as he was able to benefit from the same. They were unsuccessful in gaining on-going education, but the right of education to the age of eighteen was clarified. This case highlighted failures in Ireland's education system for learners with SEN and was instrumental

in the enactment of key aspects of both the EPSEN and Disability Acts which will now be examined.

The Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act was a key piece of legislation and changed the educational landscape for children with special educational needs. Most notably, it stated that learners with SEN must be educated in inclusive environments with children who do not have SEN, however, this was caveated with the exception that if inclusion was not in the best interest of the learner or disrupted the education of others (Government of Ireland, 2004b) then it did not need to happen. While the act did not specify who held ultimate power over such decisions, it did recognise the role of parental involvement. However learners were not recognised as part of this decision-making process. The EPSEN Act also included the creation of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and provided it with statutory powers to coordinate and advise on special education services. The Act also promoted the provision of a more inclusive education system; however, it never defined what it considered an inclusive education system to be. Some aspects of the Act were never commenced and this has left a legacy of inadequate support (NCSE, 2006, 2009, 2014). Individual Education Plans (IEPs) were recommended but there was no statutory requirement for schools to provide them. Furthermore, the provision of services to fulfil any specific therapies or approaches (such as Speech and Language Therapy; Psychology or Occupational Therapy) named in any IEP that was written could not be enforced, neither could the requirement to provide SEN assessments. As the recommendation for an independent appeals process was not enacted either, this led to an Act that was in many ways compromised and powerless. The lack of definition of inclusive education and ambiguity of language also diluted the power of the Act (Shine-Thompson and Swärd, 2018). In particular, the language around the provision of inclusive education left much room for manoeuvre:

> A child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with—
>
> (a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or
>
> (b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated (Government of Ireland, 2004, section 2).

The language is ambiguous and key phrases such as "*inclusive environment*" and "*best interests*" could be interpreted very differently by various personnel working with the children. For example, inclusive environments could be interpreted as in the one building, in the same classroom or included with peers as best meets the needs of the learners. Best

interests could equally be interpreted as the best interests of the autistic students or of their mainstream peers and it is unclear who decides these best interests. The UNCRPD states that the child has the right to determine their own best interest, while Irish legislation under the Education Act stipulates the parents determine those rights. As the EPSEN act permits excluding children with special educational needs if it could be detrimental to the education of others, the model of inclusive education purported by the UNCRPD section 24 cannot be enacted until this aspect of EPSEN is amended (Murphy et al*.,* 2023). The Disability Act (2005) should have strengthened the rights of learners by legally obligating public bodies to ensure the accessibility of buildings, information and services. The Act further entitled learners to an Assessment of Need (AoN) which should have given them an independent assessment of educational needs entitling them to the requisite services. However, the AoN system is widely acknowledged not to be fit for purpose with many children waiting years for assessments (DCDE, 2025a). Also published around this time were the updated guidelines on supporting learners with SEN entitled 'Guidelines for Primary Schools Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Classes' (DE, 2024c) which explained the level and types of supports learners with SEN could access (Table 1.2):

Table 1.2: Levels of Support for Learners with SEN

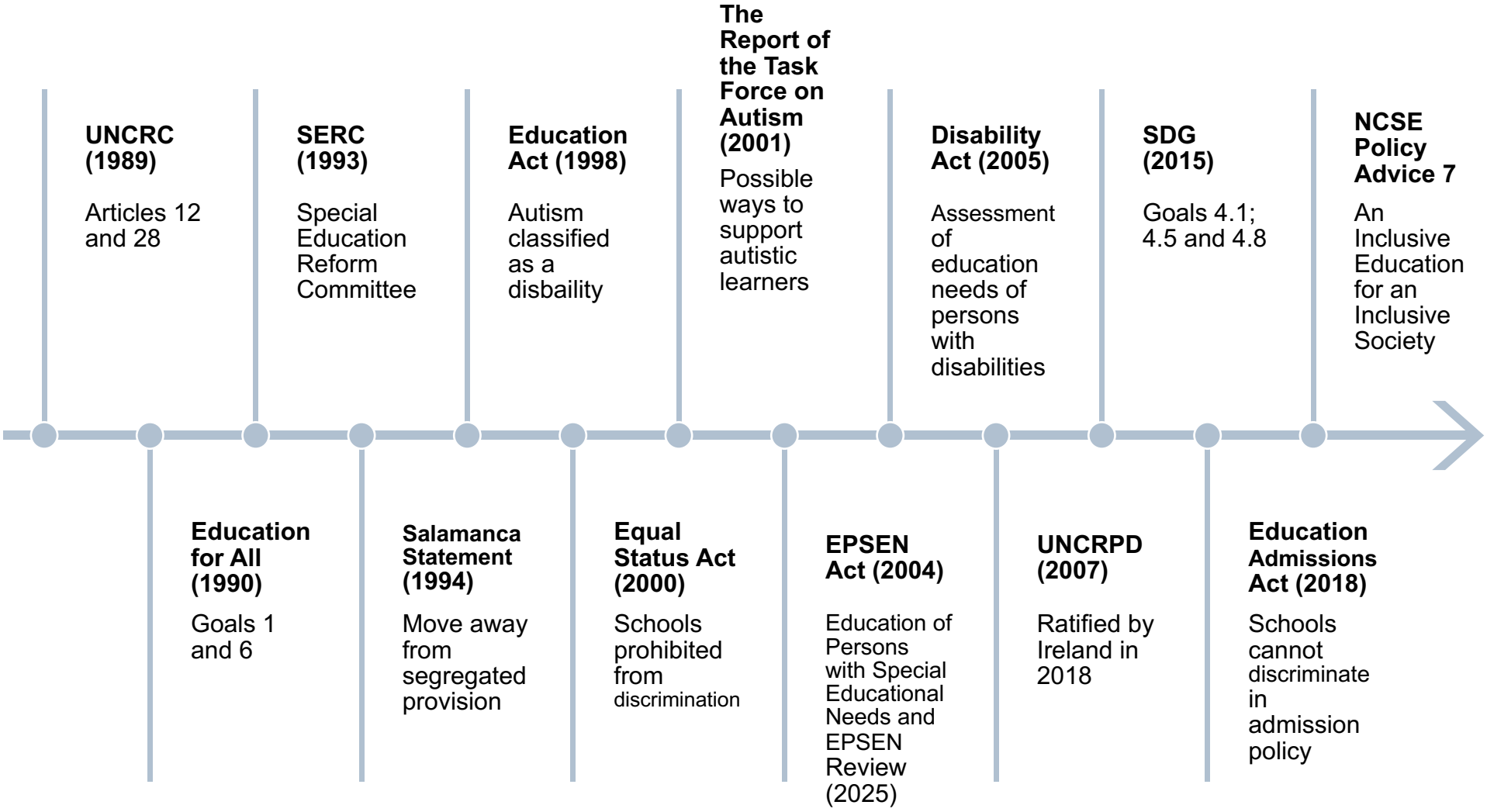
Tier	**Descriptor**
Whole School & Classroom Support for All	This is the first level of support. While a teacher will provide a differentiated learning programme for all of the learners, some may not respond to this. The Classroom Support plan is adjusted for some learners for an agreed period of time and is subject to review.
School Support for Some	This second level of support is required for learners who may need more targeted help or teaching approaches. The learners may be taught in smaller groups or small periods of time individually, for example, to improve literacy or numeracy targets. This School Support plan should operate for an agreed period of time and is subject to review.

School Support Plus for a Few	This level of the Continuum is informed by a detailed, systematic approach to information gathering and assessment using a broad range of formal and informal assessment tools and reports from outside professionals. A support plan at this level is likely to be more detailed and individualised and include longer term planning and consultation. All learners in autism classes are automatically placed on this level of support.

These levels of support did not require a child to have any formal diagnosis in order to access additional resources in the form of Special Education Teacher (SET) hours or differentiated learning programmes. In this way, a learner was not required to have gone through the Assessment of Need (AoN) process. The allocation of resources was at the discretion of the school, enhancing the agency of teachers to best meet the needs of their learners.

A review of the EPSEN Act was published in June 2025 (DE, 2025c) and contained over fifty one recommendations to enable Ireland's education system to be brought into line with international commitments to inclusive education under UNCRPD. Before synthesising the national and international policies and their impact on autistic learners and their inclusion in decision-making, the timeline for key national and international policy is shown in Figure 1.5:

Figure 1.5: Timeline of International and National Policy



The review of EPSEN (DE, 2025c) made a number of key recommendations for learners with SEN (AsIAm, 2025b). For the purpose of this research, those most pertaining to autism and the education of autistic learners will be examined with respect to both international and national policy (Table 1.3).

Table 1.3: International and National Policy Recommendations in EPSEN Review

Recommendation	Policy Aligned To	Impact on Autistic Learners
The education of all children should be under a single Act and based in a rights-based, inclusive education system.	All – national and international	A more streamlined educational system where learners' rights to have their voices listened to; views acted upon and the power to make decision regarding their own educational experiences are honoured.
Assessment of Needs (AoN) process is updated.	Disability Act 2005	Learners will have access to timely assessments which in turn should lead to the accessing of educational supports. Reviews of these supports should be regular and used to better meet any challenges the learners are facing.
Future legislation should define inclusive education in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and its core principles.	UNCRPD	Autistic learners would have the right to be included in non-segregated educational settings and to be involved in decision-making about their education.
The DE should develop a roadmap for introducing a more inclusive system while providing additional supports for those that need them.	UNCRC Salamanca UNCRPD	The learners' voices should be at the centre of decision-making in order to meet obligations under UNCRPD and ensure rights set out in

		both UNCRPD and UNCRC are respected and enabled.

(adapted from AsIAm's Explainer on DE EPSEN Act Review, AsIAM, 2025).

The EPSEN review aligned very closely with the most recent policy advice on special schools and classes which was published at the start of 2024 (NCSE, 2024a). This policy advice 'An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society' set out a number of targets which should be met in order to realise a more inclusive school system and made a number of recommendations for the Irish government. Three recommendations in particular were given around learner placement, provision and review (these were not exclusive to autism classes). The first policy recommendation was that a framework should be developed which standardised the decision-making process for placement and review. This was partially addressed with Circular 0023/2025 'Review of Enrolment in a Special Class' (DE, 2025a). Regardless of professional advice around placement and the outcome of the review, a learner cannot be moved from an autism class to full-time placement in a mainstream class without the consent of the parents. However, this creates a tension with the UNCRPD which states that educational placement should be the decision of the learner (UNCRPD/C/GC/4, 2016). The second policy recommendation in the NCSE (2024) document concerned embedding Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles throughout the school system. The theoretical underpinning of UDL is that difference and diversity should be expected and proactively planned for, rather than something that is 'added-on' or seen as additional or special (Novak, 2022). Arguably, moving away from autism classes and instead creating inclusive learning spaces which would be of benefit to all students, as required, would be a move towards these principles. An inclusive learning space should be an environment that could be used by all students where they are respected and valued (NCSE et al., 2009). The third policy recommendation suggested that the education agencies start to work together in a consistent and collegiate way. Currently education stakeholders including the NCSE; National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) mostly work separately from each other. The recommendation was that these agencies create a relevant assessment and data gathering process which standardises education for students with SEN. This could, if enacted correctly, remove ambiguity and prevent exclusionary practices around continued enrolment in autism classes. The NCSE provides supports to schools and teachers around TPL; NEPS provide a support to schools, families and children to support all aspects of the educational experience and the NCCA provides support on curriculum and assessment. By aligning priorities, the NCSE could provide more targeted TPL to school staff based on challenges that learners in schools were experiencing and the curriculum could be more responsive to those challenges. Each

agency could provide information to the other with each drawing on their own area of expertise to provide more targeted supports in a more responsive manner.

Concurrently with both the EPSEN Review and the NCSE policy advice was the Final Report of the Joint Committee on Autism which reviewed the provision of services to the autistic community (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023). It found that the DEY had a policy of "*segregation by neurotype"* (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023, p. 20). Autistic learners are recommended for special class places far in excess of any other neurotype, and unlike any other identified educational need the placement is not time-limited (NCSE, 2009, 2015, 2016b, 2024b, 2024a). A more nuanced argument has to be made around whether pursuing a policy which both the Inspectorate and the Houses of the Oireachtas consider segregation (DES and Inspectorate, 2020; Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023) is actually segregation. The UNCRPD states that "*segregation occurs when the education of students with disabilities is provided in separate environments designed or used to respond to a particular impairment… in isolation from students without disabilities*" (UNCRPD, 2016, p. 2). If autism classes are seen to be a segregated form of education then Ireland is in direct contravention of its responsibilities which would have policy implications.

Recent Developments in Autism Class Enrolment and Review of Placement

This 'Review of Enrolment in a Special Class' circular released in May 2025 aimed to formalise the review of autism class placement (DE, 2025a). It outlines that the reviews should take place on an annual basis at a minimum and highlights the needs for schools to be inclusive in their policies and practices. It advises that schools must be particularly cognisant that learners in special classes may not experience the sense of belonging and connectedness to the same extent as their mainstream peers. The circular also acknowledges that educational needs change over time and while a learner may initially have required the additional support of an autism class, the level of need may not be enduring allowing the learner to transition to a mainstream classroom full-time. Placement in an autism class is intended for "*children and young people with the more complex needs"* (DEY Inspectorate, 2025, p. 2), however, it is intended that these learners will also spend time with their mainstream peers either in the mainstream classroom; in the autism class or in the school yard. As such there may be daily movement between the autism and mainstream class settings (NCSE, 2024b, 2024a; DEY, 2025f; DEY Inspectorate, 2025a). There is also mention of the importance of the learners' own views and expectations of their educational experience being taken into account using the Lundy Model (DCEDIY, 2021) although they may not necessarily attend the review meeting. No mention is given as to who makes the decision around on-going placement or transition to mainstream. There is no

clear direction to schools on whether autistic learners must be made aware of their rights, however, schools must be rights-compliant so arguably the DEY should be ensuring schools are cognisant of their obligations.

In its report on inspections of thirty primary autism classes, the Department of Education Inspectorate highlighted the lack of review of special class placement - with only half of schools undertaking a formal review - meaning *"children may be inappropriately enrolled in a special class for a significant period of their time in primary school"* (p.14). No children had transitioned from the autism class in 60% of the schools, with only one transitioning in a further 23% (DEY Inspectorate, 2025a). It reiterates the purpose of the autism classes as designed for *"autistic pupils who are unable to access the curriculum in a mainstream class, even with support, for most or all of the school day"* (p. 5). The report highlights the need for a redefinition of autism classes in light of Ireland's ratification of the UNCRPD article 24, and also the published policy advice (NCSE, 2024a) which states the importance of the *"progressive realisation of the Irish inclusive education system where all local schools are enabled to educate all students in their community and in line with the students strengths and abilities"* (NCSE, 2024a, p. 115). This document produced by the Department of Education Inspectorate reports on the admission policies of thirty schools with autism classes – fifteen primary and fifteen post-primary. As this research is concerned only with primary schools, it is those results which will be discussed. Autism classes are established in mainstream schools for learners irrespective of their cognitive ability (NCSE, 2024b). The Inspectorate also reported on the enrolment practices of fifteen primary schools and found that they had clauses in their enrolment policies which, if implemented, could prevent children from enrolling based either on their cognitive ability or their ability to spend a specified percentage of the day in their peer mainstream class (DE Inspectorate, 2025). Four other clauses were also found to be in place in a number of schools:

1. Priority was given to autistic children already enrolled in the school if a place became available in the autism class.
2. If a student had a recommendation on their report for a special school or an autism class some schools had a clause which prevented the child from enrolling in the mainstream school.
3. Some schools had a clause around the 'potential behaviour' of students and would not enrol on those grounds despite not knowing the child.
4. Some schools requested additional documentation before enrolment. The decision for eligibility of enrolment into a special class lies with the NCSE in that the Special Educational Needs Organiser grants a special class placement (NCSE, 2024b).

This demonstrates that some schools are preventing autistic children with the greatest level of need from accessing a place in an autism class through exclusionary enrolment policies (DE Inspectorate, 2025; DEY Inspectorate, 2026a). This is evidence of systemic issues both at the point of, and on-going, enrolment of learners in autism classes due to a lack of review of placement.

Conclusion

Many of the documents discussed are not directly relevant to autism classes, and this in itself highlights the separateness of such provision. They are important to discuss as they chart the move towards a greater focus on inclusive practices. While there is clearly a segregation between the mainstream classes and autism classes, recent policy advice and updated Special Education Teaching (SET) documents have highlighted the importance of making schools more inclusive environments and have embedded these practices in the school planning process. However, the SET Guidelines are for supporting children in mainstream classes (DE, 2024a, 2024b). The language around the naming of the document appears to exclude learners from autism classes which contributes to schools concerns around resourcing as will be discussed in Chapter Two. Schools should now include learner participation and explain their inclusive practices for autistic learners as part of the whole school planning cycle (Government of Ireland, 2022a, 2022b; DE, 2024f). This is increasingly important as the rise in autism classes has been exponential. In a 25-year period autism classes have gone from being a rarity to being commonplace showing a 6000% increase, with a 99% increase in primary autism classes since 2020 (DEY, 2026a). The Oireachtas Committee report was scathing in declaring classes to be *"segregation by neurotype" (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023, p. 3)*. NCSE (2024a) policy advice highlights the difficulties with the 'separateness' of these classes within mainstream schools and questions the legality of them in respect to obligations under UNCRPD. There are a number of demands on schools to make sense of the vast literature and policy landscape and to enact these highly complex processes. There is no sign of a slowdown in the opening of autism classes with legislation being brought as recently as 2022 (Office of the Attorney General, 2022) to compel schools to open autism classes. As discussed in this chapter a greater focus on learner rights in areas of quality and inclusive education; decision-making on educational placement and the right for voices to be elicited and for those voices to be influential must become evident. Wider discussions on inclusive education both in separate and mainstream classes need to be examined in the context of defining inclusion and what existing autistic voices research recommends. Chapter Two will explore issues of

neurodiversity; voices and participation and the inclusion of autistic learners within the Irish primary school system.

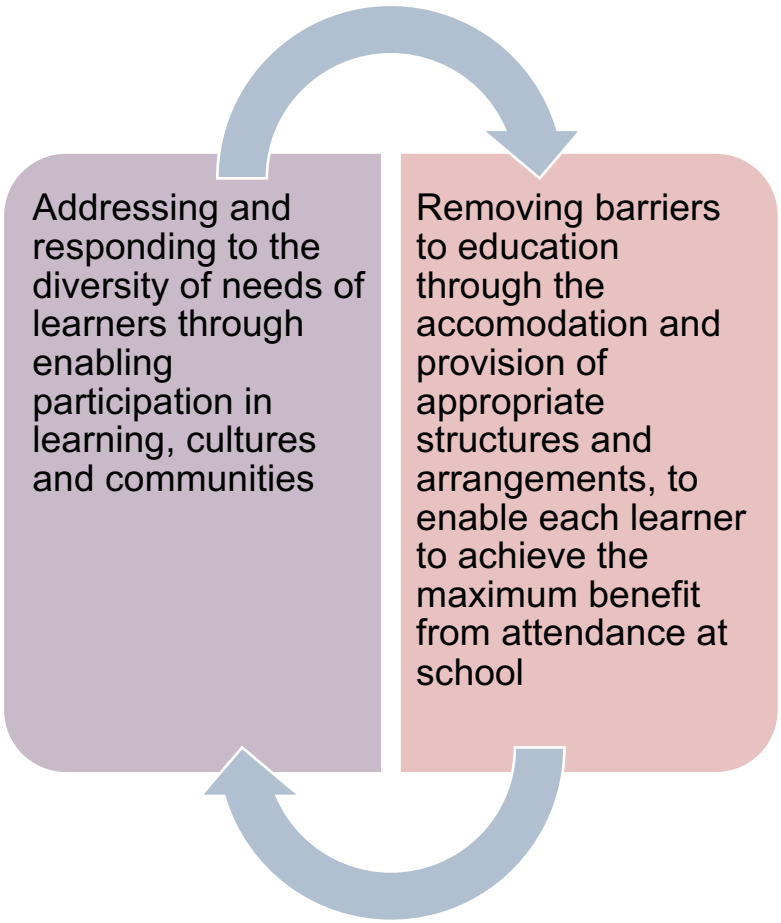
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The last twenty-five years has seen a shift in how inclusion in schools is viewed and implemented; how autism is viewed and understood and how learner voices must be sought and acted upon. This chapter will examine these issues specifically through the lens of autistic learners in primary schools, and how their voices are currently being heard in decision-making around their educational placement in autism classes. This chapter will also explore the tensions and dilemmas relating to autism classes in the context of inclusive education. It will begin with a discussion of inclusion and neurodiversity before moving on to autism in education. Then, the inclusion of autistic learners in the Irish education system will be examined. Finally, voices and participation and rights-based education will be interrogated.

Understanding Inclusion and Inclusive Education

As discussed in the previous chapter, the 'Education for All' movement and 'Salamanca Statement' significantly influenced international and national policy development in relation to inclusive education. However, there is no definitive definition of inclusion or inclusive education. Historically, inclusive education was seen as something that needed to be considered only for children with special educational needs (NCSE, 2011; Shevlin and Banks, 2021). It is now more widely accepted that meaningful inclusive education considers all the learners in terms of their participation and achievement in education by removing barriers which hinder access to education for all (Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2018; Ainscow, 2024b, 2024a; DEY, 2024b). The NCSE provides a definition of inclusive education which draws on the previously discussed UNESCO policy (2005) along with the DES definition (DES, 2007). Inclusive education is defined as a process (Figure 2.1):

Figure 2.1: Inclusion as a Process (NCSE et al., 2009)



Ainscow (Ainscow, 2024, p. 30) in his book 'Developing Inclusive Schools – Pathways to Success' summarises four principles which are integral to promoting inclusive educational settings that commonly arise across the literature and which are general agreed with in the wider literature:

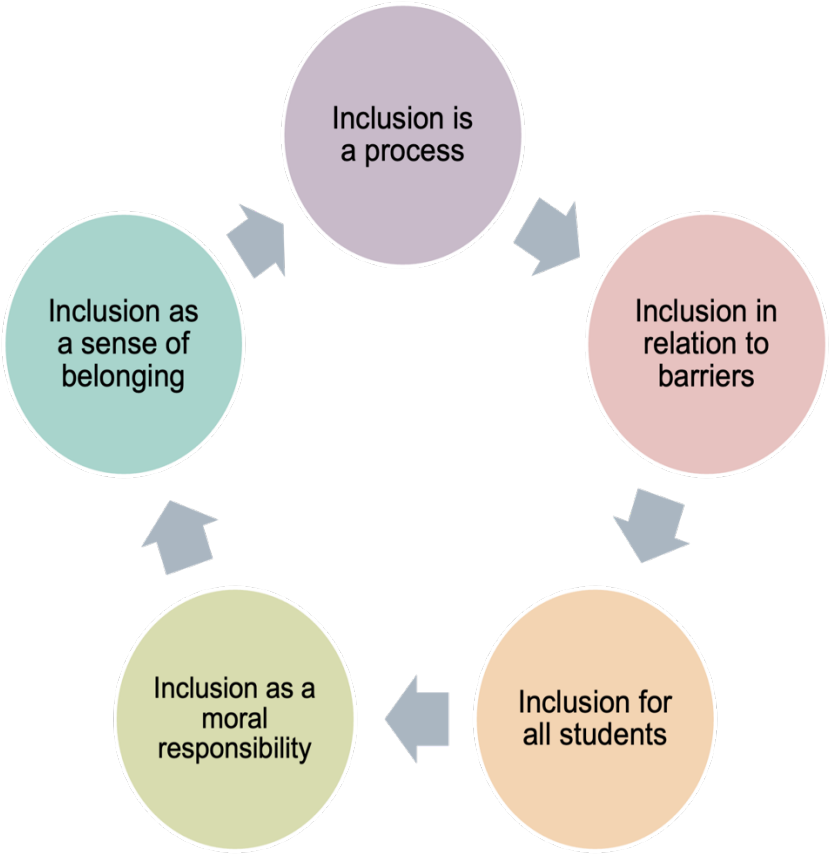
1. Inclusion is a process – schools must constantly evolve to ensure inclusion for all types of diversity and difference (NCSE et al., 2009; Shevlin and Banks, 2021).
2. Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers – this is the underpinning philosophy of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Barriers such as uncomfortable sensory environments; unsuitable communication requirements; lack of variety in teaching approaches are not for learners to endure but instead for schools to identify and change to better suit the preferences and requirements of their student population (CAST, 2018; Novak, 2022).
3. Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all learners – presence is about the physical environment in which the children are taught. For the purposes of this research the issue of participation as an indicator of educational

inclusion is pertinent. Participation not only refers to the learner experience but also to the views of the learners themselves on their educational experience (Lundy, 2007). Achievement is decided not just on academic targets but within the wider context of learning across the curriculum (Gormley et al., 2024).

4. Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement – while inclusive schools must be more than a focus on learners with additional or special needs, vigilance must be demonstrated to ensure those groups are not overlooked (Riddell, 2009).

The additional principle of inclusion as a sense of belonging has been added in the context of this study (Figure 2.2) to highlight the *"intersubjective experiences associated with feelings of belonging, acceptance, and value that are dynamic, ephemeral, spatial and in flux"* (Haegele and Maher, 2023, p. 385). Goodall's work with autistic students in an Irish context highlights the importance of a sense of belonging is particularly important for this cohort of students (Goodall, 2018b, 2020). The issue of belonging and in particular the intricacies of autistic friendship highlight and support the importance of this to learners in feeling they are part of an inclusive education system (Calder, Hill and Pellicano, 2013; Black et al., 2024; Garvey, 2024; Libster et al., 2025). Conversely, the feeling of alienation or not being included has been shown to have a negative effect both on the educational experiences of autistic learners and on their mental health (Goodall, 2018a; Cunningham, 2022; Rees and Tissot, 2023). Belonging goes beyond both the physical belonging to a place and also extends beyond autistic learners (Prince and Hadwin, 2013; Rose and Shevlin, 2017; Long and Guo, 2023). Belonging is included as a factor but moves beyond physical placement and recognises the importance of the subjective and inward experiences of learners, feeding into participation and the importance of eliciting voices about their own feelings of inclusion. These issues of participation and meaningful and authentic inclusion will be revisited throughout this and the remaining chapters. Figure 2.2 provides a visualisation of inclusive education factors.

Figure 2.2: Visualisation of Inclusive Education Factors



Inclusion is defined in many ways (NCSE et al., 2009; Riddell, 2009; Shevlin and Banks, 2021; Ainscow, 2024a; NCSE, 2024a) but a clear distinction is made in the UNCRPD between integration and inclusion. Integration relates to students being included in a classroom with no accommodations being made for any learning difference or disability, whereas inclusion relates to the student being present and participating with their mainstream peers whilst having their learning and personal requirements and preferences met and accounted for (UNCRPD, 2007). It could be argued that many schools are integrating their autistic students but not moving to a position of inclusion (DES and Inspectorate, 2020; Travers, 2023; NCSE, 2024a) which is preventing students moving from a special class setting to full mainstream inclusion. An inclusive education system is not the same as an integrated education system.

For the purposes of this research, the definition of inclusion has been woven together from interrogating the many definitions that currently exist in the literature taking account of the rights-based, neuroaffirmative stance underpinning this study. All of the conceptualisations are inextricably linked, which is, in part, why one single definition is elusive. Riddell's (2009) view of inclusion is formed in part from geographical experience. Inclusion is formulated as a wider moral responsibility to narrow the gap caused by

inequality through social, economic or additional educational needs. This aspect of moral responsibility is also drawn from the placement of autistic learners in autism classes as an "*administrative convenience*" (Shevlin and Banks, 2021, p. 9) which cannot be acceptable. The removal of barriers which are embedded in UDL principles (NCSE, 2024a) should reduce environmental challenges and increase autonomy for learners making inclusion in mainstream classes more possible. The removal of barriers can also refer to a greater flexibility in placement allowing more learners to move between classes in schools regardless of formal placement or diagnosis. Removing barriers links then to inclusion being for all learners (Ainscow, 2024b, 2024a) and also to the sense of belonging, not just in the physical placement of learners but being indicative of participation and partnership. As mentioned previously, inclusion as a sense of belonging is not unique to autistic learners (Prince and Hadwin, 2013; Rose and Shevlin, 2017; Long and Guo, 2023), however, it is also important to include the voices of autistic learners which is reflected in the 'inclusion as a sense of belonging' element reflecting recent research in the Irish context (Goodall, 2020; Horgan, 2025). This moves beyond physical placement creating an environment where learners feel they belong and are included regardless of whether this is in a mainstream class or an autism class. Considering the nuances of definitions of inclusion and attempting to reflect the multi-faceted nature of the process, inclusive education will be defined for the purpose of this study as 'a process in which the educational needs of all learners are considered, respected and accepted in addition to emotional wellbeing and a sense of belonging being paramount'.

Understanding Autism

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5 Text Revision (DSM-5-TR) or International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-10) states that to receive a diagnosis of autism a child must show a difference in social communication and social interaction skills coupled with the presence of repetitive behaviours (RRBs), intense and special interests and sensory processing differences (ICD-10 2016; APA, 2022). Currently autism is defined as a diagnosed disability. This separate category of educational classification has been in place since the 1998 Education Act. In order to be eligible for a place in an autism class, a student needs to have received a diagnosis of autism using the DSM-5 or ICD-10 criterion. The neurodiversity paradigm will be discussed in the next section, however, in relation to accessing and being enrolled in an autism class a medical diagnosis is required. This is contradictory to the neuroaffirmative approach taken in much of the policy produced by the DEY and NCSE. The preference of many in the autistic community is the neuroaffirmative approach which makes the moves from deficit based

diagnosis to a position of difference or neurodivergence (Kenny et al., 2016; Pellicano and Houting, 2022; Lai, Aoki and Seera, 2025), however, this is not universally the case (Baron-Cohen, 2019). The neurodiversity paradigm does not necessarily call for no diagnosis; it is how we conceptualise the diagnosis that needs to be examined. The medical model comes from a flawed or deficit within the individual, whereas the neurodiversity paradigm speaks of difference and barriers to learning existing in the environment not the learner.

There are three theoretical viewpoints to consider with regards to understanding autism: the medical model, the neurodiversity paradigm, and the social model. While the previous section discussed the definition of autism as a disability, this way of understanding autism is refuted by many in the autistic community (Pellicano and Houting, 2022) as too deficit focused, too individualistic (the 'blame' for any difficulties that an autistic person has is placed within the individual rather than looking at the wider environment or societal factors) and it excludes too many voices. Autistic advocate Donna Williams stated that autism is constantly judged from those 'outside', from medical personnel or therapists (Williams, 1996) negating the lived experiences of autistic individuals. This has evolved since Williams' book, but it has taken autistic adults to lead and progress the conversation (Lai, Aoki and Seera, 2025). In this context, any difficulty or difference is viewed as a result of something which needs to be 'fixed' or intervened upon coming from within the individual (Hodge, Douglas and Byrne, 2023). By adopting a neurodivergent stance, or supporting the neurodiversity paradigm, the onus is on educational systems to adapt and accommodate a wide range of difference within learners. Difference is to be expected and should be proactively planned for (Al-Azawei, Serenelli and Lundqvist, 2016; Basham, Gardner and Smith, 2020; Almeqdad et al., 2023). However, the categorising of autism as a distinct and separate disability under Irish legislation could be argued to be advantageous for some learners (Goodall, 2018b). It provides for some autistic learners to access an enhanced student-to-adult ratio and learning environment where greater considerations can be given to their sensory preferences (NCSE, 2024b). An additional layer of rights is given to autistic learners due to the classification of autism as a disability under the UNCRPD. This gives learners the right to access an inclusive education with their peers. It should give autistic learners an additional level of autonomy over their educational placement as their rights take precedence over the views of their parents/carers:

> A fundamental human right of all learners. Notably, education is the right of the individual learner, and not, in the case of children, the right of a parent or caregiver. Parental responsibilities in this regard are subordinate to the rights of the child. (UNCRPD/C/GC/4, 2016, p. 3).

Reportedly coined by Singer (Singer, 2017) the term neurodiversity has come to be understood as a way of describing "*the range of natural development that exists in human neurodevelopmen*t" (Pellicano and Houting, 2022, p. 386). The term stands with the definition of neurotypical *"a person whose neurodevelopment falls within the range usually thought to constitute 'typical' development"* and neurodivergent *"a person whose neurodevelopment falls outside of - or diverges from - the range usually considered to constitute 'typical' development"* (Pellicano and Houting, 2022, p. 386). In this way, autistic people would be neurodivergent, as their neurodevelopment would be different from the majority of the population. Unlike a diagnosed disability which is often seen as something to be fixed, there are two strands underpinning the neurodiversity stance. Neurodiversity encompasses all thinkers and learners – as no two people think or experience life exactly the same, difference is to be expected and valued. A neurodivergent thinker may think differently to a neurotypical thinker, however, difference and deficit are not the same thing (Amundson, 2000). Secondly, the neurodiversity paradigm includes all autistic and neurodivergent thinkers – it does not classify people as low or high functioning; or talk of complexities of needs (Dinishak and Akhtar, 2023; Bury et al., 2023). However, as the concept of the neurodiversity paradigm was not created by any one piece of research (Botha et al., 2024) it also has its critics. While some believe the move away from the deficit medical model to a place where difference is valued is a positive move (Walker and Raymaker, 2021) others would disagree, arguing that it removes access to essential supports and diminishes the voices of those with more complex challenges (Lutz, 2015; Perrelet et al., 2025). A third way of viewing autism would be through the lens of the social model. This model aligns more with the social model of disability (Degener, 2016) which places the issue of (dis)ability as a social construct whereby individuals are disabled by their environments and society. This approach is embedded in the Universal Design for Learning movement which posits that removing barriers to learning will enhance learning experiences for all. The social model (Dwyer, 2022) would support the removal of barriers for autistic learners such as uncomfortable or overwhelming sensory environments, while retaining essential supports and scaffolds. Furthermore, research around the age at which you are made aware of your autistic identity and the impact that has on your quality of life is contentious (Oredipe et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2024; Ali, Mandy and Happé, 2026) with some pointing towards the advantages of knowing at an earlier age and some finding older is better as the individual may be more mature. However, issues that are consistent across the existing research is the difficulty many children have at primary school in negotiating their own perceived difference (Botha and Frost, 2020; Atkinson, Wood-Downie and Wright, 2024). The research either focuses on learners who know they are autistic and can advocate on that basis (Goodall,

2021; Cunningham, 2022; Ward, Gormley and Coulter, 2026) or (young) adults retrospectively reflecting on their primary school experience (Jordan et al., 2019; Billington, Loucas and Knott, 2024). Of those reflecting, recurring themes of loneliness and difference, and feelings of isolation were reported which could be attributed to a lack of awareness or understanding around challenges that may have been present (Caslin, 2023; Tesfaye et al., 2023).

In terms of researcher positionality, as a neurotypical adult I would align myself with the neurodiversity paradigm and social model arguments – all people think differently and none of us can claim superiority over another person's method of thinking or means of processing information. However, as someone who has worked as a teacher in autism class and is now involved in teacher professional learning in autism I accept that learners in receipt of an autism diagnosis, and therefore who are considered to have a disability in respect of the Education Act (1998), brings a level of resourcing and staff support not available to students in mainstream placements. Some students report that they prefer their autism class to mainstream classrooms as these (their mainstream classes) have been unhappy educational experiences (Forde et al., 2018; Goodall, 2018b, 2018a; Horgan, Kenny and Flynn, 2023). This is a tension demonstrated in the Irish system, where policy promotes neuro-affirmative practice, it also maintains a medicalised view of autism as resources are dependent on a diagnosis. The context of autism class provision in Ireland and the sustainability of the current system given the contradictions between inclusive education and 'segregation by neurotype' will now be discussed.

Context of Autism Education Provision in Ireland and the Rise of Autism Classes

Most schools in Ireland will have neurodivergent students, including autistic learners, attending mainstream classes on a full-time basis. Latest figures show that approximately one in four children, 240,000, will require extra support, with 22,000 in special classes (Parliamentary Questions, 2026). Some children receive their diagnosis prior to starting school and some may receive it during their school career. Neither parents, nor students, are under any obligation to inform the school that their child (or themselves in the case of the learner) is autistic. Ireland's growth in autism class provision is unique, while the increase in prevalence is in line with its European neighbours. The prevalence of autism has grown from the 1.5% quoted in the Task Force Report to 3.38% in the 'Inclusive Education for and Inclusive Society' (NCSE, 2024a), with the Autism Innovation Strategy placing it at 5% (DCEDIY, 2024). The rise in autism classes in primary schools has shown a 99% increase since 2020 (DEY, 2026a). The parental desire for autism classes has contributed to the increase in special class provision (Travers, 2023). As children often enter primary school at

four or five years of age, it is usually the choice of the parents to enrol their child(ren) in an autism class. Parents who have a recommendation for their child to be placed in a special class often feel that their child will be better supported and be taught by more specialised staff if they take a place, although again the evidence is not there to fully support these beliefs (Mathur and Koradia, 2018; Ring and Daly, 2018; Hodges et al., 2020; NCSE, 2024a). Given the communication and sensory differences that many autistic learners experience, parents may feel that the best educational placement for their child is in an autism class instead of with their mainstream peers. This has led to a continual rise in the demand for autism classes by parents who may feel that the ratio of staff to students in an autism class is preferential, with one teacher and two SNAs for six learners (NCSE, 2024b). Until 2025 there had not been a fixed closing date for enrolment in autism classes. However, to facilitate planning and to ensure capacity for all children who were entitled to a space, a date was set by the NCSE in 2025. At the time of the closing date (1st October 2025) twice the number of students had applied for places in autism classes for 2026/27 than in 2025/26 clearly demonstrating that the demand has not subsided.

However, there are a number of points of dissonance for many autistic learners in relation to their education. Critically, while autistic learners should have enhanced autonomy due to their rights under UNCRC (1989) and UNCRPD (2007) the enactment of same arguably does not happen. The majority of autistic learners who start their primary education in autism classes do not transition from those classrooms to mainstream education (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023; DEY, 2024b; NCSE, 2024a). Despite repeated policy advice; policy and circulars from both the DEY and NCSE only half of schools undertake regular reviews of placement in autism classes (DEY, 2025a; DEY Inspectorate, 2025a), and there is limited evidence that learners are included in those reviews (DEY, 2025a). Furthermore, as the majority of autistic learners enrolled in special classes have never experienced full-time mainstream education it would be difficult for them to give an informed opinion on their placement, although this does not mean they should not be enabled to do so. The voices of all other stakeholders: parents, teachers and principals, are included in reviews of placement (Emam and Farrell, 2009; Mathur and Koradia, 2018; Hodges et al., 2020; Warren, Buckingham and Parsons, 2021). Under Irish legislation it is the right of the parent to continue or cease an autism class placement. Teachers and principals may be reluctant to recommend the cessation of an autism class placement as there are no additional resources or staff granted to schools transitioning learners from autism classes. Should the mainstream placement be unsuccessful, and the autism class place already have been filled, there is no opportunity for the learner to transition back to the autism class. Therefore, in this way the system arguably disincentivizes transition.

A number of events happened in Ireland in a relatively short space of time which led to both the introduction of autism classes, and a year-on-year increase in the opening of new classes by the NCSE. As discussed, the implementation of the UNCRC in 1989 instigated a global move towards inclusive education. This was swiftly followed by the Education for All (1990) movement, the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the introduction of the UNCRPD (introduced in 2009 but not ratified by Ireland until 2018). Specifically in Ireland, there was the SERC report (1993), the Education Act (1998) and the court cases of both O'Donoghue and Sinnott (PILA, 1993; ESCR, 2001) which brought the issue of all children being entitled to receive an appropriate education based primarily on their learning needs rather than their medical needs to the attention of both the state and the wider public given the high profile nature of the cases (Shevlin and Banks, 2021).

The Report of the Task Force on Autism (DES, 2001) made a number of recommendations around best practice for educating autistic learners. It should be noted that at the time of the report being produced autism was still being split into multiple categories: Aspergers Syndrome/High Functioning Autism (AS/HFA); Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) and Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The recommendations from the report tended to centre around the cognitive functioning of the learners. Therefore, the report highlighted that a range of educational placements may be required depending on the "*adaptive functioning and intellectual ability"* (DES, 2001, p. 159) of the individual primary aged child. The preference of the Task Force Report was for:

> Full-time placement in an inclusion class, i.e. a small mainstream class (overall maximum of fifteen children), comprising one to three children with special educational needs together with eight to twelve normally developing children. The class would be taught by two teachers with additional qualifications/experience in special education (DES, 2001, p. 160).

It is not documented how the Department of Education moved from the above recommendation to a policy of opening autism special classes with a staffing of one teacher and two special needs assistants (SNAs) to six autistic children (maximum). There are currently 2751 autism classes in primary schools (DEY, 2025b). This number of autism classes in primary mainstream schools has doubled since 2020 (DEY Inspectorate, 2025a). In addition to the 'The Task Force' two other documents were key to the implementation of autism classes (Table 2.1)

Table 2.1: Key National Policies for Autism Classes

Policy	Key Features	Implications for this Research
Report of the Task Force on Autism (2001)	The Report of the Task Force on Autism explored how autistic students should be best supported and educated in Ireland. Autism had only recently been included as a separate and distinct disability in the 1998 Education Act, and there had been a number of legal cases brought against the State regarding the type of education available to students. Prior to this report, many autistic students had been denied access to their local primary school and had been placed in a special school setting (PILA, 1993; ESCR, 2001).	The report highlighted in its recommendations that autistic children should be included as much as possible in mainstream with appropriate supports; that review of placement should take place at least annually and that multi-disciplinary support should be provided. At the time of publishing there were 42 autism classes in Ireland, there were 2543 autism classes in primary schools in the academic year 2025/26 (DEY, 2025f). The report made several pages of recommendations (DES, 2001) which adopted a lifelong approach to both education and support which may be required by the autistic person.
International Review of the Literature of Evidence of Best Practice Provision in the Education of Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (2009)	The 'International Review of the Literature of Evidence of Best Practice Provision in the Education of Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders' (NCSE, 2024a) highlighted the importance of using evidence-based approaches to supporting autistic students, identifying 34	This review provided the evidence informed practices which underpinned the 2015 document "Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools' (NCSE, 2015). Although many of these approaches would not be used in schools now (McGill and Robinson, 2021) due to new knowledge

	internationally which could be adopted into the Irish setting.	of best practice, the international review provided research driven practices for implementation in the growing number of autism classes.
Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools - Policy Advice Paper No. 5 (2015)	This was a seminal document when it was released in 2015 (NCSE, 2015) and was accompanied by a supporting document for parents/carers explaining the types of support that should be provided for their children in the autism class (NCSE, 2016b).	The document provided a structure for the types of approaches that could best support autistic learners in schools. These approaches were evidence-based and Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) could be accessed by teachers through the NCSE. The TPL was free to teachers and substitution cover was provided for schools in order that teachers could attend. The TPL was open to all teachers in both mainstream classes; special classes and special schools. This aimed to enhance learning opportunities and also better inform school staff as to how to support autistic learners. It also provided structure and professional guidance around running autism classes, reiterating the importance of research and evidenced based approaches.

The report by the Houses of the Oireachtas entitled ‘Towards Harmonisation of National Legislation with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities’ (Crowley, 2024) highlighted the limited progress that had been made in moving towards an inclusive education system. It explicitly referred to the rise in autism classes and stated, *“the Committee believe that inclusion should be more than individuals coming in the same gate together, to then be segregated based on their needs”* (Crowley, 2024, p. 96). It could be argued that COVID-19 delayed the work of progressing educational inclusion and research would indicate that autistic learners were disproportionately affected (IHREC, 2020; Inclusion Ireland, 2020; Senior et al., 2025). The rise in new autism classes shows no sign of abating with a further 168 new classes being announced as an initial figure for 2026/27 (O’Donoghue and Osborne, 2026). However, there has been a new focus on autism classes from the perspective of the DEY, the Inspectorate and the NCSE, and in particular on both the enrolment of learners into autism classes and a heightened emphasis on those placements being reviewed (Kearney, 2024; NCSE, 2024b, 2024a; DEY, 2025f, 2025e, 2025a; DEY Inspectorate, 2025a). The continued preference of parents to choose autism classes for their children (Mathur and Koradia, 2018; Hodges et al., 2020; Waltman, 2021; NCSE, 2024a) versus the need for Ireland to comply with its UNCRPD obligations and national policy recommendations (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021, 2023) prompts a discussion on the sustainability of autism classes.

While a contradiction is present between Irish law and Ireland’s obligations under the UNCRPD as to the power dynamic of who has the ultimate decision on school placement, this does not supersede the right of voices. Learners should be given a say in the initial enrolment process into an autism class, but currently that is a bureaucratic exercise between the diagnosing professionals and the NCSE. In order to meet the eligibility criteria for enrolment in an autism class the learner must have a diagnosis of autism plus evidence of complex educational needs with a recommendation for special class placement which details the rationale for the placement (DE, 2024g). There is no explicit definition as to what constitutes a complex educational need. There is a requirement for both the professional writing the report and the NCSE who approves the placement to ask the learner about their preferences, however, these options do not feature on any of the required documentation (NCSE, 2022b, 2022a, 2025a). While this is clearly in violation of the learners’ rights to have a choice on their educational placement, these rights are further eroded by the on-going nature of the majority of autism class placements.

The sustainability of autism classes.

The sustainability of autism classes must be considered not only in financial terms, but also in relation to their feasibility and suitability as part of an inclusive education system. The financial cost of separate autism classes is significant. In 2025 more than a quarter of the budget for education (€13.1 billion) was spent on special classes (DEY, 2025c), the majority of which are autism classes (over 85%) (Oireachtas, 2023). This funding could support a more sophisticated model that aligns with the UNCRPD.

The sustainability of autism classes as part of the wider inclusive education discussion is a larger issue. Many autistic learners report feeling more comfortable in smaller classes, or being away from the mainstream (Goodall, 2018b; Williams, Gleeson and Jones, 2019; Billington, Loucas and Knott, 2024; Lynam et al., 2024), however, many do not experience mainstream education (NCSE, 2024a). Furthermore, it is central to inclusive education philosophy, the neurodiversity paradigm and the social model that a learner's inability to feel comfortable in an educational setting is not the fault of the learner, but the fault of the system which does not value and respect difference (Goodall, 2020; Merry, 2020; DCEDIY, NDA and DCU, 2024). If the five factors of inclusive education detailed previously are considered in terms of sustainability, then the longevity of them must be examined (see table 2.2):

Table 2.2: Five Factors of Inclusive Education Through the Lens of Sustainability

Five Factors of Inclusive Education	Implications for the Sustainability of Autism Classes
Inclusion is a process	The sustainability of autism classes cannot be viewed as a process due to their unchanging nature since their introduction into the educational system.
Inclusion in relation to barriers	The barriers for autistic learners moving to mainstream still exist in Ireland parental rights take precedence over learner preferences.
Inclusion for all students	Autistic learners in autism classes are separated from their peers by the 'segregation by neurotype' approach (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023).

Inclusion as a moral responsibility	There is a moral obligation – and right - to hear the voices of learners around their special class placement.
Inclusion as a sense of belonging	The limited research undertaken which included autistic voices found that autistic learners felt a sense of emotional belonging, particularly with their autistic peers.

The sustainability of autism classes in the context of Ireland moving towards an inclusive education system cannot be dismissed. As can be seen from Table 2.2, there are contradictions in each of the factors between policy obligations and the current trajectory of autism classes. The rights of the learners to voice opinions and be involved in the decision-making process around special class placement must be prioritised. The following section will examine the voices of core stakeholders in autism education.

Examining Voices of Core Stakeholders in Autism Education

There are a number of core stakeholders involved in the education of all learners which is not exclusive to autistic learners, including the learners; parents/carers; teacher and principals. For learners who are enrolled in autism classes there are additional layers of stakeholders. A diagnosis of autism is required by a multi-disciplinary team consisting of psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists (SLT) and Occupational Therapists (OT). However, because of long waiting lists in the public health system (NCSE, 2024b, 2024a; DCDE, 2025b) parents may choose to have their child assessed privately meaning that only one professional will meet the child (Howes, Burns and Surtees, 2021; NCSE, 2024a; DE Inspectorate, 2025). It may be the case that after an initial diagnosis there is no further engagement with the medical professional who assessed the child. If a recommendation of enrolment in an autism class is made then this report will be sent to the Special Educational Needs Officer (SENO) in the NCSE. If the child meets the criteria for enrolment (autism and evidence of complex needs) (NCSE, 2024b), a school placement is sought and the child is enrolled. The SENO may have no further involvement in the placement unless it breaks down or the child transitions to another educational placement, setting or mainstream class (DE, 2025). The key stakeholders are the learner; their parents/carers; autism class teacher; mainstream class teacher and principal. As previously discussed, there is a contradiction between Irish legislation and the UNCRPD. General comment 24 states that the child's views on their educational placement should take precedence over parental preference,

however, Irish legislation affords greater rights to the parents. While the work of some researchers in Ireland has started to seek the voices of autistic learners this is still an area which requires further study. There is limited evidence of the voices of school personnel and parents/carers around education in autism class (Crane et al*.,* 2018; Kendall, 2019; Hodges et al*.,* 2020; Goodall, 2021) and very little at primary school level.

Understanding voices and participation.

Voices, participation and communication are all used by the UNCRC to describe the rights that children have in relation to their education and specifically article 12. For clarity it is important to define how the term voices is conceptualised throughout this research. Firstly, the term voices is used to highlight the number of ways a learner may use to communicate. With 25-30% of autistic learners using communication beyond spoken words (Brignell et al., 2018) it is important to acknowledge and encourage multiple forms of communication. It is also important to recognise that while many autistic learners do communicate with spoken word this may not be their preferred means of communication (Nind, Boorman and Clarke, 2012; Heasman et al., 2024), and that silence can be a strong form of communication (Gutiérrez and Arroyo Paniagua, 2024). This links to the importance of relationships and that sense of belonging defined previously and ensuring that learners feel emotionally, physically and sensorially safe to enhance the chance of communication occurring and voices being elicited (Milton, 2012; Tesfaye et al., 2019; Courchesne et al*.,* 2022; Øverland et al*.,* 2025). The speaks to the relational understanding of voices and communication (Facca, Gladstone and Teachman, 2020; Haegele and Maher, 2023). The last conceptualisation reflects the diversity of voices in this research. Multiple stakeholders are interviewed providing a range of different perspectives and beliefs, and it is critical to acknowledge that different experiences give rise to different voices. The power dynamics attributed to whose voices are heard will be discussed later in the research, but that difference must be acknowledged in the use of the stated terminology (Facca, Gladstone and Teachman, 2020; Shevlin and Rose, 2022; Skerritt, 2023). Hart (1992) describes participation as "*the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the community in which one lives"* (Hart, 1992). The expanded General Comment No. 7 which focuses on 'Implementing Child Rights on Early Childhood' makes three statements pertinent to this research:

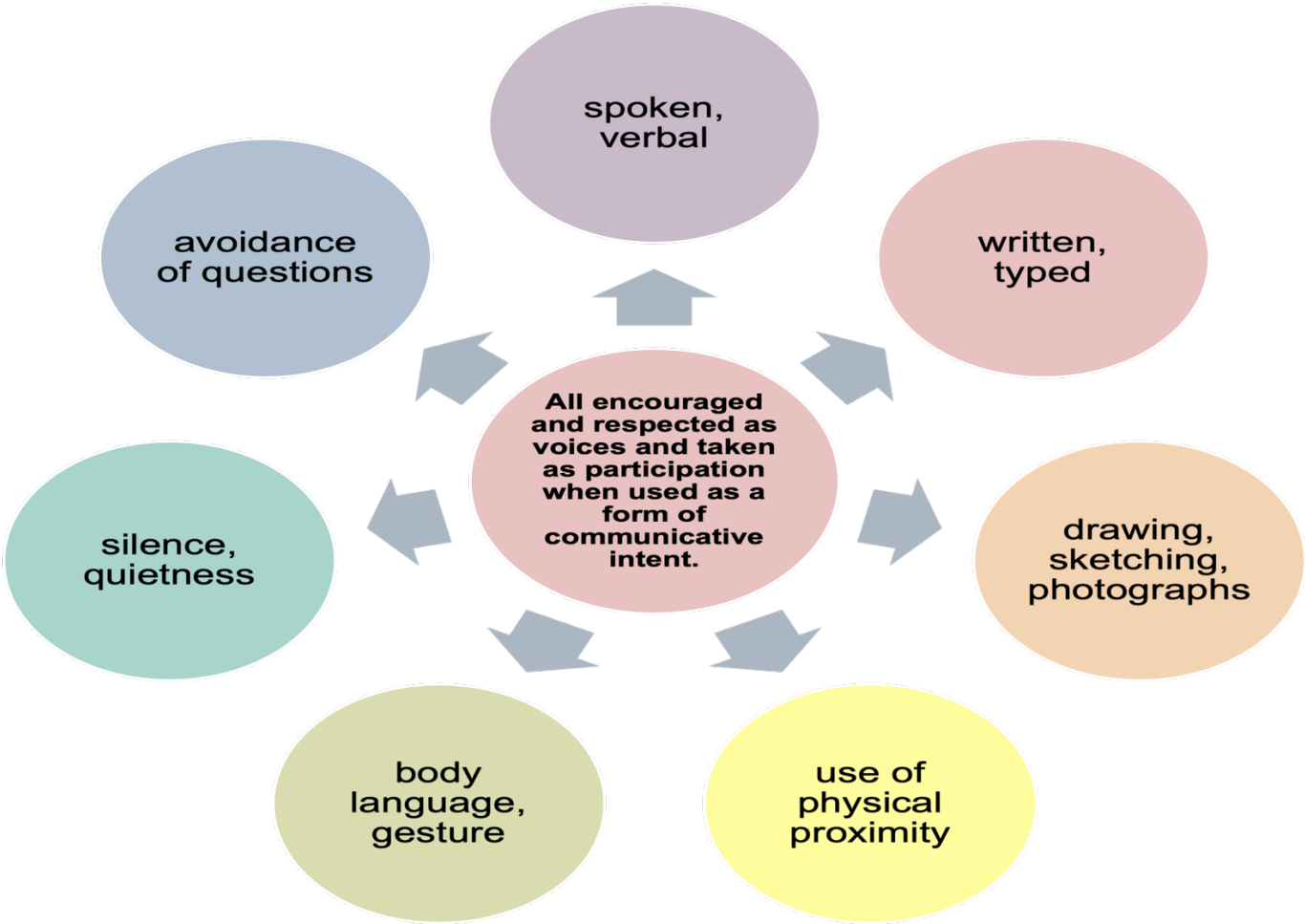
> that the child has a right to express his or her views freely in all matters affecting the child, and to have them taken into account. This right reinforces the status of the young child as an active participant in the promotion, protection and monitoring of their rights. (CRC/C/GC/7, 2005, p. 7).
>
> They (young children) make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language. (CRC/C/GC/7, 2005, p. 7).

> To achieve the right of participation requires adults to adopt a child-centred attitude, listening to young children and respecting their dignity and their individual points of view. It also requires adults to show patience and creativity by adapting their expectations to a young child's interests, levels of understanding and preferred ways of communicating. (CRC/C/GC/7, 2005, p. 7).

These statements emphasise the importance not only of ensuring that children's rights are respected but also that adults must adapt their communication styles to the preferred method of the children, and that communication is not just spoken language. Communication is akin to the understanding of voices outlined above in that it represents what is said and unsaid but also includes also gestures or physical proximity. Given that communication differences are part of the autism diagnosis, it is essential that the communication preferences of autistic learners are met (DCYA, Barnados and McEvoy, 2015; Flynn, 2019; DCEDIY, 2021; Goodall, 2021; DCEDIY, NDA and DCU, 2024). Participation is more reciprocal in nature, it requires more than one person. In order for voices or communication to be effective, another person needs to be present and 'hear' what is being voiced. In this way, participation happens through partnership, the presence of more than one participant and yet again relates back to that concept of 'felt' belonging.

For the purpose of this research the definition of voices refers to any form of communicative participation, verbal or non-verbal, written or performed, illustrated or photographed. Unanswered questions, or avoidance of topics was also interpreted as voices or participation. Physical proximity, non-spoken sounds, and Gestalt phrases were taken as communication, voices or active participation. A Gestalt is a 'chunk' of language which is meaningful to the learner (Hutchins, Knox and Fletcher, 2024) but which the listener may find difficult to interpret. Silence was also interpreted as voices or participation if it was construed as purposeful and intended. As will be discussed further in the next chapter ethical consideration was given to ensuring learners felt comfortable and confident not only in participating but also in stopping their participation (see Figure 2.3):

Figure 2.3: Visual Representation Of Voices And Participation

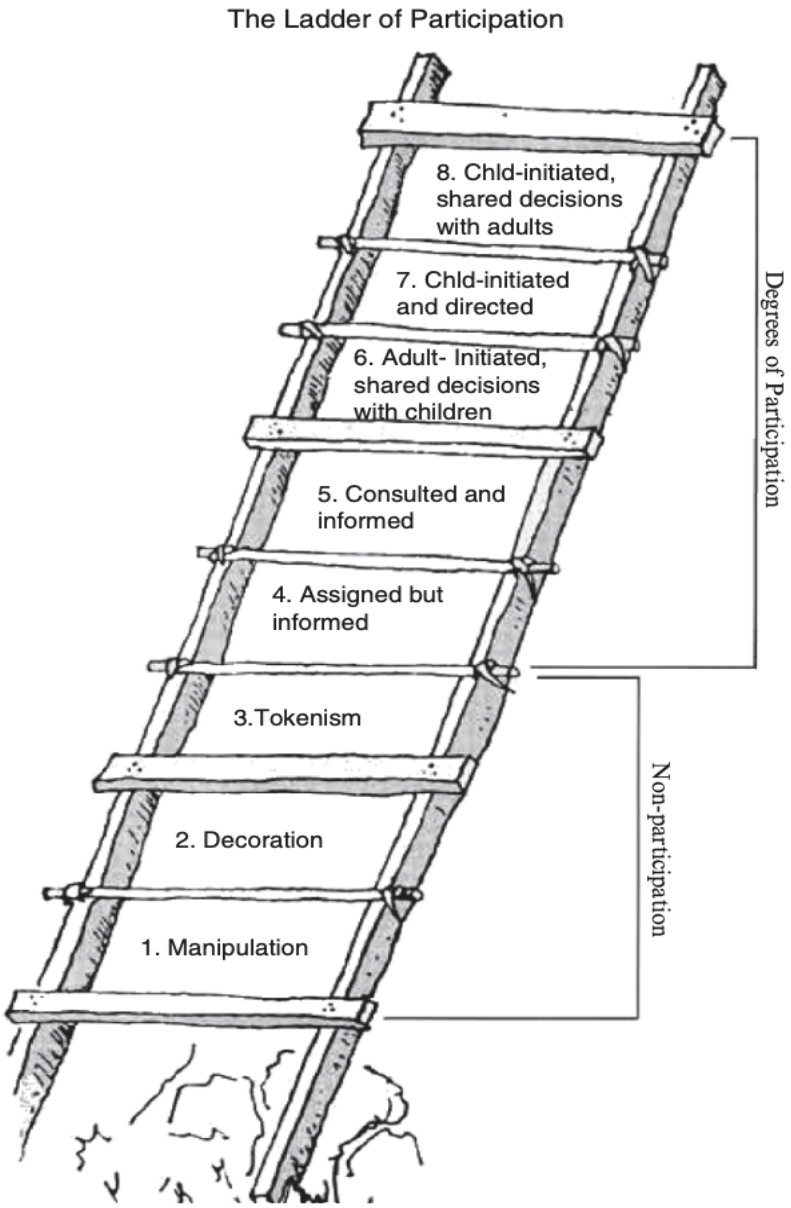


There are a number of different frameworks and models for eliciting voices and enhancing learner participation. It was important to evaluate which was the most relevant for this piece of research as it pertained to the ages and stages of the learners, as well as their educational setting and their preferred communication methods.

Models of participation.

Participation is conceptualised as giving voluntary and informed assent to actively share in an experience. There are a number of models of participation which can be used for eliciting the voices of individuals. Each of these models reflect the reciprocity of participation as discussed in the previous section. While the Lundy Model is used nationally and internationally as the seminal framework for eliciting learner voices (Lundy, 2007; DCYA, Barnados and McEvoy, 2015; Mannion, 2018; DCEDIY, 2021; McCall-Smith, 2021; Edström, Gardelli and Backman, 2022; Queen's University of Belfast, 2022; Lundy, 2024a), it is important to discuss alternative models of participation as they shaped understanding both of voices (in its widest sense) and the importance of listening to learners on matters which involved them. The 'Ladder of Participation' (Hart, 1992) and 'Pathways to Participation' (Shier, 2001) will be discussed.

Figure 2.4: Hart's 'Ladder of Participation' (1992)



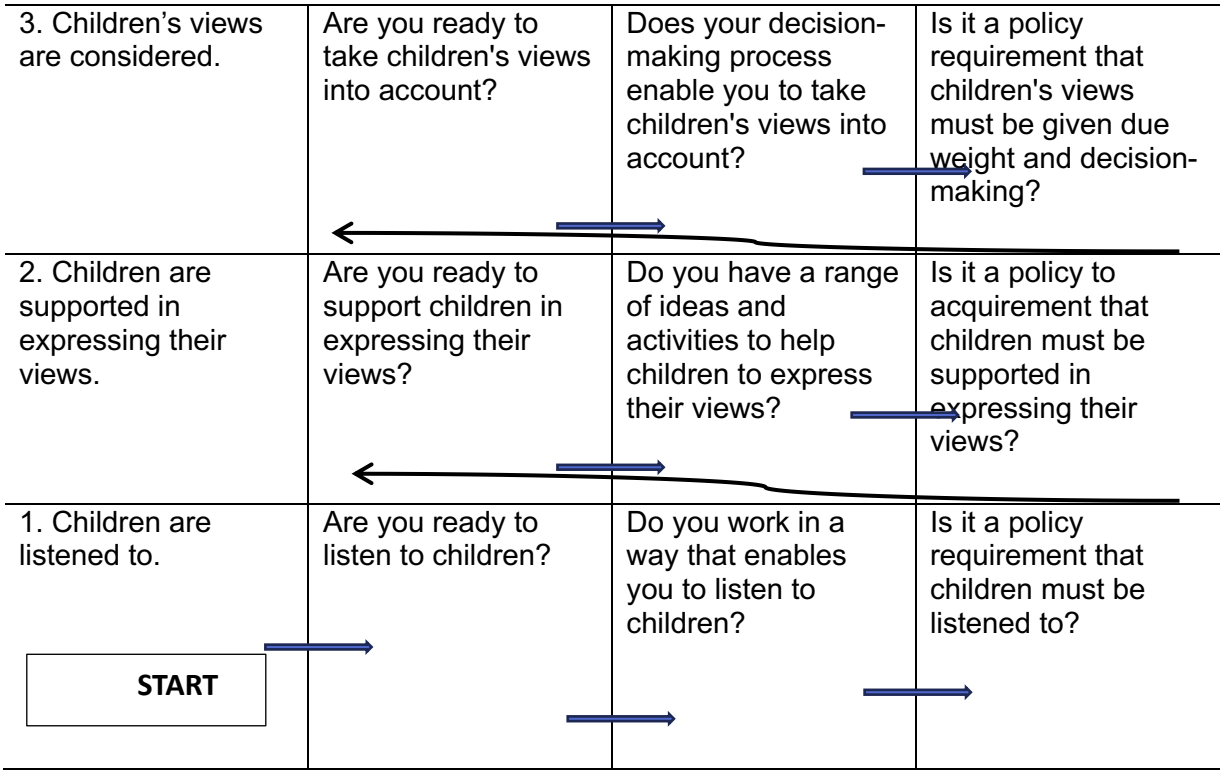
Roger Hart (1992) proposed a 'Ladder of Participation' (Figure 2.4) which was split into two parts. The bottom three rungs of the ladder represented how children were seen to be taking part in an event but were not actual participants. The remaining five rungs of his ladder showed the different degrees of participation with level eight representing true and meaningful participation. The philosophy behind the participatory model was hierarchical in nature, with level eight viewed as more meaningful than level four. This led to criticism of the model for overlooking participation and opportunities for voices that did contribute to decision-making, but also to learners making differences within their own environments

(Hart, 2008; Reid, 2008; Lundy, 2018; Perry-Hazan and Bauml, 2023). It may be that not all children wish to voice an opinion or participate in the topic they are being involved in and this is also their right. In this way their non-participation could be viewed as participation. There is also a danger that adults may view participation or voices as only a matter which should involve large or 'adult-decided' significant decisions and that what is important to children may be viewed as irrelevant to adults (Perry-Hazan and Bauml, 2023). Therefore, adults must be aware of the danger of manipulating children's narratives.

Shier's (2001) model of participation (Table 2.3) was rooted in the United Kingdom's enactment of the UNCRC in 1991. While acknowledging that it draws on the work of Hart, Shier has made changes to the pathways of participation as a result of some of the criticisms levelled at Hart's model (Shier, 2001). The three non-participation levels have been removed, leaving five levels of participation but with the addition of "*three stages of commitment"* (Shier, 2001, p. 3). At each of the levels, the first stage is an opening. The 'opening' is a question posed to the participating adult about their willingness to encourage voices and participation of children. If there is a positive response to the opening question and the circumstances are conducive, the next stage is 'opportunities'. The opportunity can occur when the needs of the organisation are met: resources, skills and knowledge, new approaches – if the needs to meet the opportunity are not met then the next stage cannot be reached. Stage 3 is 'obligations', at this stage there is a policy in place to ensure that the 'levels of participation' can happen.

Table 2.3: Shier's Model of Participation

Levels of Participation ↓	Openings > > > >	Opportunities > > >	Obligations
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making.	Are you ready to share some of your adult power with children?	Is there a procedure that enables children and adults to share power and responsibility for decisions?	Is it a policy requirement that children and adults share power and responsibility for decisions?
4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.	Are you ready to let children join in your decision-making processes?	Is there a procedure that enables children to join in decision-making processes?	Is it a policy requirement that children must be involved in decision-making processes?

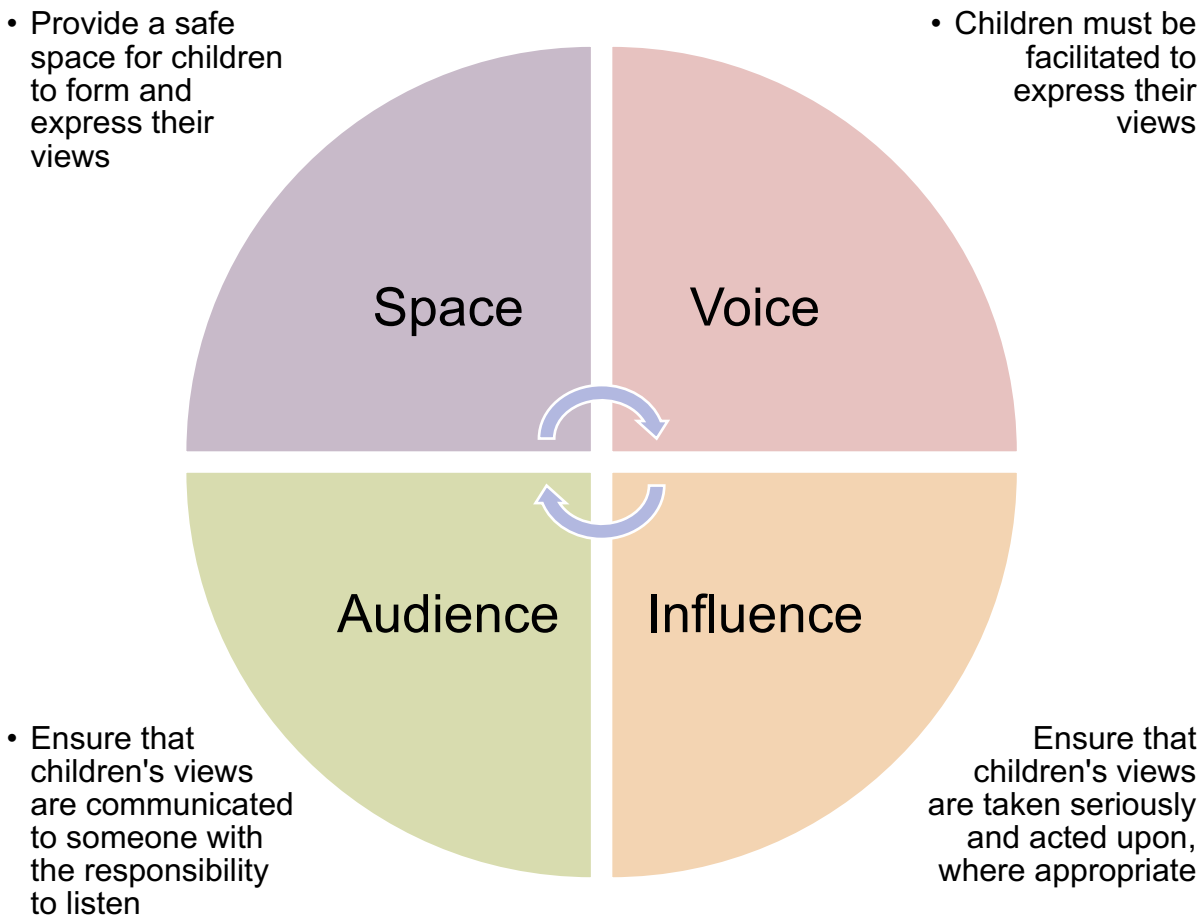


Shier's model differs from Hart's in that by levels four and five the learners are directly involved in the decisions, and in what decisions should be made. In the context of this research using the lens of Shier's model, autistic learners could choose to instigate not only a discussion around their placement, but also when and where they would like to spend their school day and whether they wished to continue with an autism class placement. The learners' views would be given equal weight with the adult views with all parties sharing power and responsibility for decision-making.

While both Hart's and Shier's models of participation are hierarchical and linear in nature, Lundy's Model has four interconnected elements. Lundy's Model moves beyond these levels or degrees of participation and in doing so, captures the contextual nature of participation. A further distinct feature of Lundy's model is facilitation, not only in expressing views but also in the formation of views. A criticism that arguably could be levelled at Lundy's Model is the lack of guidance for adults in how to operationalise the elements effectively (Kazmierczak-Murray, O'Mahony and Carey, 2024). The four interconnected factors; space, voice, audience and influence enhance the opportunity for meaningful and effective participation when attention is given to each of the elements (Davis, O'Neill and Fletcher-Watson, 2026). As discussed in Chapter One, the clarity of the model and the human rights lens make it accessible across a range of disciplines. The interconnected design moves the

responsibility of fostering voices and participation to the person(s) who has the power to enact the steps without over-complicating the process (Figure 2.5):

Figure 2.5: Lundy's Interconnected Model for Participation



(Adapted from DCEDIY, 2021).

While it is within the rights of the child to have their voices heard, often this is a neglected area (Cook-Sather, 2020; Goodall, 2021; Baker and Le Courtois, 2022; Holquist et al., 2023). Lundy (2018) highlighted this issue about tokenism (Lundy, 2018), with tokenism being defined as a symbolic act done to impress or show intention without the need for action, stating that:

> children may well have their time wasted and feel angry and upset that they took part in activities where they were not taken seriously and that were not fruitful for them in terms of eventual outcome. That does not in itself provide a legally sound or sufficient excuse for doing nothing at all. (Lundy, 2018, p. 344)

Lundy's Model was used for this research with consideration given to each of the quadrants. All sections needed to be considered in advance and discussed with the schools to ensure those criteria were met. This model was chosen due to the interconnected nature of the elements. The hierarchical models of Hart and Shier arguably imply that success is only achieved with the completion of the linear models. The apparent straightforwardness of the Lundy Framework belies the complexity of the underlying principles enabling the rights of the learners to be honoured by respecting their communicative and personal preferences and recognising the relational components of voices. For autistic learners with significant intellectual disabilities a shift towards supported decision-making must be considered and honoured shifting the focus from what a learner cannot do to supporting them to make their own informed decisions (Glen, 2015), this being enshrined within Irish Law (Office of the Attorney General, 2015). The cyclical nature of the model demands that the adult stakeholders repeatedly centre the learners' voices while respecting diverse communication styles and by committing to acting on feedback (through the influence element) reduce the inherent power dynamics of adult-child interactions (Goodall, 2026).

Stakeholder perspectives of educational provision for autistic learners.

The stakeholders in this research are the learners, their parents, their teachers and principals. While autistic voices in research are starting to be heard more often (Goodall, 2018b; Horgan, Kenny and Flynn, 2023; Atkinson, Wood-Downie and Wright, 2024; Billington, Loucas and Knott, 2024; McNally et al., 2025), many of these studies have examined the views of young or older adults reflecting back on their school experiences. Furthermore, as many of the studies take part either in the United Kingdom or internationally, the educational experiences for autistic children in Ireland may be different. The principles of the 'Autism Friendly Schools Project' (McNally, Sweeney, Keenan, Lynam, Ramsbottom, 2025) which investigated autistic learners' experiences of education in the Republic of Ireland across the continuum of education, underpinned many of the approaches and considerations adopted in this research. However, this research focussed specifically on aspects of learner experiences on decision-making about special class placement and their wider educational experience eliciting the views of the learners, their parents, their teachers and principals. Stakeholder attitudes both towards inclusion for autistic learners and autism classes are important to discuss as they may share influences with stakeholder attitudes in this research (Roberts and Simpson, 2016; Jordan et al., 2019; Roberts and Webster, 2022).

The NCSE commenced research in 2018 to examine the role of special classes and special schools in the Irish educational context. The release of the report was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and so was not issued until January 2024. Stakeholder voices included school principals, teachers and parents. It is unclear if students were included as part of stakeholder consultations. Overall, the research concluded that due to the lack of widespread research in the area of autism classes that no definitive conclusions could be reached in terms of policy decisions around retaining the current continuum of educational provision. However, there was a strong belief amongst the stakeholders interviewed that the *"special class is the best educational provision for an autistic child"* (NCSE, 2024a, p. 8) citing better resources and teachers with more specialised training and experience (McCoy et al., 2014). The belief that teachers in autism classes are more experienced with enhanced qualifications is repeated by stakeholders throughout the research, however, there is no evidence to support this (Leonard and Smyth, 2022; Rice, Kenny and Connolly, 2023b; Travers, 2023) and limited evidence to show that schools often place teachers with the least experience into autism classes (NCSE, 2015, 2024b; NCSE et al., 2016; DEY, 2024a, 2025a). The report acknowledges that the widespread belief that autism classes are better than mainstream classes continue to drive public perception. If this belief remains, the public perception to increase separate autism class provision will not abate (NCSE, 2024a). There are a number of criticisms identified in the report in relation to autism classes. Many of the learners were found to be inappropriately placed in the autism classes spending little or no time in the physical classroom, but by being enrolled may have been excluding learners with more complex needs accessing the placement (DEY Inspectorate, 2025a, 2026a). As was previously discussed, some schools were operating selective enrolment policies which again may have prevented those with a need of the placement being able to access it. There were infrequent, or no, reviews of learner placements leading to learners never having the opportunity to transition full-time to mainstream education.

These criticisms have been on-going through the many reviews of autism classes (NCSE, 2006, 2016a, 2024b; Waltman, 2021). Whilst children and parents have the right to choice and agency with regards to educational placement some autistic learners have indicated preferences for autism classes or at least articulate the struggles of mainstream education (Goodall, 2018b, 2018a, 2021; Cunningham, 2022; Horgan, Kenny and Flynn, 2023; Billington, Loucas and Knott, 2024). Sensory differences are cited as a major factor in causing difficulty for the autistic students who have participated in research. Mental health difficulties have also been reported by both autistic learners and their parents as a reason for preferring their autism class (Benevides et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2023; Black et al., 2024; Lynam et al., 2024). The perceived sensory safety and greater staff awareness of

learner differences have been cited as evidence of these preferences (Goodall, 2018b; Cunningham, 2022). As researchers, the voices of learners who have been through the education system either in an autism class or in mainstream must be listened to. Only by listening to the autistic community do researchers now understand how some approaches can be damaging to their dignity (McGill and Robinson, 2021; Leaf et al., 2022). The autistic community have also been at the forefront of the move away from deficit models of autism to a place where neurodivergence is accepted and difference is valued (Lai, Aoki and Seera, 2025; Alcorn, Nic Thaidhg and Flynn, 2026).

Much research has examined the inclusion of autistic students through eliciting the voices of school staff (Warren, Buckingham and Parsons, 2021; Hutchinson and Campbell, 2022; Leonard and Smyth, 2022; DEY, 2024b). The consensus amongst most teaching staff is that all learners should be included; a caveat stated by many teachers is that the amount of inclusion that can happen is hampered by large class sizes; curricular demands and lack of teacher professional learning which prevents them (the teachers) from feeling confident in their ability to support multiple needs (Lindsay et al., 2013; Leonard and Smyth, 2022; Cook, 2024). Recent research which looked at multiple stakeholder groups (mainstream class teacher, special class teacher and principal) across multiple settings also highlighted the "*disconnect in staff attitudes towards children in the mainstream class versus children in the special class"* (Rice, Kenny and Connolly, 2023, p. 14). This finding was supported by research which defined the disconnect as *"micro-exclusion"* (Sweeney and Fitzgerald, 2023) and highlighted that autistic students were integrated rather than included as they may have attended the mainstream class for periods of the day, but no accommodations were made to ensure the success of this time.

The issue of eliciting voices of stakeholders around autism classes is multi-faceted. The DEY, NCSE and Inspectorate recognise the contradictions between current educational policy at government level and obligations under the UNCRPD. The lack of awareness of autistic identity is an issue when it pertains to acceptance of neurodiversity and the enactment of inclusive education (Happé and Frith, 2020; Botha, Dibb and Frost, 2022; Ward and Gormley, 2025; Ward, Gormley and Coulter, 2026). Criticism is levelled at the lack of movement from autism classes to mainstream; lack of review of placements; newly qualified teachers being placed in-post; lack of external services and exclusionary admission policies. However, the parental voice around 'entitlement' of autistic children to a place in an autism class is strong with demand for places in autism classes doubling between the year 2025 and 2026. School staff are supportive of autism classes in their settings, although staff working in the classes report feeling isolated and burnt-out by the experience (Rice, Kenny

and Connolly, 2023; Sweeney and Fitzgerald, 2023). Excluding the voices of autistic learners in decision-making while they are attending school leads to the consequence of much of the autistic experience being voiced by young adults and not young children. Those that are asked cite difficulties with sensory overwhelm; communication differences and social pressures (Goodall, 2018b, 2018a; Benevides et al., 2020; Atkinson, Wood-Downie and Wright, 2024; Horgan, 2025).

Conclusion

This chapter set out to describe the concepts and existing literature on areas of educational inclusion, detailing the definition of inclusion which underpins this research. Autism and neurodivergence were then discussed as they relate to this research and how they are understood within the educational system in Ireland. Voices and participation were defined and examined with the use of terminology being detailed and the choice of Lundy's Framework being justified. Finally, the literature of stakeholder views around autism classes was interrogated in order to clearly articulate the educational landscape in Ireland as it currently exists.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

This study examined the extent to which autistic learners were included in decision-making about their special class placement. It further interrogated how learner voices are currently incorporated into the educational placement decisions in Irish primary schools, the experiences of inclusion among learners attending autism classes, and how autistic learners' voices might be more meaningfully included in such processes. The research design and methodology are outlined in this chapter, beginning first with the research aims and questions. The philosophical assumptions that influenced the researcher's theoretical position and their impact on the research design are also discussed (Appendix B). This will be followed by an examination of the research's design, with clear justification for the mixed methods approach used. The composition of the research participants and sampling will be detailed, and the ethical considerations will be identified. Each phase of data collection will be described ahead of detailing the data analysis methods and limitations of this study. A mixed methods approach was used to examine the extent to which the voices of autistic learners are considered in decisions about special class placement. It incorporated the perspectives of multiple stakeholder groups including learners, parents/guardians and school personnel. The first phase involved a survey of teaching staff examining their perceptions and experiences of inclusive practices for autistic learners attending special class. The second phase consisted of a multi-site case study exploring the perspectives of learners on their educational experiences within both their autism classes and mainstream settings. Teachers and principals were interviewed about placement review processes; the inclusion of learners in decision-making and the implementation of inclusive practices within the school for learners attending an autism class. Parents were asked to discuss the reasons for enrolling their child(ren) in an autism class, their understanding of inclusive practices relating to time spent in autism classes and in mainstream classrooms and what conversations they had with their child(ren) about autism classes (Appendix C).

Research Questions

The research set out to determine to what extent are autistic learners included in decision-making about their special class placement? This involved addressing the following sub-questions:

Sub-Question One: How are the voices of autistic learners in primary schools currently being included in decision-making with regards to the educational experience?

Sub-Question Two: What is the experience of inclusion for learners from autism classes?

Sub-Question Three: How can the voices of autistic learners be meaningfully included in decision-making in mainstream primary schools with regards to their educational placement?

Philosophical Assumptions

Before undertaking any research it is important to understand that paradigms are not simply a methodology but represent different ways of looking at the world (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). By choosing one paradigm over the other, researchers communicate their philosophical assumption not only about how the world is, but also how they understand or know about it (Hammersley, 1992). The research should be underpinned by the thorough investigation of the ontological and epistemological stance taken, as this underlines the beliefs held about what the most important factors are in conducting a study (Creswell, 2023). Language use when considering research philosophies is contentious, with some using the term philosophical worldviews (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Creswell, 2023), paradigms (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Hammersley, 1992; Mertens, 2007) and others proposing that epistemologies and ontologies will best explain positionality (Crotty, 1998; Fryer and Navarrete, 2024). Philosophical assumptions, or worldviews (Creswell, 2008), referred to by Kuhn (1962) as paradigms, provide the conceptual framework within which researchers operate (Sobh and Perry, 2006). Although there is no universally accepted definition of a paradigm, it is commonly understood as the *"basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator"* (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). Such worldviews encompass considerations of ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge), axiology (the values researchers bring to their work), and methodology (the processes and methods employed in research) (Crotty, 1998). In selecting an appropriate research paradigm for this study, careful attention was given to ensuring alignment between the theoretical perspective adopted and the overall aims and purpose of the investigation (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2018). A range of paradigmatic perspectives were considered in the design of this study, including positivist, interpretivist, and critical approaches (Appendix B). Each paradigm offers different assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge, reality, and the role of the researcher. Given the focus of this research on both the lived experiences of autistic learners and the practical processes surrounding educational placement decisions, it was necessary to adopt a paradigm capable of accommodating multiple forms of knowledge and methodological approaches.

Consequently, pragmatism was identified as the most appropriate paradigm for this investigation and is discussed in the following section.

Pragmatism.

When thinking about ontology the researcher must place themselves on a continuum between scepticism and realism. A realist believes that there are no facts beyond dispute, and that our facts are often derived from theories which can be tested (Robson and McCartan, 2016). This is at the end of the continuum – many realists will agree that certain facts are universally true (or are beyond doubt) but most can be contested and will therefore can be classified as critical realists (Bhaskar, 1978; Harré, 1997; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2016; Fryer and Navarrete, 2024). A sceptic at the opposite end of the continuum will argue the stance that the reality of everything should be questioned, and that no reality can be unquestioningly accepted. In terms of this research, the existence of autism classes and learner rights about participation and decision-making are beyond doubt. However, the experience of inclusion, power dynamics and the participatory nature of decision-making should be questioned. While there is a clear reality, people's understanding of that reality is shaped by subjective, contextual experiences. Axiology which can be defined as the philosophy of values in research (Hiles, Heron and Reason, 2008) is an important consideration in any piece of research. Pragmatists are not value-free, they make their values explicit to guide the research towards solving practical problems. As a researcher I was drawn towards the problem of the lack of autistic learner voices being involved in decision-making throughout their educational experiences preventing the enactment of inclusive practices.

If ontology concerns what exists or the nature of being, epistemology addresses the processes through which knowledge is constructed and validated. Within epistemology, the continuum ranges from direct to indirect approaches (Coe et al., 2017). Direct epistemologists contend that knowledge of the world can be acquired purely through observation. In contrast, indirect epistemology emphasises the role of experience in shaping understanding (Coe et al., 2017). This distinction is particularly salient in the current study. Engaging multiple stakeholders such as parents, teachers, principals and learners revealed insights that could not have been captured through observation alone; the lived experiences, perceptions and interactions of participants were essential to understanding the impact of placement decisions. My own epistemological stance aligns with this indirect perspective, recognising that meaningful understanding arises not only from observing phenomena but from interrogating experiences and constructing knowledge in interaction with participants' realities.

The paradigm used in this research is pragmatism. This approach is the best fit for this particular study as it allows for decisions to be made about design and methods in order to best suit the research questions and objectives instead of being aligned with one principled approach (Biesta, 2017). Pragmatism advocates that a mixed methods is most appropriate as quantitative and qualitative data is needed and with the multiple stakeholder groupings it is important to be flexible and pragmatic, as opposed to rigid and fixed which may not be the best combination for answering research questions (Onwuegbuzie and Johnson, 2006). Educational research can be defined as any research that seeks to understand, inform and improve on the practice of education (Coe et al., 2017). This study adopts a mixed-methods approach. The most basic definition of a mixed methods design study is that there will be a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collected (Coe et al., 2017, 2021). It is important to distinguish between a multi-method design and mixed methods – 'multi-methods' design refers to the collection of multiple types of qualitative data as opposed to mixed methods which collects one type of data from each phase (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2016; Anguera et al., 2018; Creswell, 2018). The design is explanatory in nature as the research attempts to explain issues around autism class placement and decision-making.

While many theorists would postulate that quantitative and qualitative research are fundamentally different in their philosophical underpinnings they caution against claiming that they cannot complement each other, and reject the false dualism of favouring one over another (Hammersley, 1992; Pring, 2000) . Arguably it is the very nature of the approaches that brings strength to educational research with a mixed method approach (Salomon, 1991). As both quantitative and qualitative paradigms yield different types of data, the difference enriches and deepens knowledge rather than diminishing it. Both were collected for this research as the quantitative data provided a broad overview of autism class provision and inclusive practices, while the qualitative data provided detailed insight into the enactment of inclusion and a lived reality of educational experience for multiple stakeholders.

Positionality.

At the outset of this research it is important to state any bias and positionality which may be present. Having chosen the pragmatist stance, I am acknowledging that my understanding of knowledge acquisition is subjective and rooted in a 'real world' context of which I am a part. The provision of autism classes in the way that it is pursued through successive Department of Education policies is unique to Ireland (Shevlin and Banks, 2021; Travers, 2023; NCSE, 2024a) and runs contrary to the spirit of the UNCRPD.

I worked in an autism class as a class teacher from 2009 – 2021 and then began my current role as an autism advisor with the NCSE. I have spent the last fifteen years working in and around autism classes, and in that time, there have been no significant policy changes despite policy advice being published (DES, 2001; NCSE et al., 2016; DES, 2020; DE, 2024g). The most recent circular from the Department of Education (DE, 2024g) formalises the process of increasing autism class provision, which it could be argued is the opposite of inclusive practice and has been defined by the House of the Oireachtas as 'segregation by neurotype' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023). This professional experience has inevitably shaped my perspectives on inclusion, autism class provision, and the educational experiences of autistic learners. At the same time, it has provided me with extensive insight into the practical realities, tensions, and complexities surrounding educational placement and inclusive practice in Irish schools. Throughout the research process, reflexivity was therefore essential in critically examining how my experiences, values, and assumptions may have influenced the framing of the research, interpretation of findings, and interactions with participants (Appendix D). To mitigate potential bias, the study sought to foreground the voices and experiences of multiple stakeholders, particularly autistic learners themselves, in order to ensure that the findings were grounded in participants' perspectives rather than solely my own professional interpretations.

Research Design

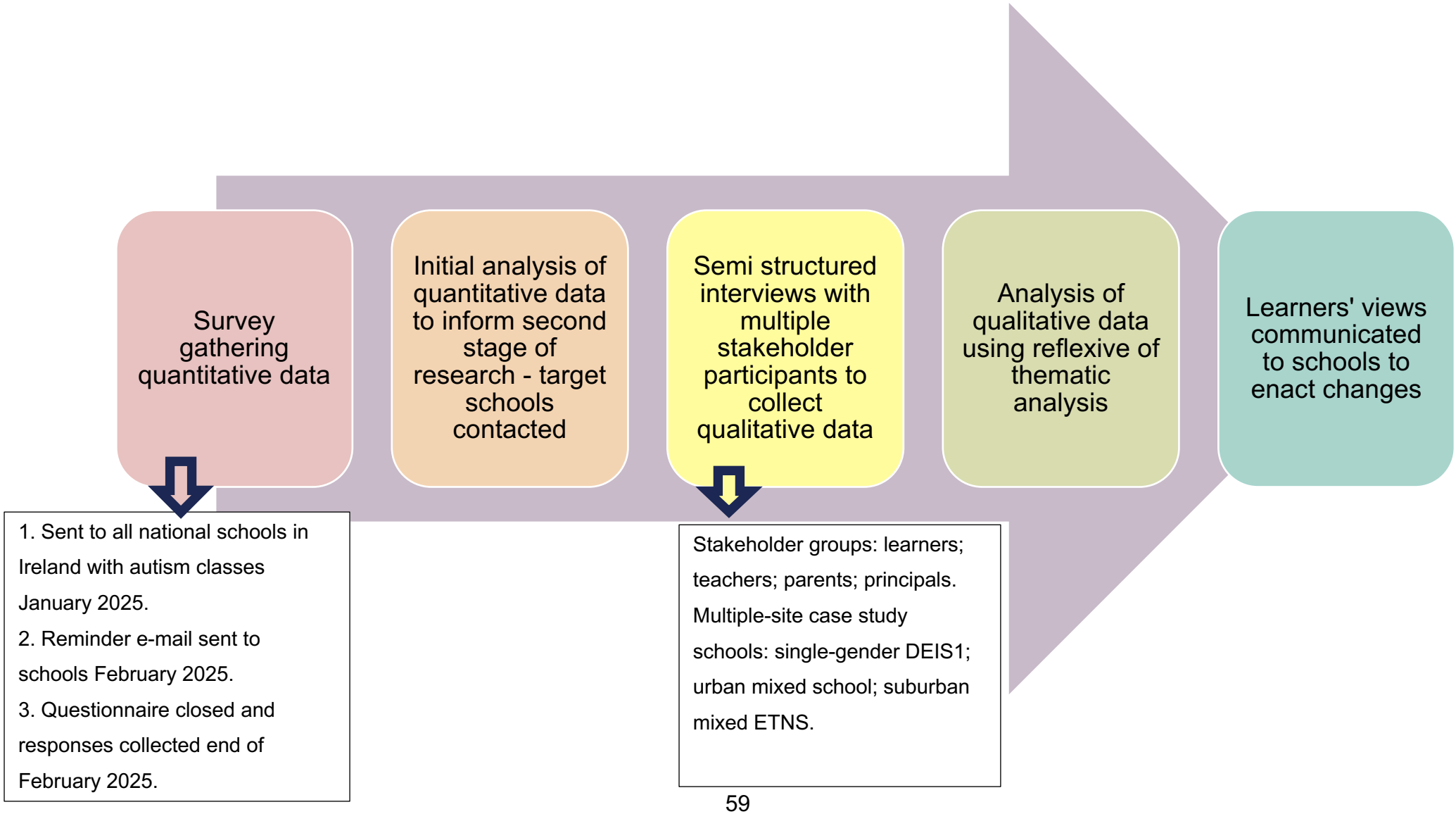
Sequential explanatory design.

This research adopted a mixed methods explanatory sequential design in order to have the best chance at capturing data that understands, improves and informs the way to elicit the voices of autistic learners in decision-making processes with regard to their educational placements. The research had two phases (Figure 3.1). Phase One included a large-scale questionnaire which was sent to all national schools in Ireland with autism class provision (Appendix E). There are more than 1500 primary schools with autism classes (NCSE, 2024a). The participants were members of teaching staff that had responsibility for the autism class(es): in some instances, that was the principal, but in other schools there was a designated member of staff. Schools were provided with an untraceable link if they were interested in taking part in Phase Two of the research which involved stakeholder interviews.

In this research, questions around placement reviews and inclusive practices were explored during Phase One in order to inform the design and focus of the Phase Two investigation and to provide an overview of current school practices. Phase Two consisted of semi-structured interviews with multiple stakeholder groups. All participants were provided

with the interview questions in advance of meeting with the researcher to support informed and reflective engagement with the process. The rationale for adopting a sequential explanatory design was that the quantitative data and its subsequent analysis offered a broad understanding of current practices and perspectives among school personnel. The qualitative phase then enabled a more detailed explanation of these findings by capturing the lived experiences and perspectives of multiple stakeholders, allowing for a richer and more nuanced understanding of current practice to emerge (Ivankova, Creswell and Stick, 2006).

Figure 3.1: Timeline of Mixed Methods Explanatory Sequential Research



Survey research.

The survey was first piloted with a group of teachers who had worked in autism classes (*n*=16) to check for clarity of questioning and user-friendliness. A number of suggestions were made in relation to phrasing, and the amendments were incorporated into the final survey. Expert review and pilot testing supported the content validity of the survey. Validity refers to how well the survey set out to measure what it was designed to measure (Ranganathan, Caduff and Frampton, 2024). Face validity was considered during the pilot phase of the survey, with particular attention given to the clarity, appearance, structure, and sequencing of questions, as well as the use of branching logic to ensure that participants were only presented with questions relevant to their experiences. Content validity was supported through the design of the survey, with questions developed directly from the literature review and aligned with the key constructs under investigation, including placement review practices, inclusive approaches, and stakeholder involvement and decision-making. Content validity was used as the aim was to capture factual or practice-related information rather than a latent construct.

Case study.

A case study is an established research design used frequently in qualitative research methodologies (Robson and McCartan, 2016). While Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2018) would argue that the term 'case study' does not require a single definition, it does require an explanation in order to situate the researcher's methodological position. A case study is defined as "*a design of inquiry… in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case… for one or more individuals"* (Creswell, 2023, p. 15). Case study methodology enables detailed and multifaceted exploration of complex social phenomena within their real-world contexts and is particularly suited to research seeking to understand participants' experiences and perspectives across different settings (Crowe et al., 2011). This was key to Phase Two of the research. As discussed in Chapter Two, there is an absence of research both in the area of young autistic voices being involved in decision-making and an overall stakeholder belief on reviews of placement. A multi-site case study design was therefore selected to allow for the in-depth examination of these issues across multiple school contexts and stakeholder groups. By incorporating the perspectives of learners, parents, teachers and school leaders across three schools, the study generated rich "*thick*" data (Geertz, 1973), supporting the development of detailed codes, patterns and themes. The study was bounded by the context of Irish primary schools with autism classes, with each school representing an individual site within the wider case.

Conducting high-quality qualitative research.

There are generally thought to be up to or at least eight criteria which contribute to high quality qualitative research: worthy topic, rich rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical practice and meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010; Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017). Ideas relating to worthy topic, significant contribution and ethical practice have been dealt with in other sections of this research with coherence being addressed in data analysis (Appendix F). To ensure rigour the researcher must consider the amount of data is sufficient to support claims and findings, the sample group is appropriately chosen, research procedures are appropriate and considered and enough time is given to data collection. Sincerity relates to reflexivity and the honesty employed in the researcher data auditing practices. Credibility was ensured by eliciting multiple contestations and constructions, with resonance being considered in the write up of the research. Text should be written in an engaging way which moves the "*heart, tummy and head"* (Bochner, 2000, p. 269).

Research Participants

The participants were stakeholders in the decision-making process around autism class placement. The four stakeholder groups were: learners enrolled in an autism class; teachers currently working in autism class; parents whose child(ren) are currently enrolled in an autism class and principals of schools with two or more autism classes. All four groups of stakeholders were involved in Phase Two of the research. The questionnaire participants from Phase One only included school staff, specifically the staff members who have responsibility for the running of the autism classes. This may have been the principal, the deputy principal or the member of staff responsible for timetabling in the autism classes. Each school was asked to assign the most suitable staff member to complete the initial questionnaire.

School selection and information.

The initial selection criterion schools to be involved in Phase Two of the research was that they had to have at least one established autism class in the school year of 2024/25. These schools were all contacted in Phase One (Appendix G). Schools at this phase who had expressed an interest in being a case study school for Phase Two through the link at the end of the survey were then contacted. Fifteen schools asked for further information about Phase Two. Details were sent to the school outlining the research and what would be required from schools (Appendix H). Following this information, eight of the fifteen schools expressed an interest to participate further. Detailed information was sent to these eight

schools (Appendix I) at which stage five schools remained. As two of the schools only contained one autism class, they were removed from the selection process. While the initial selection criteria stipulated one, it was decided that schools with more classes would have a bigger population of learners. The three schools that remained had two or more classes, administrative principals and their autism classes had been established for at least five years. Each school was given a pseudonym (Oak National School, Beech National School and Holly National School) and details of participants from these schools can be found and Table 3.1 and Table 3.2.

Oak National School.

Oak National School is a large, urban Catholic school of approximately 500 students. The catchment is mixed with many students being enrolled from the local International Protection Accommodation Service. The school was originally a boys' school but in recent years has also enrolled girls – the first complete cycle of a co-educational school will complete in 2025/26. The school has three autism classes – a Junior Class of junior and senior infant students; a Middle Class of 1st to 3rd class students, and the Senior Class of 4th to 6th class students.

Beech National School.

Beech NS National School is a rural, girls, Catholic and DEIS school of less than 200 pupils. The school has two autism classes: a Junior Class which contains Junior Infants to 2nd Class students and a Senior Class with 3rd to 6th class students. All the students in the autism classes are female (it is important to note that in single sex schools, autism classes can still be mixed gender).

Holly National School.

Holly NS National School is an Educate Together National School in a suburb of a large city. There are just under 500 students in the school. The school has three autism classes - a Junior Class of junior and senior infants students; a Middle Class of 1st to 3rd class students, and the Senior Class of 4th – 6th class students.

Table 3.1 and 3.2 show the participant information. Quotes for learners will include their pseudonym, school and age (for the first quote) e.g. Adam (Oak, 6). Quotes from adults will have their abbreviated role, number, school name e.g. Teacher 3, Beech NS.

Table 3.1: Learner Participant Information

Name of School	Pseudonym	Age
Oak NS	Adam	6
Oak NS	Fionn	7
Oak NS	Graham	10
Oak NS	Harry	7
Beech NS	Becky	10
Beech NS	Chloe	10
Beech NS	Daisy	9
Beech NS	Ellie	10
Holly NS	Jonah	6
Holly NS	Kevin	8
Holly NS	Lottie	11
Holly NS	Martin	10
Holly NS	Niall	7

Table 3.2: Adult Participant Information

Name of School	Participant Type	Identifier	Years of Autism Class Experience
Oak NS	Teacher	Oak NS T1	2
Oak NS	Teacher	Oak NS T2	5
Oak NS	Parent	Oak NS Parent	
Oak NS	Principal	Oak NS Principal	
Beech NS	Teacher	Beech NS T3	5
Beech NS	Teacher	Beech NS T4	Less than 1
Beech NS	Parent	Beech NS Parent	
Beech NS	Principal	Beech NS Principal	
Holly NS	Teacher	Holly NS T5	2
Holly NS	Teacher	Holly NS T6	2
Holly NS	Teacher	Holly NS T7	2
Holly NS	Parent	Holly NS Parent	
Holly NS	Principal	Holly NS Principal	

Data Collection (Phase One)

The data collection instruments for Phase One consisted of a quantitative questionnaire designed through Qualtrics™ software (Appendix E). The questionnaire consisted of 19 questions. It was distributed electronically to the school email address registered on the publicly available list of schools with autism classes published on the NCSE website. Consequently, the sampling was not random but purposive (Teddlie and Yu, 2007) with participants chosen because of their experience of working in schools containing autism classes (Ball, 1990). In the academic year 2024/25 this amounted to approximately 2300 schools. A Plain Language Statement (see Appendix G) was sent to the school which contained a link and/or QR code for participants to access the questionnaire. There was no inducement offered for taking part in the survey. At the end of the survey schools could volunteer for Phase Two. The survey respondents were anonymous.

The questionnaire contained closed questions relating to demographic details (e.g. school type, years of experience) and Likert scales to ascertain agreement with or participation in various school placement processes. Likert scales were chosen as ranking (rank ordering) would have forced highest to lowest answers which may not have represented the beliefs of participants or forced the identification of priorities which in practice did not exist. This method of data collection could be criticised for predetermining categories for participants and preventing a true measure of attitude or belief (Tanujaya, Prahmana and Mumu, 2022). However, for the purposes of this research it was more important that the choices enabled participants to select the response that most closely aligned with their practice (Carifio and Perla, 2008). The questions were purposefully designed to elicit responses around School Support Planning (SSP); inclusive education practices in the school; whose voices were heard in decision-making and reviews of placement.

Data Generation (Phase Two)

Stakeholders across three settings took part in individual, semi-structured interviews (Appendix J). Each of the participants was given the opportunity to see the questions ahead of the interviews (Appendices I, J, K, L). Child participants in autism classes were sent a video presentation of the researcher explaining the research and also provided a visual means for becoming familiar with the appearance and speech of the researcher (Appendix M).

For the purpose of this research semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary qualitative generation tool for a number of reasons. Semi-structured interviews give the advantage of being able to provide open-ended questions to the participants in advance of the interviews providing predictability around topics to be discussed, this is particularly important for autistic learners (Vermeulen, 2023). It also allows for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions or for clarification around answers. To undertake structured interviews would remove the flexibility to investigate attitudes and beliefs further. In the case of speaking with the learners, it will be essential to follow their lead if they wish not to answer questions or if the questions need to be rephrased in order to enhance understanding. Unstructured interviews would not be predictable and may cause anxiety in participants if they did not feel fully aware of the requirements of the interview process. As the researcher is not providing therapeutic assistance, nor do they have prior knowledge of participants. the non-directive and focused interviews are also unsuitable.

Both the interview questions for the learners and adults were piloted ahead of the interviews. The interview questions for school staff (teachers and principals) followed on from the questions asked in the questionnaire issued to schools is Phase One. As discussed in Chapter One, new procedures for the annual review of autism class places had been issued by the DEY between the initial questionnaire being issued and the interviews taking place. Questions on the review of placement were included in the interview schedule. The parents were also asked about their thoughts on autism class placement. Following pilot interviews with previous autism class teachers (n=2) and a parent of an autistic child enrolled in an autism class (n=1) some language was modified to ensure the parents did not feel their child's place was at risk and that the teachers/principals did not feel compelled to have implemented the new guidelines ahead of the interviews.

Learners were asked about their general school experiences and specifically about their experiences in both their autism class and mainstream settings (Appendix N). At all times in the creation and administration of the learners' interviews Lundy's model of participation was operationalised with additional considerations being given to learner well-being (Appendix O). Each element of the model was considered (Table 3.3):

Table 3.3: Operationalisation of Lundy's Model (2007)

Element and Considerations for This Research.	Actions Taken
Space – learners must be provided with space in which they feel physically, emotionally and sensorially safe to express their views.	Schools were asked to provide a space the learners were familiar with and comfortable in. The children were free to sit, stand or move around. All learners were closest to the door so they could leave immediately if they wanted to.
Voice - learners should be given clear information about the research and communication preferences should be respected. It is OK for the learner to not answer the question and crucial for this to be communicated to the learner. By providing the information prior to the interviews, this gives learners time to form views and hence build capacity.	Information leaflets were sent to the parents and the teachers detailing the research. Video presentations were sent to the children and they were provided with the questions prior to the interviews. Visual supports were used and the school was asked to provide any individual visuals or concrete objects that the learner preferred. The learners were repeatedly reassured that it was ok not to answer a question. All answered the questions in their preferred order.
Audience – learners' views should be given to someone who has a responsibility to listen.	The learners were told who would hear their answers. If they gave answers that could be easily fixed – i.e. moving position in class, they were asked if that could be communicated to the principal or teacher for them.
Influence – learners' view should be taken seriously and acted upon where this is possible and appropriate. Explanations for implementation of views should be given to the learners. Explanations for why things may not change can be discussed during the interview or communicated to the school to justify.	Information was given to each of the participating schools about changes the learners had asked for. A general overview of stakeholder interviews was provided to each school.

The construction of questions for the learners' interviews drew on best practice for interviewing children (Morrison, 2013; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Flick, 2018). Further consideration was given to their autistic strengths and differences (DCEDIY, 2021, 2024; Goodall, 2021). The learners were provided with the questions ahead of time and in written format on the day of the interviews (Appendix N). The questions for the children had been provided to both their teachers and parents in advance of the interviews (Appendices K and L). Teachers and parents were provided with the contact details of the researcher if they wished to discuss the content of the questions given to the children. By providing information ahead of the interviews, this aligned with the definition of semi-structured interviews (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Flick, 2018).

Most significantly however, all of the visual support and materials that were used with the learners were co-created with the help of Oonagh (10 years old, pseudonym) an autistic girl not affiliated with any of the participating schools. Co-creation was a critical part of the resource creation being seen as both best practice but, most importantly, to address any unconscious bias of the researcher who was neither autistic nor a child (Autism-Europe, 2025). Government agencies in Ireland that research with children as participants follow the UNCRC and UNCRPD policy situated within Lundy's Framework (2007) as discussed in Chapter One of this research.

Considerations of communicative preferences.

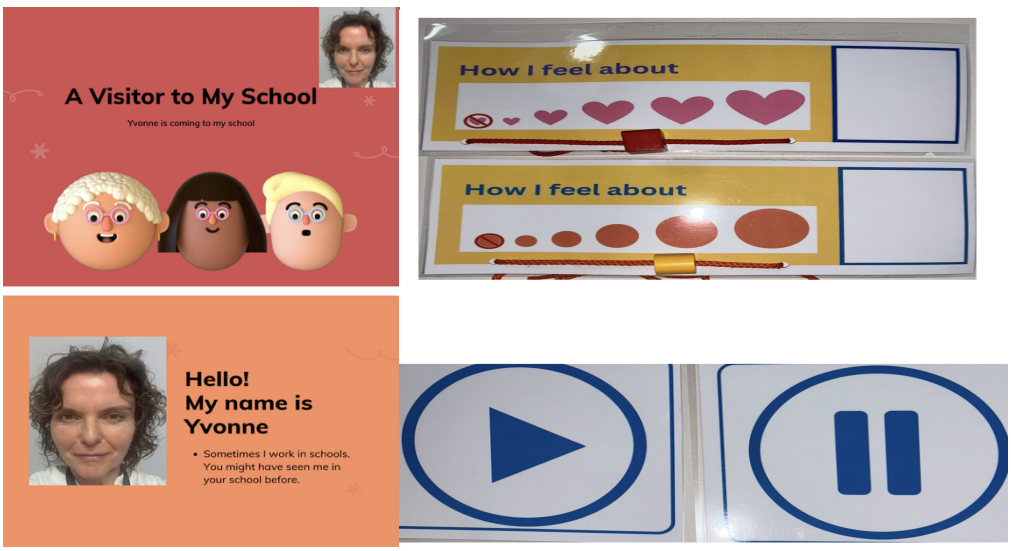
In designing the learner interviews, a range of adaptations were developed to ensure that children could participate in ways that aligned with their individual communicative preferences and needs. This approach recognised that verbal responses alone may not be the preferred or most accessible mode of communication for all learners. In line with inclusive research practice, a variety of multimodal supports were therefore incorporated to facilitate participation, comprehension, and expression, as well as to support informed assent (Pyle and Danniels, 2016; Bertram et al., 2025; Ólafsdóttir, Danby and Theobald, 2025).

Prior to the interviews, learners were provided with accessible information about the study through an audio-visual presentation introducing the researcher and explaining the purpose and process of the interview (see Appendix L). This presentation included a live video of the researcher, was fully captioned, and could be shared with parents via digital platforms such as WhatsApp. On the day of the interview, learners were offered the option of having a familiar adult present and were guided through the assent process using a child-friendly assent form before any data collection began (see Appendix P). Learners were also

given time to review the interview questions in advance, either independently or with support, and could request that questions be read aloud if preferred.

A broad range of visual, tactile, and written supports were made available to enable flexible participation. These included sentence starter cards, emotion figures, and a co-created set of response cards developed in collaboration with an autistic learner, Oonagh (10), who was not a participant in the study (see Appendices P, Q, R). Oonagh emphasised the importance of providing learners with options to express intensity of feeling (e.g., “always/never”, “love/hate”) and the ability to indicate when they did not wish to respond, as well as an “I want to say…” card for additional comments. Visual supports were further enhanced through the use of photographs of familiar school spaces (e.g., autism classes, mainstream classrooms, sensory rooms, gardens, and yards), play/pause cards to scaffold pacing, and a visual Likert scale. Writing and drawing materials (e.g., whiteboards, markers, paper, crayons, sticky notes) were also provided, as some learners chose to express responses non-verbally while continuing to speak.

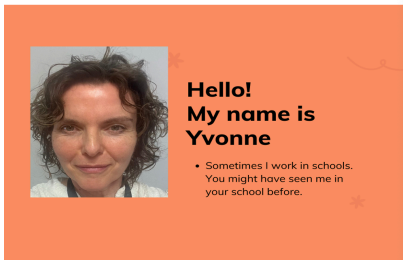
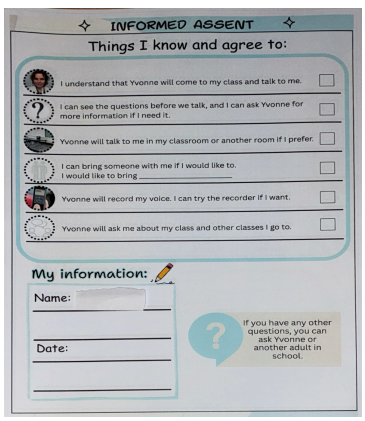
Figure 3.2: Sample Resources to Support Learner Communication Preferences Before and During Interviews

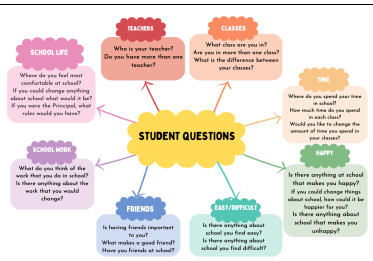
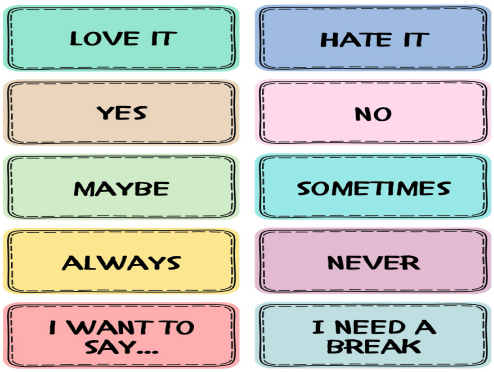


Oonagh (10, co-creator) felt it was important that participants were given a range of options for how they felt about certain aspects of school (see Appendix Q) and ways to opt out without speaking. It was important to her that learners’ options such as never/always, love/hate were included as she stated that sometimes “*autistic children feel very strongly about things*” (Oonagh, 10). The schools also provided photographs of autism and mainstream classes and other areas of the school that the children used and were familiar with. Learners were also provided with play/pause cards and a visual Likert scale to assist with scaffolding answers or taking some time away. A range of figurines which show different

emotions were also provided for the learners again which could be used instead of speaking or to role play situations which they found difficult to vocalise (Appendices P, Q, R and S) as detailed in Table 3.4:

Table 3.4: Considerations for Communication Preferences

What needed to be considered?	What steps were taken?	What was provided? What resources were needed?
The learners (and their parents) may want to see and hear me ahead of the interviews. The research should be explained to the children in an accessible format. If the children disclose anything concerning, they should be informed that I may need to tell someone else.	A video presentation was sent to all parents of participating learners (via the class teachers) which could be accessed as a PowerPoint or through WhatsApp. Disclosure procedures were briefly explained.	 
It is imperative that the children are happy to participate and understand the purposes of the research – independent of whether parents have consented or not.	In addition to parental consent, all children were asked to assent to their participation. The assent form was filled at the start of each interview and prior to recording starting.	
The children will have been given the questions by their parents and teachers, but they may want	Questions were provided to the children. They were asked if they wanted to	

their own copy during the interview as a visual support.	read them or for them to be read to them.	
The preferred method of communication for the learners may not have been to talk so different options were made available to them.	A range of cards were given with options for the children to use for answers, or to help scaffold their answers.	
Additional visual supports would be needed for learners who found text difficult to access.	Visuals with play/pause symbols similar to those used online and Likert scales were also provided for the learners.	 
Some children may prefer to write or draw answers.	Writing resources were provided: whiteboards; markers; sticky notes, paper; pens; crayons and pencils.	
Some of the learners may be unsure of how to express emotions or feelings.	As well as the emotions words, emotions figures were given for learners who preferred concrete materials.	

The research information was distributed to each of the learners in all of the autism classes within the three participating schools. The cognitive profiles of the learners were not requested, nor was any stipulation given regarding which learners participated other than that they were enrolled in the autism class. This was to ensure that no parent felt their child could not participate, and no child felt that their voices would not be valued. No participants used an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) device. None of the learners in the autism classes across the three schools used an AAC device. Table 3.5 shows a breakdown of methods that learners engaged with.

Table 3.5: Learner Engagement with Data Collection Methods

Data Collection Method →	Spoken	Written (words)	Illustration	Emotion Figures	Role Play	Gesture	Posture	Physical positioning	Walk around school	Choosing not to answer	Prompt cards
Learner ↓											
Adam	√		√	√		√		√	√	√	√
Becky	√	√	√	√		√	√	√		√	√
Chloe	√		√	√		√	√	√			√
Daisy	√	√	√	√			√				√
Ellie	√			√			√				√
Fionn	√			√							√
Graham	√		√	√		√	√	√			√
Harry	√	√	√	√		√	√		√	√	√
Jonah	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√			√
Kevin	√		√	√	√			√		√	√
Lottie	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√			√
Martin	√		√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√
Niall	√	√	√	√	√			√			√

Ethical Considerations

A number of steps were taken to ensure the well-being of all participants in this research, while being particularly cognisant of the learner participants in particular. For example, in line with ethical requirements and the need to ensure accessibility for both parents and learners, clear and easily understandable information was provided to all participants prior to data collection. Information leaflets outlining the aims of the research were disseminated to all adults involved with the children, and an accessible video presentation was also shared with parents via class teachers, available in both PowerPoint and WhatsApp formats. Although the researcher may have been familiar to some children, it was recognised that they would not be well known to all participants and that interviews would not always take place in the learner's usual classroom setting. To support comfort and participation, each child was offered the option of a trusted adult of their choice (teacher, SNA, other) who could accompany them during the interview, with schools ensuring a familiar adult and appropriate room were available.

In addition to the steps taken above, Research Integrity Training was completed by the researcher through Dublin City University (see Appendix T) and ethical approval was both sought and granted by DCU Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix U).

Voluntary participation and assent.

In addition to parental consent, all children were required to provide assent prior to participation, which was completed at the beginning of each interview before any recording commenced (Appendix P). Children were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw or pause at any time without giving a reason. Break, play, and pause cards were provided to support communication of discomfort or fatigue (Appendices Q and R), and trusted adults were asked to monitor for signs that a child may wish to stop.

Power.

There were a number of steps taken to ensure the minimisation of any power imbalance which may have occurred between the researcher and the stakeholders, particular attention was paid to the learner stakeholders as they were arguably the most vulnerable grouping (Table 3.6). The power dynamics of the relationships drew on work from a number of studies in the area of participatory research with children (Flewitt, 2005; Powell and Smith, 2009; Water, 2018, 2024) and is adapted from ‘Collecting the Data’ considerations (Creswell, 2023, p. 98-99). There is a natural power imbalance that cannot be eliminated (Palaiologou and Palaiologou, 2019) however, steps can be taken to minimise

this by researching within the learners' environment; using first names and emphasising that there are no correct answers to the questions.

Table 3.6: Power Considerations for Stakeholder Groups (Focussing on Learners)

Consideration	Implications For This Research
Disrupt as little as possible	Interviews with the children were held at a time that was convenient for them. It was important that disruptions to the learners' routines were minimised, and that they could take regular breaks.
Make sure that all participants receive the benefits	Both the researcher and the participants should benefit from the research. The learners' views on improvements to their educational experience should be considered and implemented, where possible, by the schools. However, this is not guaranteed and should not be portrayed as such.
Collaborate with participants	For the adult stakeholder groups, questions were provided with options given to answer them or not. The details for the steps taken for the learner participants have been detailed in Tables 3.7 and 3.8.
Avoid deceptive practices	All participants were provided with extensive information prior to participating in the research. Also all participants were offered full transcriptions of their interviews to ensure clarity and accurate recording.
Respect potential power imbalances	All participants were given the option to remove consent or assent at any time. Learners were given multiple ways to communicate the wish to stop. If the learner appeared overwhelmed in any way the interview was stopped.
Avoid exploitation of participants	Reciprocity should be shown to participants, by acknowledging the time and

	work of the participants and sharing the final research report with them.
Avoid collecting harmful information.	Learners were advised that if they disclosed that harm was being done to them then this information may need to be shared. They were informed that their own personal identities would be pseudonymised.

Data Analysis

The Phase One questionnaire was administered using Qualtrics and analysed with the support of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS™) software. As the questions were designed to gain an overall view of what was happening in schools with regard to decision-making; eliciting of autistic voices and inclusive education practices, descriptive statistics were deemed sufficient for the current study. ‘

Several established qualitative approaches were considered in relation to the analysis of the interview data, however, each was ultimately deemed insufficient for the nature and composition of the data set (Appendices V and W). For example, Discourse Analysis, with its emphasis on how language constructs reality (Fairclough, 2003) was deemed unsuitable as many learners did not rely primarily on spoken language but instead communicated through photographs, drawings and gestures. Similarly, Qualitative Content Analysis was not appropriate as it tends to reduce data into frequency counts or categories, which risked stripping meaning from nonverbal and multimodal modern forms of communication central to this study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was ultimately selected as the most appropriate analytic approach, as it aligns with the multimodal, multi-stakeholder, and interpretive nature of the dataset. RTA acknowledges researcher subjectivity as an analytic resource rather than a limitation, allowing the researcher’s positionality and interpretive lens to be explicitly engaged throughout the analytic process (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This approach was particularly suited to data that included spoken responses alongside drawings, gestures, and visual materials, as it enabled themes to be actively constructed through immersion, reflection and iterative engagement with the detail rather than being predetermined or mechanically derived. Consistent with Braun and Clarke (2022), RTA views themes as analytic outputs generated through the researcher’s interpretive work, underpinned by reflexivity, theoretical awareness, and creative engagement with the data, making it the most coherent fit for the aims and design of this study. Braun and Clarke (2021) identify six

phases of RTA as detailed in Table 3.7. However, it is essential to note that RTA is not a linear process. They (Braun and Clarke, 2021) stress the importance of both immersing yourself in the data and also allowing time to absorb and reflect on the codes and generated themes. For example, it may be that the researcher moves between phase two and phase five multiple times before achieving phase six.

Table 3.7: The Six Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2021, p. 35/36)

Phase	**Description**
1. Familiarising yourself with the dataset	Become deeply familiar with data through reading and re-reading, listening and transcribing, and making notes both on parts of the data and on the data as a whole.
2. Coding	This is when the data set is worked through in a systematic and detailed manner. Segments of data that appear potentially interesting, relevant or meaningful for the research questions are named using descriptions or code labels. Focus is specific, and detailed, with coding aimed at capturing single meanings or concepts. Data can be coded at a number of levels: semantically when we code for surface meaning or latently when the meaning is implicit or more conceptual.
3. Generating initial themes	This phase involves identifying shared patterns of meaning across the dataset by clustering related codes around a central concept. Themes are actively constructed by the researcher through engagement with the data, research questions, and interpretive insight. Have these caused capture specific instances of meaning, themes represent broader shared patterns, with all relevant coded data collected under each candidate theme.
4. Developing and reviewing themes	The task is to assess the initial fit of the provisional candidate themes to the data and the viability of the overall analysis by going back to the full data set. Development and review involve checking that themes make sense in relation to both the quoted extracts, and then the full data set. Revision is common. The researcher starts considering the relationship between the themes, and existing knowledge, and/or practice

	in the research field, and the wider context of the research. Steps three and four may be repeated multiple times.
5. Refining, defining and naming themes	Analysis is fine-tuned ensuring that each theme is clearly demarcated and is built around a strong concept. A brief synopsis should be written and an informative name decided upon. This step took several iterations.
6. Writing up	Writing was an integral phase of the analytic process and was started early on. In this research the formal analytic writing started from phase 3 – and before – in the research journal as previously discussed. At this phase (six), the researcher finessed and finished the writing process. The aim was to weave together an analytic narrative and compelling vivid data extract to tell the reader a coherent and persuasive story about the data set that addressed the research questions. This phase is also iterative and required copious editing.

NVIVO™ 15 software was used at each stage of the RTA process to organise and collate the data during the coding and theme generating stages. NVIVO™ 15 was used as an administrative convenience in order to keep the data manageable. Twenty-six stakeholder interviews were recorded. The interviews were recorded using a data recording app (Otter). Each of the interviews was then transcribed for clarity and to ensure pauses or other noises were correctly noted. Each transcription was then uploaded to NVIVO which allowed notes to be added to each participant, and the initial data files to be compiled. Code labels and definitions could then start to be built. With layers of coding happening for all stakeholders, NVIVO allowed visual representations of patterns and ribbons to track both the codes and the participant types (Figure 3.3). The generation of themes was represented visually (Appendix X) using NVIVO codebook generation software. A sample breakdown of one theme is shown in Figure 3.4 which shows the number of files (how many references entered the file) and references (how many codes made the reference) formed the generation of the theme. A more detailed breakdown of the themes will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Figure 3.3: An Example of Codes, Memos and Code Stripes

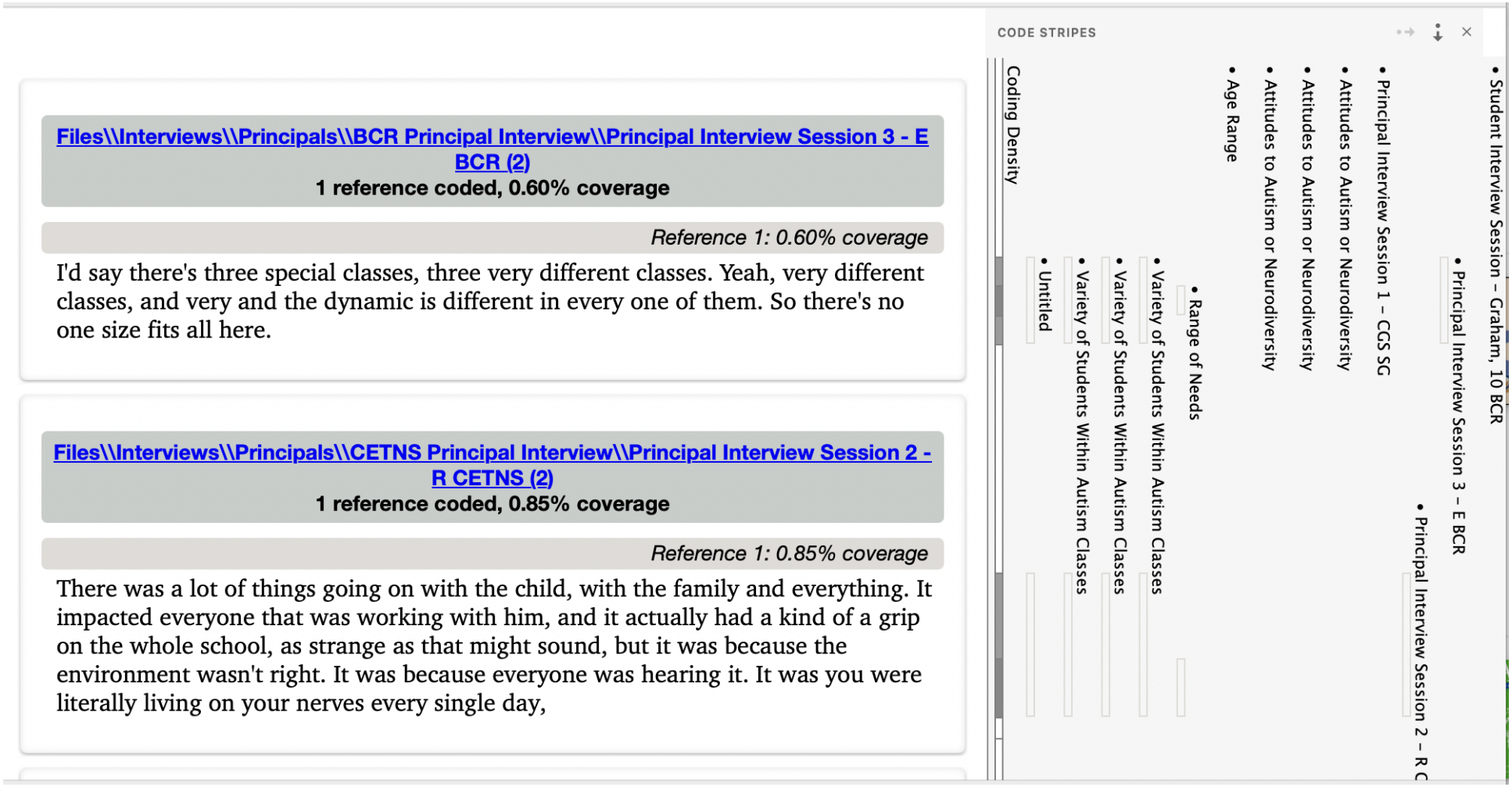
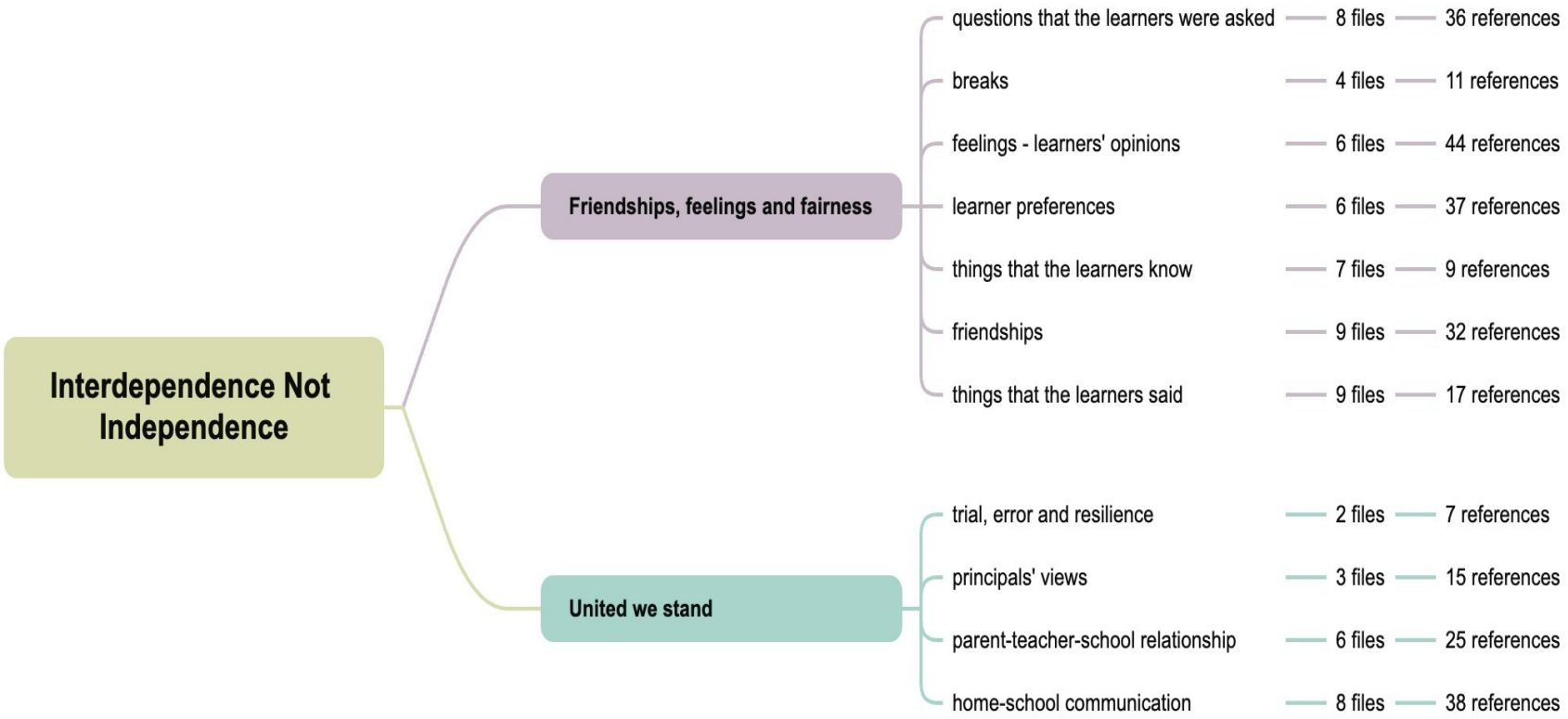


Figure 3.4: Visualisation of Theme Generation



Conclusion

This mixed-methods, sequential explanatory research set out to answer research questions around the voices of autistic learners; decision-making and the enactment of inclusion. The philosophical underpinning of the research was pragmatism. Phase One data consisted of a survey sent to primary schools in Ireland that had at least one established autism class. The data was analysed descriptively using SPSS™ software. Phase Two consisted of multiple stakeholder, semi-structured interviews underpinned by a bounded context case study approach. Careful planning and attention were given to the ethical considerations of working with young, vulnerable learners and communication preferences were considered. All aspects of the research were piloted and the research materials were co-constructed with an autistic learner. Phase Two was analysed within the reflexive thematic analysis method utilising NVIVO™ 15 software. Chapter Four will present the findings gained from this methodology.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents findings of this explanatory sequential study research in two parts. First, the outcomes from Phase One are presented. This phase used a survey to identify whole school inclusive practices for autistic learners with a particular focus on annual placement reviews and the procedures managing autistic learners' access to autism and mainstream classrooms. Beliefs and practices around autism class decision-making were also considered. Analysis from the data generated from the multi-site case study approach adopted in Phase Two will then be provided. These data came from consultations with learners, parents, teachers and principals.

Phase One – Quantitative Data

The survey was divided into three sections: general school information; factors and opinions influencing placement in autism classes; benefits and barriers to including learners from the autism classes into mainstream. The full survey can be viewed in Appendix E. A total of 189 surveys were recorded using Qualtrics™ software. There were 24 surveys removed from the analysis (12.7%, *n*=24) during an initial data clean-up for being incomplete. A total of 165 complete surveys were analysed with the assistance of SPSS™ software.

Demographics

The school category and ethos of the school were recorded in order to ensure that the sample had a sufficiently diverse range of schools represented. A total of 165 participants were recruited, representing 165 schools. Schools disclosed their size, ethos and their status within the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme, (i.e. Band 1, Band 2, Rural DEIS, non-DEIS schools). (See Table 4.1):

Table 4.1: Number and Percentage of School Categories (*n*=165)

Category	***n***	**%**
Urban DEIS Band 1	21	11.3
Urban DEIS Band 2	13	7
Rural DEIS	25	13.4
Ex-Disadvantage	2	1.1
Non-DEIS	114	61.3
Unsure	1	0.5

Missing	10	6.4

The predominant ethos of schools replying were Catholic with that cohort consisting of 83.3% (*n*=155) with 8.1% (*n*=15) identifying as multi-denominational. As 88.3% (*n*=155) of primary schools fall under Catholic patronage (DEY, 2025d), the sample replying to the questionnaire is an accurate representation of primary school types. The majority of schools completing the survey had between 101 and 300 students (53.8%, *n*=100). The majority of schools were non-DEIS (61.3%, *n*=114), with the next largest cohort being rural DEIS (13.4%, *n*=25) with a similar number of DEIS Band 1 (11.3%, *n*=21). Schools were also asked to report the number of autism-specific classes, as this is relevant to the staffing allocation criteria within the system. Most participating schools had one (33.3%, *n*=62) or two (41.4%, *n*=77) autism classes, with a smaller number reporting three or more classes (16.6%, *n*=31). These data are presented in Table 4.2.

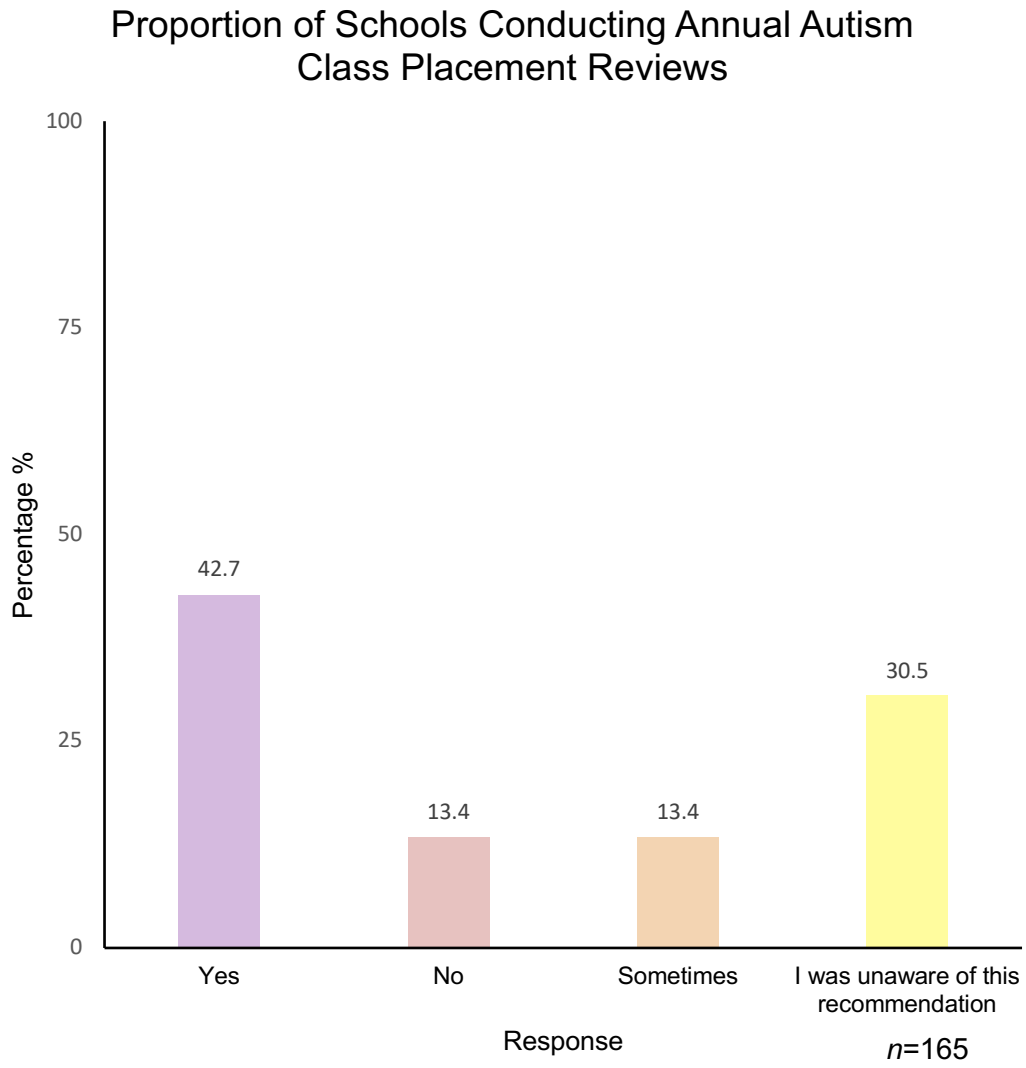
Table 4.2: Number and Percentage of Autism Classes In Participating Schools (*n*=165)

Number of Classes	***n***	**%**
1	62	33.3
2	77	41.4
3-4	25	13.4
5 or more	6	3.2

Completion of Annual Review of Autism Class Placement

The DEY (DEY Inspectorate, 2025a) and NCSE (NCSE, 2024b) recommend that placements in autism class are reviewed at least annually and this recommendation has been in place since the original Task Force report in 2001 (DES, 2001). The majority of respondents (56.1%, *n*=92) indicated that they conducted an annual review - annually or sometimes - of autism class placement in response to the NCSE's recommendations. However, almost one-third of participants (30.5%, *n*=50) reported that they were unaware of this recommendation with a small minority (13.4%, *n*=22) indicating that they did not conduct an annual review of placement despite such guidance. As can be seen in Figure 4.1, just over two-fifths of schools did conduct an annual review (42.7%, *n*=70) with remaining schools conducting reviews only sometimes (13.4%, *n*=22):

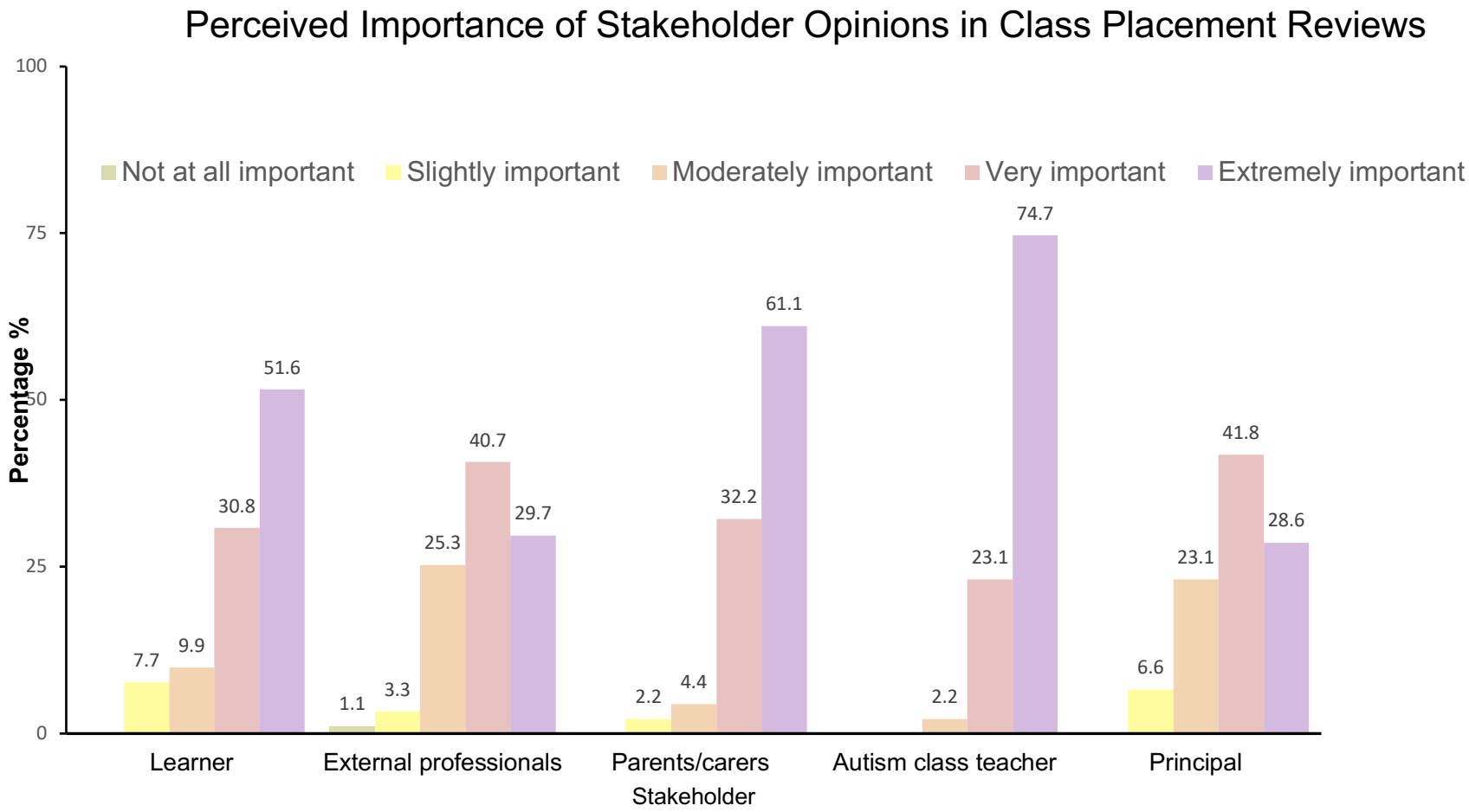
Figure 4.1: Proportion of Schools Conducting Annual Autism Class Placement Reviews



Importance of decision-making among stakeholders surrounding annual review of placement.

Among respondents who reported conducting an annual placement review (100%, *n*=92), participants were asked to rate the relative importance of different stakeholders in the decision-making process. The majority identified the autism class teacher (74.7%, *n*=68) and parents/carers (61.1%, *n*=55) as extremely important. Learners' views were rated as extremely important by 51.6% of respondents (*n*=47), while principals were least frequently identified as extremely important (28.6%, *n*=26). These findings are presented in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2: Perceived Importance of Stakeholder Opinions in Class Placement Reviews



***n*=92**

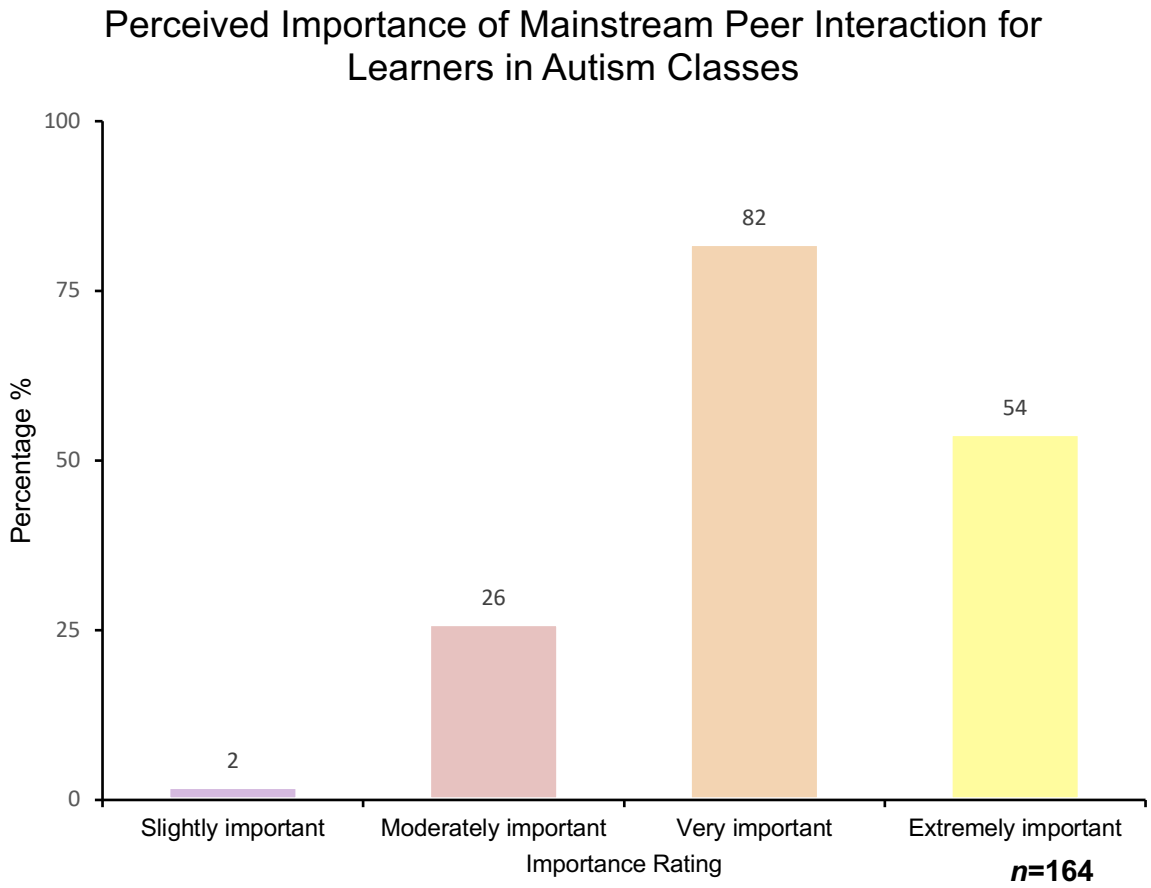
Access to Autism and Mainstream Classrooms: Beliefs and Practices

This section presents findings relating to teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the amount of time learners from autism classes spend with their mainstream peers. Given that fewer than half of schools reported conducting an annual placement review (42.7%, *n*=70) these data provide additional descriptive context for understanding school practices in this area.

Time together.

Participants were questioned about how important they felt it was to have learners from autism classes mix with their mainstream peers. The majority of respondents believed that autistic students spending time with their mainstream peers was either very or extremely important (82.9%, *n*=136) as shown in Figure 4.3:

Figure 4.3: Schools Rating Of Perceived Importance of Peer Interaction



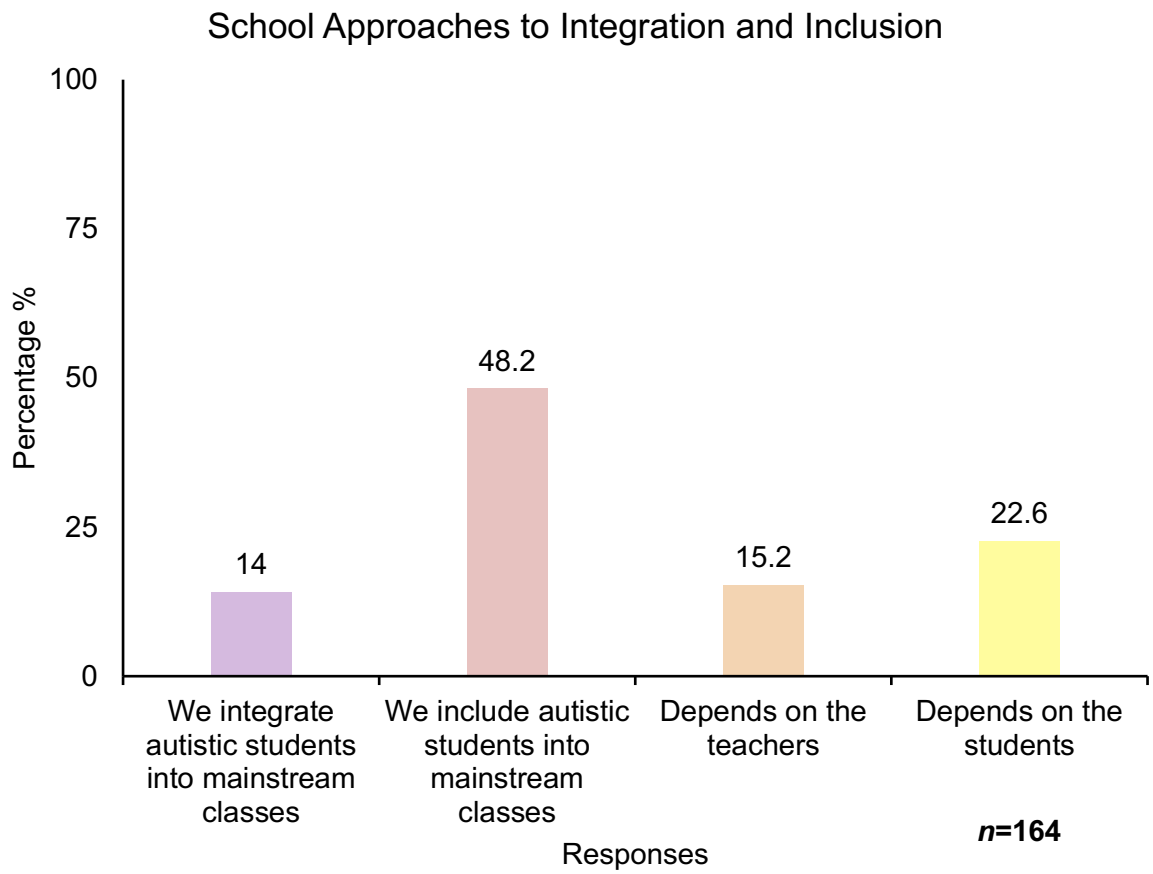
This response clearly indicates that schools view periods when all learners can spend time together as valuable. However, responses give no indication as to the quality of the

experience for the autistic learners from the special class nor whether adaptations were made to the mainstream class.

Integration versus inclusion.

To determine how schools conceptualised their approach to bringing autistic and non-autistic peers together, respondents were given a definition of integration and inclusion. Integration involves children being in a mainstream class with no changes to the environment or curriculum. Inclusion was defined as children being included in mainstream classrooms with reasonable accommodations. As shown in Figure 4.4, 48.2% (*n*=79) of schools reported that autistic learners attend mainstream classes with some accommodations. A further 14% (*n*=23) indicated that autistic students attend mainstream classes *without* specific accommodations. In 22.6% (*n*=37) of cases, respondents stated that decisions regarding an integrated or inclusive approach depended on the individual student. Additionally, 15.2% (*n*=25) reported that such decisions were dependent on the individual class teacher.

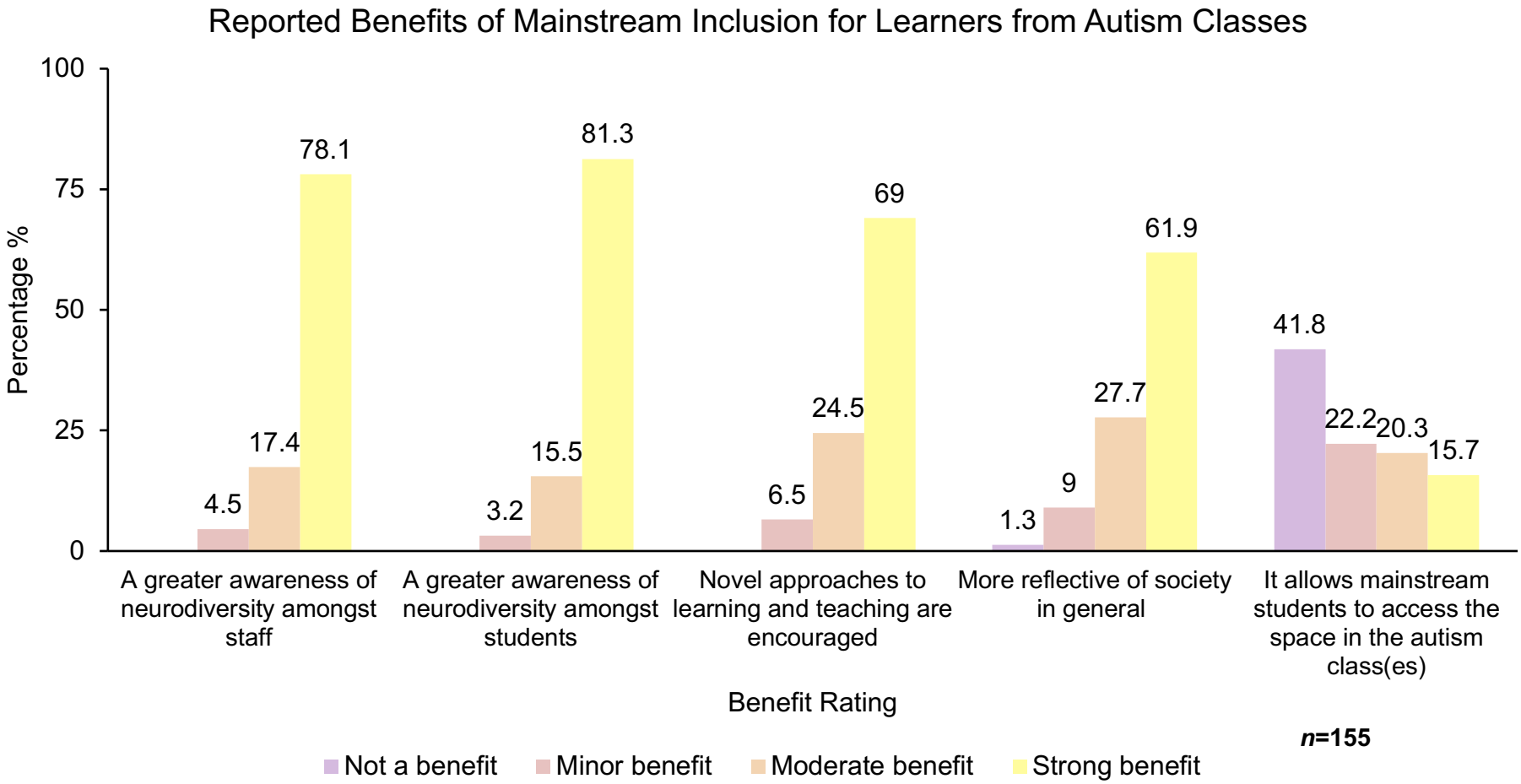
Figure 4.4: School Approaches to Integration and Inclusion



Access to autism and mainstream classrooms: decision-making.

Further analysis of the data revealed that in addition to beliefs and practices affecting access to autism and mainstream classrooms, there are a number of additional factors to consider. When considering the factors that influenced access to autism and mainstream classrooms, the benefits and barriers to transitioning autistic learners to mainstream class contexts for periods of the day were examined. Respondents who reported that they transition their autism class learners to mainstream contexts (100%, *n*=155) were first asked about the benefits of including learners from autism classes into mainstream settings regardless of whether they implemented a review of placement (Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5: Reported Benefits of Mainstream Inclusion for Students from Autism Classes



Respondents (100%, *n*=155) noted that there were strong benefits to including learners from autism classes into mainstream classes particularly in the area of increasing awareness of neurodiversity and neurodivergence amongst both students (81.3%, *n*=126) and staff (78.1%, *n*=121) and that this was more reflective of society in general (61.9%, *n*=96). School staff also responded that they adopted more novel approaches to learning and teaching to meet the individual learning preferences of autistic learners (69%, *n*=107). Notwithstanding agreement with the presented benefits, barriers to including learners from autism classes in mainstream settings are shown in Table 4.3. The mainstream sensory environment was identified by 65% (*n*=101) of teachers as a strong or severe barrier to inclusion. A further 67.3% (*n*=104) of respondents indicated that the demands of the mainstream classroom represented a strong or severe barrier to inclusion.

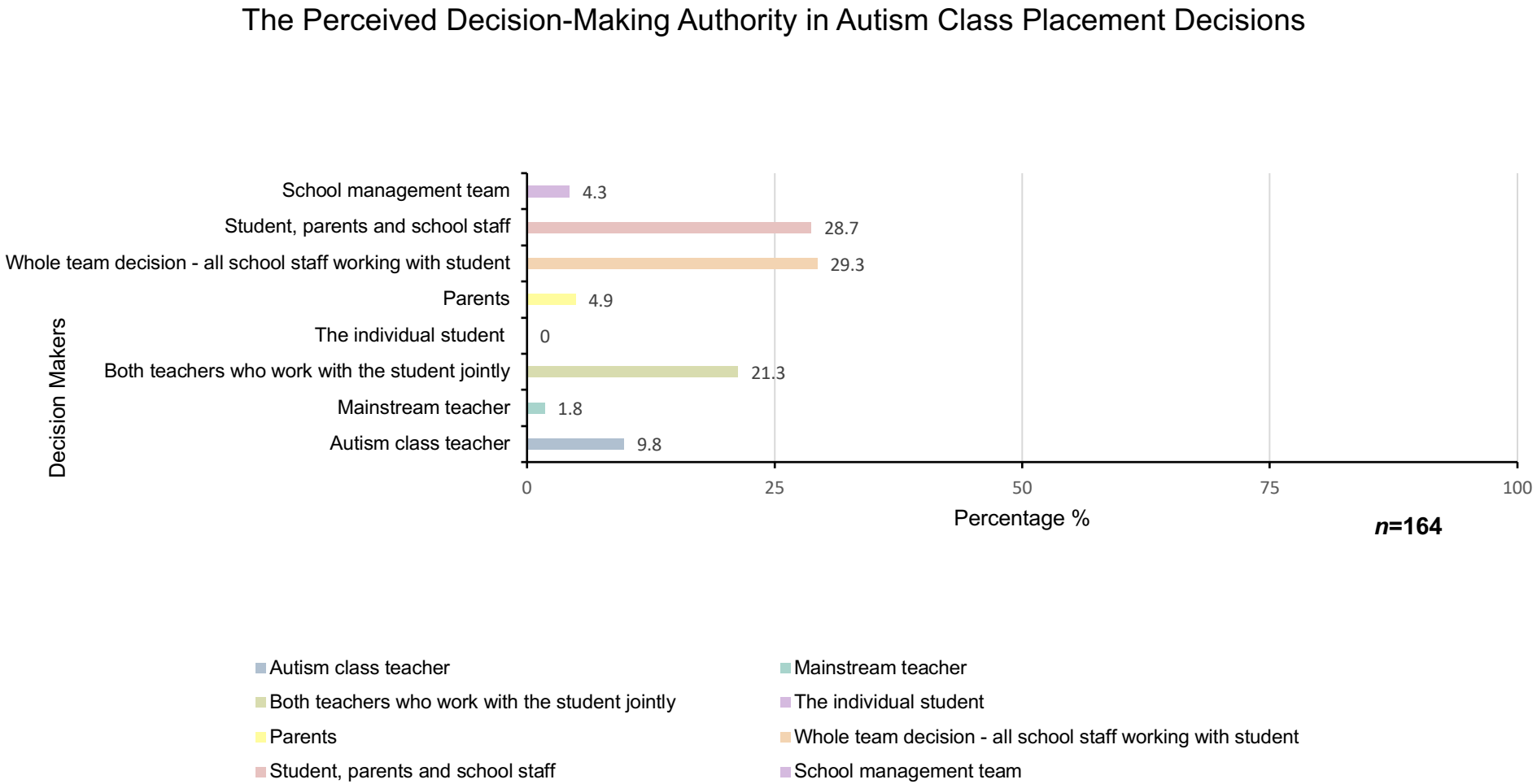
Table 4.3: Reported Barriers to Mainstream Inclusion of Learners from Autism Classes (*n*=155)

	Not a Barrier	**Minor Barrier**	**Moderate Barrier**	**Strong Barrier**	**Severe Barrier**
	%	%	%	%	%
Mainstream sensory environment	0.6	8.9	25.5	46.5	18.5
Large mainstream class sizes	4.5	9	27.7	35.5	23.2
Unable to meet mainstream curriculum targets	11.5	27.4	26.1	24.8	10.2
Teachers discomfort over inclusion	40.1	24.8	14.6	10.8	9.6
Parents discomfort over inclusion	40.1	19.1	18.5	15.3	7
Lack of staff to support inclusion	11.5	16.7	24.4	25.6	21.8
Demands of mainstream class	3.2	5.8	23.7	42.3	25
No formal planning of inclusion	59.5	15.7	7.8	9.2	7.8

Individual influence.

While all the benefits and barriers to including autistic learners have been illustrated, it is the individual influences of the different stakeholders who appear to hold significant influence in regard to the decision-making opportunities within individual schools. Respondents to the questionnaire were asked who they thought had the greatest decision-making power with regards to an autistic learner's placement. The majority of participants (100%, *n*=164) indicated that decision-making powers surrounding the learner's placement in the autism class should be split between the whole team working with the student (29.3%, *n*=48); students, parents and school staff (28.7%, *n*=47) and both teachers who work with the student jointly (21.3%, *n*=35) as outlined in Figure 4.6. Significantly however, none (*n*=0) of the respondents to this survey thought that the student had the greatest decision-making power in educational decisions. While this appears to contradict the previously reported finding that 51.6% (*n*=47) of respondents stated that learners' views were extremely important when it came to decision-making, no respondent thought that the learner had decision-making power. The distinction is important as the learner does have rights under both UNCRC and UNCRPD to have a say in their education and for those rights to take precedence over that of their parents/carers.

Figure 4.6: The Perceived Decision-Making Authority in Autism Class Placement Decisions



Phase one summary.

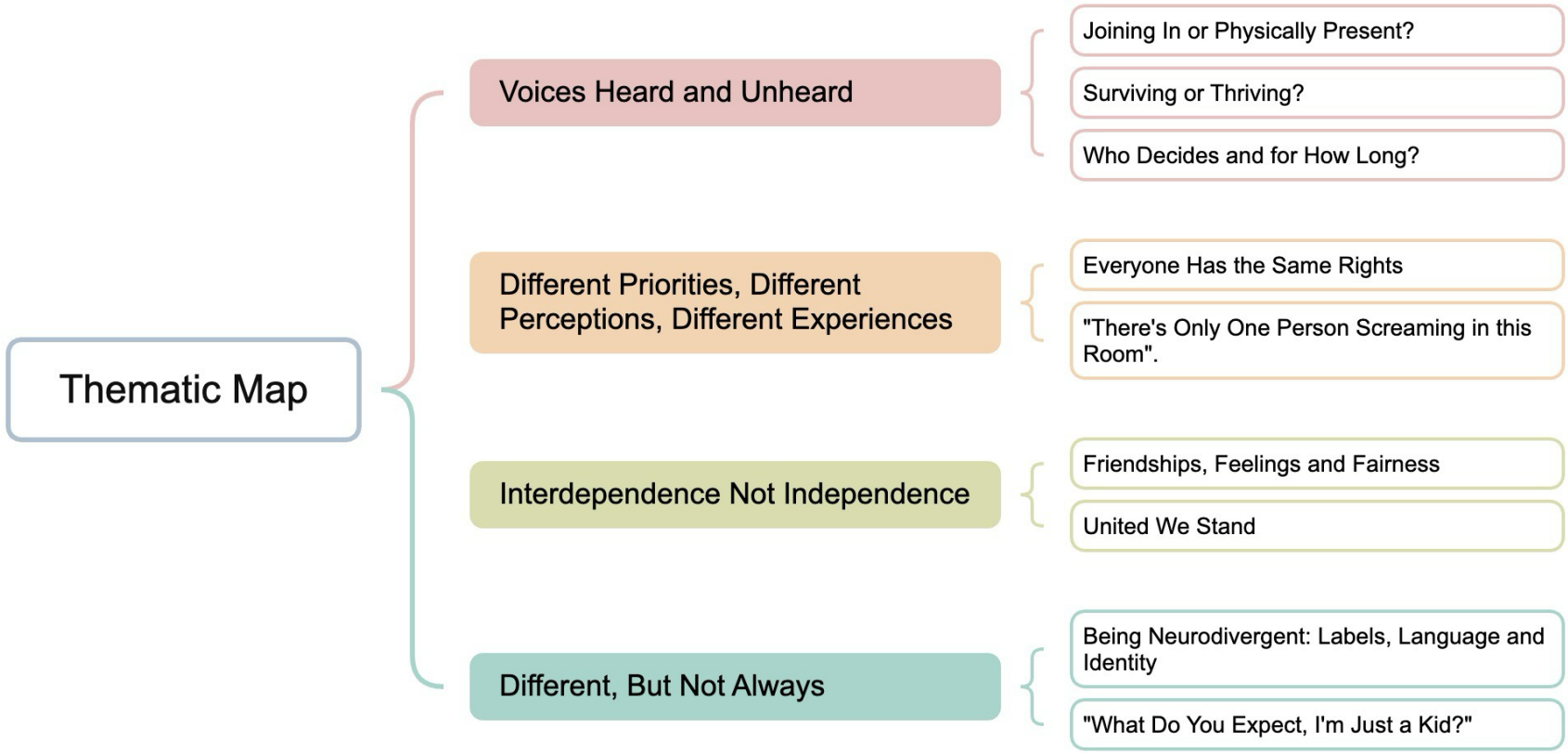
The results from the survey indicate that although a majority of respondents knew that a review of autism class placement should be undertaken at least annually (56.1%, *n*=92), less than half (42.7%, *n*=70) actually conducted them on a consistent basis. School respondents could identify benefits to including autistic learners from the special class in the school in general, but again slightly less than half (48.2%, *n*=79) made consistent reasonable accommodations to enhance opportunities for successful educational experiences. The most striking result to emerge from the data is that no respondents believed that learner voices are the most important in relation to decision-making about their educational placement. This initial quantitative phase of the research was conducted prior to the stakeholder interviews. Findings relating to the relative emphasis placed on learner voices, and comparison with those of adult stakeholders, together with other pertinent issues, was explored further in the subsequent qualitative phase (Phase Two).

Phase Two – Qualitative Findings

Introduction.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis was adopted for the purpose of generating themes within the qualitative data. While this method generally omits the reporting of code and theme frequency in case, for example, a greater number of codes, references or files suggest "*more is better"* (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 141) it can be useful to illustrate the amount and depth of data collected. Over 1200 initial codes were identified, which were grouped into 66 files (codes which shared common ideas). These files generated seven initial themes. Between further reflexive journalling (Appendix D) and a rereading of those seven themes, the final four themes were generated in response to the research questions as demonstrated in Figure 4.7. The quotes embedded in this chapter are all from the interviews conducted over the period of the research.

Figure 4.7: Thematic Map Showing Themes and Subthemes



Definitions of the themes and subthemes are provided in Table 4.4. While these will be described in more detail in each of the relevant sections of the chapter Table 4.4 acts as an initial overview.

Table 4.4: Definitions of Themes and Subthemes

Theme or Subtheme Title	Definition
Theme 1: Voices Heard and Unheard	This theme refers to what stakeholders were both prepared to talk about and avoided talking about in relation to inclusion and placement.
Subtheme 1: Joining in or physically present?	How inclusion is conceptualised and enacted.
Subtheme 2: Surviving or thriving?	Explores the emotional and relational dimensions of the experience of inclusion.
Subtheme 3: Who decides and for how long?	Interrogates the power dynamics underpinning placement considering whose voices ultimately shape these educational journeys.
Theme 2: Different Priorities, Different Perceptions, Different Experiences	This theme refers to the influence of stakeholders' positionality on their priorities as well as their perceptions and experiences of autism class placement.
Subtheme 1: Everyone has the same rights	Adult perspectives on inclusion and what is important for learners.
Subtheme 2: "There's only one person screaming in this room"	Learner perspectives and priorities about their autism class.
Theme 3: Interdependence Not Independence	This theme refers to the interdependence between stakeholders. This theme emphasises the importance of relationships and interconnectedness.
Subtheme 1: Friendships, feelings and fairness	This refers to social interactions and how these shape school experiences.
Subtheme 2: United we stand	The importance of connectedness between stakeholder groups.
Theme 4: Different But Not Always	This theme explores issues of sameness and difference between autism and mainstream classes.

Subtheme 1: Being neurodivergent: labels, language and identity	Stakeholder views on autism.
Subtheme 2: "What do you expect, I'm just a kid?"	Learners' views on school life; likes and dislikes and what needs to change.

Theme One: Voices Heard and Unheard

'Voices Heard and Unheard' captures not only what participants were willing to articulate, but also what remained unspoken and omitted. The question of where children spend their time (in mainstream or in an autism class) became a focal point for understanding how voice, agency and decision-making are enacted (or restricted) in practice. In a wider sense, it also refers to what was not said by the learners due to hesitancy or limitations in supporting them to speak out in response to levels of emotional regulation or levels of understanding that they can advocate for themselves. The learners' right to have a say in relation to where they spent their day also formed part of this theme as the purpose of both the autism class and inclusion in mainstream was a source of uncertainty across every stakeholder group.

In order to examine the extent to which autistic learners are currently being included in decision-making around their autism class placement, it is essential to investigate whose opinions are being sought and who is, or is not, being listened to. All of the learners who were interviewed had been enrolled in an autism class since Junior Infants. The amount of time each learner spends in their autism class and their mainstream class is an in-school decision. As described in Chapter One, there are no DEY guidelines about when inclusion with mainstream peers should start, or for what percentage of the day should be spent in each setting. The lack of guidance was problematic for school leaders with Oak NS Principal commenting *"every school is an island"*.

While all learners spoke about being in two classes, only Graham (Oak NS, 10) explicitly talked about the difference in his classes. He stated that the difference between his two classes was that one was a special class and the other was mainstream. He also clarified his current choices about where he spent his time:

> But sometimes I honestly prefer my main class more than my special class, just because the kids in the special class can, you know, irritate me, but it's not like in the way I don't like them…. Pretty much all of them are younger than me…that's why I just stay up in my main class, because I don't want to, like, make them feel upset themselves.

Graham (Oak NS) was orally very articulate and was able to advocate for himself – the school also respected his choices. Others experienced difficulties when making their feelings known, for example, Becky (Beech NS, 10) visibly shut down when asked about her mainstream class and her current feelings on it. She stated she had moved seats recently and produced the visual shown in Figure 4.8.

Figure 4.8: Becky's Picture

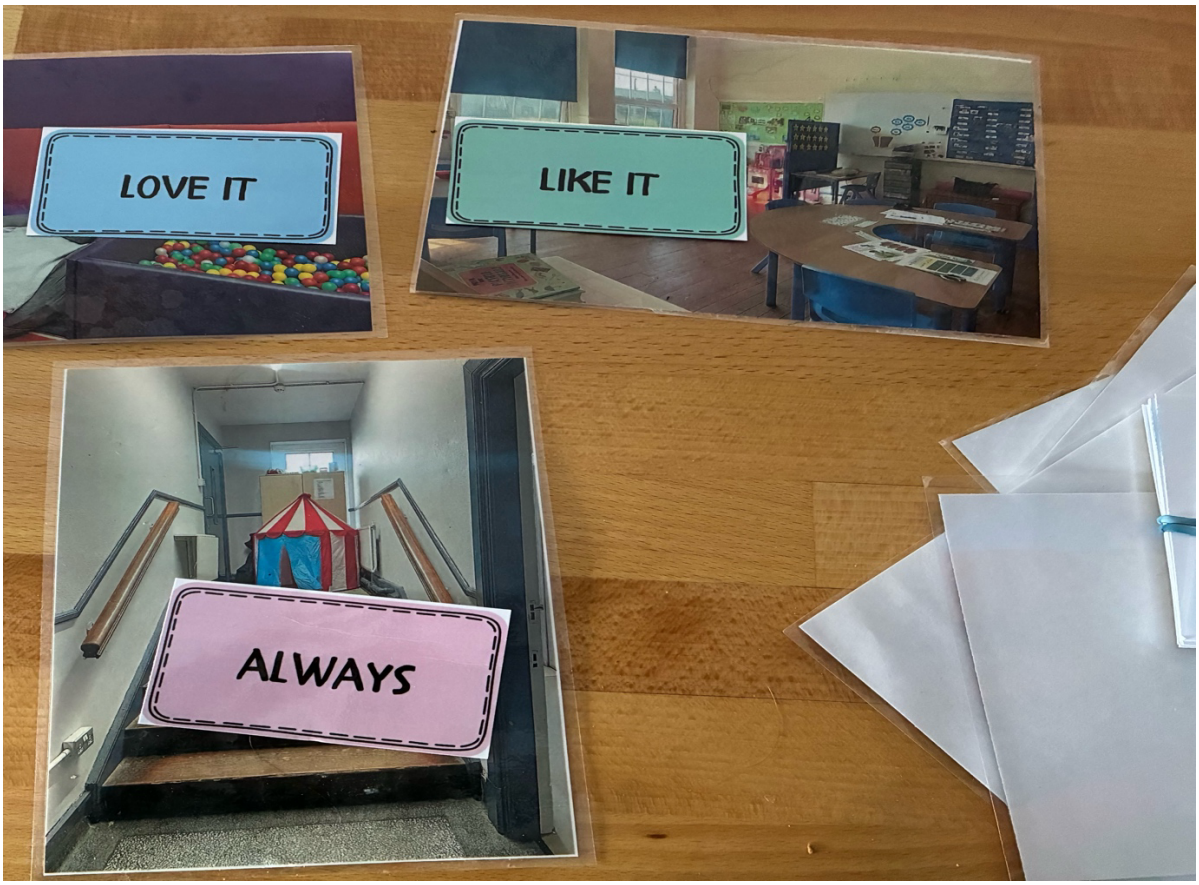


She then orally stated, *"Sometimes I don't really know how to ask for the help because it's hard"*. While Becky was a chatty ten-year-old, she expressed that she found it difficult to speak in times of overwhelm. Her voice in these instances went unheard not because she could not advocate for herself, but because her type of communication shifted from speaking to non-speaking. It appears that her mainstream teacher was unaware that Becky was unable to verbally articulate her feelings during times of overwhelm. Becky stated that she would be uncomfortable asking to be moved to a different seat in case that made the teacher annoyed. She was also anxious that the other girls around her may take offence and concluded that she would remain uncomfortable instead of advocating for herself. When asked about times that she was not happy at school she responded "*noise, or tight, really tight spaces with a crowd, that's not nice".* When asked if she could ask to leave the environment in those instances when she felt uncomfortable she stated, "*I'm not sure, because that never happened".* This denial of her own comfort is a clear example of masking

which over time can have a significant emotional toll on autistic learners. In knowing this information Becky's teacher could more meaningfully include her voices in decision-making.

When asked about where he felt most comfortable in school, Adam (Oak NS, 6) quickly sorted the photos, only selecting those which were part of the autism class (Figure 4.9). Despite being asked about the other places in the photographs he repeatedly would only talk about places he was happy in and that he liked. While he never made any negative comments about the mainstream class, the schoolwork that he did or the school yard his refusal to talk on those issues appeared significant. This is one example of the interpretive lens that was used when generating the themes and sub-themes – the absence of answers sometimes spoke more loudly than presence of them.

Figure 4.9: Adam's Picture



Voices heard and unheard refers to what stakeholders were both prepared to talk about and avoided talking about. The above examples of data generated in partnership with the learners gives an insight into how children felt about their inclusion in schools with autism and mainstream classes. This overarching theme is explored through three interrelated subthemes. 'Joining In or Physically Present?' considers how inclusion is conceptualised and enacted, examining the boundaries between autism classes and

mainstream settings. ‘Surviving or Thriving?’ explores the emotional and relational dimensions of these experiences, focusing on how children and staff navigate and communicate their experiences of inclusion. Finally, ‘Who Decides and For How Long?’ interrogates the power dynamics underpinning placement considering whose voices ultimately shape these educational journeys.

Joining in or physically present?

This subtheme focuses on how ideas around inclusion were conceptualised and enacted by the participants, and what is the experience of inclusion for learners from autism classes. For the adults in this research, the words integration and inclusion were used interchangeably and depended on the language used in school policy – staff (principals and teachers) and parents in both Holly NS and Oak NS used the word integration throughout the interviews, whereas the term inclusion was used by all the adults in Beech NS. School staff were asked about their understanding of both terms – inclusion and integration – with all responding that when they started teaching the language used had been integration. All adult stakeholders in Holly NS and Oak NS spoke of inclusion whilst using the phrase ‘integration’. There was no difference in the experiences the schools were describing whether the language was inclusion or integration. The principals and teachers all emphasised that time and support would be required to ensure children had a positive introduction to time with their mainstream peers. For example, Principal (Holly NS) *“probably take about a year [..] spending more time in the mainstream class, but would still have access to the SNAs, still have movement breaks”.* However, in all cases the school staff spoke of the gradual removal of support as a measure of success, classifying the removal of SNAs or need for breaks from the classroom as a reduction in support. Neither Holly NS nor Oak NS conducted reviews of placement with the learners to ascertain their opinions on time spent in mainstream. The principals in both schools spoke of changes made to both school policy and practice in order to ensure the sense of belonging for the learners. Principal Beech NS had contacted Aladdin (the company who provides the software for electronic school rolls) to ensure that learners from the autism class were included on both class roles:

> We want to include our children in a class of 28, so we need it to say 30. We asked them [Aladdin] to look at it and come back with a solution…. they’re now called associated pupils. We don’t like that language so we’ve asked them to go back and look at it again, but at least now it shows 30 pupils in third class.

Principal Beech NS felt that “*associated pupils”* ‘othered’ the autistic students and made them different from the mainstream class. This understanding of not just having the learners named but having them equal and the same as their peers points to a clear understanding and enactment of the spirit of inclusion. She noted that, in order to shift the

mindset of mainstream teachers, it was important that staff also viewed children who move between both settings as belonging to both classes. She stated that "*if you think of your class as having, for example, 26 students then you plan for that in terms of furniture, school trips, letters to parents and other day-to-day classroom elements… your thinking includes all learners".* When the two learners from the autism class were included on the mainstream class list they did not seem additional rather they were 'part of' the class stating, *"they joined in, they weren't just physically present" (*Principal, Beech NS).

The parents also spoke of the sense of belonging, one of the underpinning conceptualisations of inclusion, and the welcome that was extended to both them and their children stating that "*it's like a big family"* (Parent, Beech NS). The parents' key concerns related to their child's happiness. None of the parents were concerned with how much time was spent between the classes, with each parent stating they were happy to leave it up to the school and how their child felt on the day: *"she's happy in her class… She's not thinking I'm being segregated from the mainstream class… Those are her friends"* (Parent, Beech NS).

Teachers and principals spoke of the importance of reverse inclusion, whereby learners from the mainstream context joined the autism class for a planned period of time. Schools used this either to widen the social interactions of their autistic learners who may not have been comfortable attending the bigger and less familiar mainstream class settings. The schools also used reverse inclusion to give additional support to the mainstream children while allowing the learners from the autism class to work as a varied group in their own, more familiar setting:

> One thing we did this year was a Literacy Lift Off programme. We brought a couple of kids from mainstream who were not getting extra support but were borderline and ran a station down here. It was great. Two kids from my class and three from mainstream. It benefitted my two and the other three as well [..] They are collaborating as part of a group. (Teacher 5, Holly NS).

All autism teaching staff had a clear understanding of the purpose of inclusion and the importance of ensuring that learners felt that they belonged in both classes. All children had desks in both classrooms, and the autism class teachers felt strongly that the learners should be accompanied by a familiar adult in their mainstream classes. The teachers did speak of the importance of children being included with the 'right' teacher, citing the personality of some teachers being less compatible with some of the learners:

> The teacher had a different approach and was very interested and very gentle with the kids [..] Because of the dynamic with this teacher it suited him much better, it was a much calmer environment. (Teacher 2, Oak NS).

The view that some teachers are a "*better fit*" for including autistic students, as expressed by Teacher 2 (Oak NS) was echoed by several participants. Some respondents suggested that the success of inclusion depends on particular teachers being assigned to autistic learners.

The learners' views on their placement indicated that they belonged to two classes and moved between them. The children classified their classes differently in each school. In Holly NS school, they called their autism class multi-class (their mainstream classes were single stream, all the children were of the same age and stage, the autism class had mixed ages and mixed-class equivalent children so there were multiple class stages in the one room) and their mainstream by year group e.g. 2nd class; in Oak NS they used their teacher's names and in Beech NS school they used their year group names and neutral nature-based names for their autism classes. It is important to note that it was often not clear in conversation with the learners if they were aware of their autism or why they moved between classes (with the exception of Graham, 10, Oak NS). If parents have not informed their children they are autistic, children may not understand why they moved between their classes and why many of their peers did not. Many of the learners spoke about being more comfortable in their autism class usually because of the sensorily overwhelming environment in mainstream classrooms. Some of the children felt that they had more work in mainstream, as expressed by Niall (Oak NS, 7) "*I don't like about it that we have to do maths and everything"*. Niall felt differently about his autism class and highlighted that "*The thing that's fun about it is the teachers, there is less working, the teachers are kinder and one of my best friends is there."* Niall expressed clearly that he considered anything that was written into a textbook as work, and he did not enjoy writing stating that it hurt his hand. He was able to show his understanding of concepts differently in his autism class and preferred those suggesting that if his mainstream teacher wishes him to 'join in' rather than be physically present, alterations may have to be made to meet his learning preferences. Graham (Oak NS, 10) was the only learner who articulated that he preferred his mainstream class, stating that he felt different from the others in his autism class. All the other learners preferred their autism classes as reflected in Chloe's (Beech NS, 10) response saying it was *"the place they go to relax"*. All learners apart from Graham (Oak NS) spoke of having friends in both classes.

The subtheme 'Joining In or Physically Present?' highlights that some schools reported formal structures to support movement between autism and mainstream classrooms. These structures were described as supporting autistic learners to experience inclusion across settings rather than simply being placed in different locations during the

school day. Parents generally supported movement between classrooms, although some preferred full-time placement in autism classes, stating that this best met their child's needs.. Most autistic learners spent some time in mainstream classrooms with their peers however reported experiences of inclusion varied, with factors such as sensorily overwhelming environments, rigid teaching, and curriculum demands influencing participation. The next sub subtheme, ‘Surviving or Thriving?’ further explores learner well-being and classroom experiences.

Surviving or thriving?

‘Surviving or Thriving?’ explores the emotional and relational dimensions of classroom experiences, focusing on how children and staff navigate and communicate their current experiences of inclusion. Without exception, the parents felt that their children were happy, understood and well-supported in their schools – that the support they were given in the autism class gave their children space and time to flourish. Beech NS and Holly NS parents were both convinced of the need for an autism class placement for their children before they started school. One parent spoke of his initial struggle to accept that his son may need a special class placement but stated that, in retrospect “*A mainstream class? They wouldn’t have got the best of him. The [autism] class was the best thing for him…. 100%”* (Parent, Oak NS).

For many parents, the decision to enrol their child in an autism class was difficult, especially if there is a chance that they may manage in the mainstream context. One parent who had two children in the autism class stated that for her daughter the decision was an easy one due to the complexity of her communication differences. However, her son’s communication differences were less complex while his social interactions required more support – she stated that she (and her husband) were concerned that enrolling her son into the autism class may *“hold him back”* (Parent, Holly NS) and that ultimately the aim was to have him fully enrolled in mainstream. The hopes of the parents that their children could at some stage achieve success in mainstream had a resulting impact on staff, with a great deal of trust being placed in the staff’s professional judgement “*we left it with his teacher to make the decisions about how much time he spends in both classes [..] we’re not going to dictate”* (Parent, Oak NS).

While all the teachers spoke of enjoying their time in the autism classes, some were clearly surviving more than thriving, often as a result of issues outside of their control. The learners were more positive about their autism classes generally than their mainstream classes generally representing the autism class as a safe haven for them:

> Miss EEE (mainstream class) is so noisy…. It's noisy all the time… It's a small room with loads of girls in it. I prefer to be outside at Miss DDD's (autism class). (Chloe, Beech NS).

While the physical and sensory environment of mainstream contexts was the most common source of dissatisfaction with mainstream classrooms, only one of the children spoke about really disliking their mainstream class for reasons beyond this. He stated he wanted to spend all his time in the autism class but was not allowed to:

> Work and stuff. Maths, English, circle time. They hurt. They're kind of just boring and they hurt my hand, and sometimes they are hard…. If I could change things I would not go to school. Ever, never. I don't need an education. (Martin, 10), Holly NS).

Martin was also the child who stated that he had no friends, and that really the only time he was happy was when he was allowed to watch or talk about his specific interests and enthusiasms. He stated that he did not need friends and preferred to spend time with his Dad. He spoke enthusiastically about his interests throughout the interview, relaying happy times back to instances around that topic. It did not appear that any attempt had been made to incorporate this interest into making learning more interesting for him, or that he was given time to engage with his interest during school time, arguably missing an opportunity to meaningfully include his voice in decision-making. This appeared to upset him, and he expressly stated many times that he felt school to be pointless and a place where he was "*miserable".* Graham (Oak NS) spoke about a number of topics which made school easier for himself, citing his understanding of his own autism and support from school staff as key to making school easier for him to manage. Indeed, knowing his own identity as an autistic person contributed to his own ability to manage different school contexts and environments. This suggests that personal factors interact with environmental and placement factors in helping learners to feel included in different classrooms: "*I mean, it allows me to, like sympathise for myself a little more. Sometimes I think I'm a bad person, and then I just realise I'm just having some difficulties…"* Graham (Oak NS).

Based on the data presented here, some participants were just surviving placement in a school. The learners spoke of finding schoolwork difficult and the sensorily overwhelming nature of the mainstream class. With the exception of Graham (Oak NS) who stated that he took his breaks outside of his autism class, all of the learners welcomed the emotionally safer, more regulating environment of their autism classes.

Who decides and for how long?

'Who Decides and For How Long?' interrogates the power dynamics underpinning placement considering whose voices ultimately shape these educational journeys. All of the

parents interviewed were happy for this to be decided by the school, with the only concern being the loss of the autism class placement. One parent (Oak NS) whose son spends the majority of his time in mainstream explained that it was only: "*when we got the assurance the place was always there for him, we trusted the school to do what they needed to do*" (Parent, Oak NS).

All parents were aware of their children spending time in the mainstream classroom but were happy to leave the decision about how much this happened entirely at the discretion of the school staff. One of the parents questioned the different approaches taken by teachers in the autism class and the mainstream class and expressed that this was difficult for her son *"that side of integration is very hard for him"* (Parent, Holly NS). She felt that it was important that her son continued to attend the mainstream class in order to forge social connections. The autism class teacher spoke with the learner and they decided to bring some of the mainstream children for play in the autism class until connections could be forged in an environment that was more familiar for the learner. When the child returned to spending time in the mainstream class he was seated with familiar children. This was a clear example of the teacher understanding the importance of listening to the initial concerns of the parent while finding a solution that was comfortable for the learner ensuring that he belonged in both classes with the support of his friends. While the teacher referred to this process as integration and reverse integration, the sense of belonging and felt safety of the child was clearly at the heart of the process. While the decisions were ultimately based on discussions between the parent and the teachers, they were clearly based on the needs of the learner and concerns he had voiced at home.

Lottie (Holly NS, 11) felt that she did have choice around where she spent her time but acknowledged that every day was scheduled by someone else and she followed that schedule. She did state that she could ask to leave her mainstream class and return to her mixed class (autism class) if she wanted. However, as noted by Lottie (Holly NS) and Becky (Beech NS) it may be difficult for someone with communication differences to request help in a way that is easy to be heard or understood in a busy classroom environment. Given the power dynamics that exist in pupil-teacher relationships this may be an additional barrier to children expressing their views. It may also be that teachers feel that children have opportunities to express their views, but if they are not listened to, or if their communications are not respected or responded to, it suggests that learner voices and all forms of voice are not being heard.

Principals were concerned with movement in and out of the classes reflecting their role in informing the DEY and NCSE of available places. Principal Oak NS stated '*you're*

trying to subsume them into your mainstream allocation and it's very difficult" clearly articulating that resources were stretched and that this, as a school leader, had to be considered when deciding on inclusion and transition to mainstream classrooms. Teachers decided around daily timetabling and when inclusion with mainstream peers took place. This was mainly decided by the learners' strengths and needs – if deemed capable by the autism and mainstream class teachers most students completed the core curricular subjects with their mainstream peers. The learners had various levels of input. Sometimes they were deemed unable, by teachers, to advocate for themselves either because of their age or communication differences, in these instances the professional judgement of the teachers decided for the learners. However, even when they were clearly stating preferences around which setting they wanted to be in those were views were sometimes over-ruled by staff who considered their judgement to be more important. This suggests that although some learners advocated for themselves and expressed their voices, it appears that they had minimal influence.

When interrogating this theme 'Voices Heard, Voices Unheard' the learner's position in the decision-making process appears to have the least influence, or to be the least heard of all of the views. Where the learner's views are considered at all, this seems to be largely at the discretion of the school, with parents only becoming involved if their child is clearly distressed or unhappy. This places children at the bottom of the decision-making chain.

While voices arguably may be heard, the imbalance of power which places the learner at the bottom of decision-making influence cannot be ignored. Survey data (Phase One) supports this argument as the learners cannot enact decision-making if schools do not participate in decision-making procedures. There appears to be little collaborative communication between all the stakeholders. Until the circular (0023/2025) was issued, there was autonomy within schools to carry out reviews of placement. However, the findings in this study demonstrate that reviews were not undertaken. In this regard it was not that voices went unheard, but that learners were overlooked leading to a situation when decisions are made by proxy for the child by adult stakeholders. The next theme explores how stakeholder positionality determines beliefs, and how different stakeholder perspectives can foster different priorities.

Theme Two: Different Priorities, Different Styles, Different Experiences

As discussed in Theme One, the voices of all the stakeholders at times goes both heard and unheard, with concerns and wishes spoken and unspoken. Each stakeholder group expressed frustration towards those they perceived as either more powerful or with the ability to make decisions about autism class placements. The current theme of *Different*

Priorities, Different Styles, Different Experiences refers to how the positionality of the stakeholders within the education system influences their beliefs around autism class placements and what they prioritise in this process. The core of these priorities should be embedded in the educational experiences of the autistic learner and enhance their opportunity to contribute to decisions around their own placement. While principals and teachers may be focussed on resourcing issues, for learners communication can be an on-going difficulty as stated by Ellie (Beech NS, 10)

> It's very difficult for me to socialise… my brother says it's just walking up to someone and saying hi, but it's a lot more than that…. sometimes my social barrier is just low.

Ellie's experience suggests that school can be stressful and exhausting, while adult stakeholders may place greater emphasis on academic achievement and participation in mainstream settings. Stakeholders therefore bring different experiences and priorities to the decision-making process, highlighting the need for cross-stakeholder communication to understand differing perspectives. These views are explored through two subthemes: 'Everyone Has The Same Rights' and 'There's Only One Person Screaming In This Room'. The subthemes reflect factors shaping stakeholder perspectives and how these are influenced by experiences of autism class placements. Principals reported considering external supports (e.g. DEY, NCSE, NEPS and CDNTs), internal staffing (teachers and SNAs), and student composition across autism and mainstream classes. Teachers considered classroom dynamics across both settings, as well as SNAs, parental preferences, and, in some cases, learner preferences. Parents focused primarily on their own children, while learners were asked to reflect on their own experiences.

Everyone has the same rights.

This subtheme interrogates adult perspectives on inclusion and what is important for learners. What became evident from each of the principals was the lack of external services and the lack of wider support from both the DEY and NCSE. Principal Oak NS stated that: "*I suppose the frustrating thing about special classes attached to mainstream is that, from my perspective, once you open a class, your support ceases".*

This frustration was echoed by each of the principals, with views expressed by all that their role was as a principal and that they needed support to sufficiently manage the running of the school and increase staff knowledge of how best to support their autistic learners. They felt that enhanced TPL around eliciting learner voices would enhance opportunities to embed this practice. One of the principals (Oak NS) had made a room in the school available to outside therapists from the local Children's Disability Network Team (CDNT).

This was implemented so that the children could access support in a familiar environment; the families did not need to cross the city (often by public transport with more than one child) to access services and also in the hope that by building relationships with these external agencies the school may receive some additional support. As observed by Principal Oak NS "*it can be done like if there is communication, co-operation and collaboration – it's all the C words"*. A further strand to the perspective of the principals was the lack of flexibility in the system in moving learners from autism classes to mainstream. Currently, for placement status to change the parent must initiate or agree to the move. Principals stated they were reluctant to recommend a permanent move to mainstream as the learner would not be able to re-enrol in the autism class if the placement broke down. While the perception of the adults may be that mainstream is the ultimate goal in attaining inclusion, the perspective of the learners could be quite different if they feel overwhelmed and yet are not given the platform to influence that decision-making. The principals expressed trust in their teachers to make the decisions around regular inclusion into mainstream citing the class teacher's greater knowledge of the learners. The class teachers voiced their frustrations around the variable nature of that process and the increased workload it placed on them.

There was a marked difference in the opinions of principals and teachers around autism class placements. The principals spoke of decisions to move children in or out of autism classes and the difficulties that arose. However, the week prior to the principal interviews a circular (0023/2025) had been issued from the DEY formalising this process with each acknowledging they would now need to do one. In particular, Principal Beech NS was frustrated with the bureaucracy:

> So we've never done it. Do I plan on doing it this year? No. And why? Because I can't see any parent offering up their child's place because they fought so hard to get it. So even if they don't feel they need it, they wouldn't give it away, just in case. I will do it next year. If it's a requirement, a definite requirement. (Principal, Beech NS).

All the principals agreed that two years would be the minimum time required in moving a learner from the autism class to mainstream full-time, citing the inflexibility in resourcing the move in terms of staff and the permanence of the move. All principals expressed concern that if a student was to rescind their autism class place and the mainstream placement broke down, then options for additional or renewed supports were unavailable.

> The reality was, for that child (who transitioned), his one-to-one support came away, his SNA support came away. So that was a lesson for us. I think we want the children integrating, but it has to be genuine integration – not talking about integration. He's doing really well now, but there was a lot of support taken away. It's something that we want, but it has to be the right time, and it has to be

> done slowly, it has to be thought through, what will it look like if and when the support is taken away. Will the child be able to survive, basically, and thrive? (Principal, Oak NS).

The principal saw this as a decision that they needed to bear as it was them who had the ultimate responsibility for resourcing issues within the school. None of the principals seemed to recognise the child's role in this circular, not just in the regards to their right to have a say in educational decisions which affected them, but in the sense of seeking and respecting their opinions and decisions. This shows the unintended consequences and negative impact of the linkage between resources and placements – there is no safety net or middle ground during the transition period, or indeed post-transition. Based on the perspectives gathered here, parents make the initial decision about placement and the principal decides how long the placement lasts.

The teachers discussed the daily timetabling of inclusion and how the decision was made about how the learners spent their days. Each of the teachers' spoke of the importance of the children mixing with their mainstream peers, and this being timetabled. They expressed frustration around the apparent contradictions in best practice approaches for including autistic students – the need for consistency and predictability, while acknowledging that some days their learners were unable for the demands of the mainstream class. The teachers took their cues from the children and on some days would decide that: "*I'm not going to send them up if that's going to be too overwhelming for them"* (Teacher 1, Oak NS). Teachers also highlighted the complexities of coordinating practice with mainstream colleagues and SNAs, who were described as holding different priorities and drawing on different experiences of autism class provision. Some frustration was expressed regarding a perceived lack of understanding among mainstream teachers about the purpose of inclusion, with one teacher noting that "*the mainstream class teacher, her expectations are different because she's basing it off her whole class*" (Teacher 1, Oak NS). Autism class teachers described differing priorities across settings, with autism classes often emphasising social development, while mainstream classes were described as primarily focused on curriculum outcomes. This reflects how inclusion is shaped by differing interpretations of what learning should prioritise across contexts.

Variability was also evident in approaches to learner participation in decision-making. In Holly NS, the junior autism class teacher described their daily check-ins with students regarding their timetable and facilitating group movement between classrooms to support sensory needs and reduce emotional overwhelm for some learners. In contrast, the middle autism class teacher (2^{nd} – 4^{th} class) described a more structured approach, emphasising consistency and predictability, and placing greater emphasis on parental input. This was

reflected in the statement that "*The parents are on board, but I'd always give them the option of deciding [targets] it's such an important relationship to get right*" (Teacher 7, Holly NS). Learners in this class reported having limited choice in their school day.

Across interviews, teachers consistently identified parents as central stakeholders in decision-making and described managing parental expectations as a key part of their role. These differing approaches illustrate how inclusion is enacted differently across classrooms particularly in relation to how learner voice is enacted.

"There's only one person screaming in this room".

This subtheme examines learner perspectives about their autism and the importance of communication between the learners, their peers and other stakeholders. While this may appear to be a less curricular focus, Holly NS parent stated, "*they know him so well… they know when he's struggling or when he's just being a six-year-old not getting his own way".* This speaks to an understanding between parent and teacher that different priorities are to the fore at different times, as well as illustrating that the learner's communication may alter depending on the level of emotional regulation or dysregulation. The importance of the relationship between teacher and parent cannot be underestimated especially at the time of initial enrolment as communication preferences must be clearly articulated between both for the benefit of the learner. However, once the relationship between learner and teacher has been developed and communication preferences have been acquired, the perspectives of the learners should be heard.

The subtheme quote is by Adam (Oak NS, 6) "*there's only one person screaming in this room*" and was in reference to the sensory overwhelm that many learners experienced in their mainstream class. Noise, the volume of people, and the demands of listening to instructions was stated by many of the learners as really challenging for them. When Chloe (Beech NS) was asked what rules she would make as principal she stated, *"inside voices outside, outside voices inside".* When questioned further as she had talked about being distracted and upset by noisy places she explained that if that was the rule then when she was in the yard the girls would be speaking quietly but when she was inside *"I'd be in my office and I'd have the door closed"* (Chloe Beech NS). This was a multi-layered response that indicated Chloe's preference for quiet extended beyond the classroom to the yard; she still wanted social interactions and at times she wanted the solitude of shutting a door and retreating from everyone. It also displayed a mature sense of humour and understanding of herself as she later spoke about her own upset and distress if she saw those emotions in others. The learners were all articulate in their communication in where, how and when they would prefer to spend their school day, and in the majority of instances that was more in their

autism classes than their mainstream. These communications were conveyed coherently and yet often appeared to go unheard or disregarded by the teachers, or the preferences may not have been questioned by the teachers denying the rights of the learners to have a say in decision-making. Of all the learners interviewed, Graham (Oak NS) exercised the most choice, but understood that his choices were still limited. Nevertheless, he appreciated being heard even when his preferences could not be accommodated:

> I understand choice might not always be possible. Because one time I wanted to have a walk and my teacher explained that I couldn't because she needed someone to supervise me, I didn't really want to, you know, I just kind of wanted to do it by myself. It wasn't because I was upset or anything. I like walking by myself. But I didn't really want to push anything. I couldn't go so that's fine I'll just walk her in the yard later on once again I wasn't upset I just kinda wanted to walk around a bit.

This theme 'Different Perspectives, Different Styles, Different Experiences' clearly demonstrates how positionality influences priorities and perceptions are shaped by the experience of autism class placements. Principals were reluctant to review class placements citing insufficient resources in the mainstream class; uncertainty around how the child would manage in the long-term in mainstream; the lack of 'safety net' if a child transitioned from the autism class; the lack of external services and supports for both the school and the learners and an unwillingness of parents to 'lose' the autism class placement. The learner voices were not considered and was not spoken about spontaneously by any principal.

Teachers believed they were more aware of what their learners wanted and needed, "*If they're calm, happy, relaxed, feel safe, comfortable that would override the curriculum for me"* (Teacher 3, Beech NS). The teachers too cited resourcing as an issue for inclusion citing "*the lack of services don't help and I' the only point of contact"* (Teacher 4, Oak NS). Teachers also highlighted the importance of professional relationships within the school stating that some mainstream teachers were unwilling to support inclusion and some felt the autism class students were not their responsibility. Again, this clearly demonstrates that the perceived positionality of mainstream teachers – many of whom had not taught in an autism class – shaped their perception of autistic learners in autism classes as different from their mainstream cohort despite them being on the same class role. While the autism class teachers were aware that it was their learners right to spend time in their mainstream class and be asked about their educational experience there seemed to be an assumption that they (the teachers) knew best or that they were imposing extra work on the mainstream teacher, again leading to learner voices going unheard "*sure I know them better than they know themselves at this stage, and it does no harm for them to build a bit of resilience"* (Teacher 7, Holly NS).

The views of the parents were similar to both principals and teachers in that they acted in what they believed to be the best interests of the children without actually asking them. Parents had not discussed their child's autism with them; why they were in two different classes or appeared to be aware of what their child was achieving in each of their settings. The learners were articulate and considered in what they responded to and what they chose not to. They believed that they knew what was best for themselves, and while some stated an understanding for why things could not always happen, many expressed frustrations over the lack of consideration given to their preferences. Key in all the positionality and influencing of decisions was the importance not of the independence of the stakeholders but of the interdependence between groups, particularly among the adults. Theme three explores the importance of interdependence and the importance of relationships and interconnectedness.

Theme Three: Interdependence Not Independence

As discussed in the previous two themes, the voices of all stakeholders, at times, go both heard and unheard. Furthermore, priorities, perceptions and experiences often determine beliefs around stakeholder influence in decision-making about autism class placement. As the first two themes have detailed "*every school is an island"* (Principal, Oak NS) with the multiple stakeholder groups not always listening to each other. This theme examines the interdependence between stakeholders and emphasises the importance of relationships and inter-connectedness. There are two subthemes: 'Friendships, Feelings and Fairness' which refers to social interactions and how these shape school experiences and the second subtheme 'United We Stand' which interrogates the interconnectedness between stakeholder groups. When relationships have broken down or perceived to have broken down, this can have a negative effect on the learners. Niall (Holly NS) stated that he was *"cross and sad"* at the same time after an SNA had told him off for something at yard time that he did not get to explain *"I tried to explain, but she wouldn't let me say".* He acted out the scene in Figure 4.10:

Figure 4.10: Niall's Re-enactment Of Break Time Incident



Niall continued to go back and forward about the incident, acting out a few different scenarios but did state again *"[teacher] said it was okay, he wasn't mad, so it's ok. I am ok"* (Niall, Holly NS). The relationship with the teacher was strong and he sought reassurance from him, but the injustice of not being listened to was visibly bothering him. Issues of fairness and friendship were central to many of the children's conversations and will be examined in the first sub-theme. The importance of forging connectedness across stakeholder groups will be examined in the second subtheme.

Friendships, feelings and fairness.

This subtheme refers to social interactions both between the learners, their peers and also other school staff. The learners were asked about friendships and if they felt them to be important; they were also asked about issues that made school tricky or challenging. Many of them used these questions to talk about social inter-connectedness and how this shaped their school experience. Many of the children named everyone in their class as friends "*I have 29 in Ms RRRR's class and 5 in my mixed class"* Kevin (Holly NS, 8) which was common in the younger learners and seemed to reflect the ethos of everyone being friends. Some stated a strong preference for one or two others who shared interests with them. Harry (Oak NS, 7) commented "*we had a playdate, and then he asked me on a playdate and we went to Airtastic"*. For some of the older learners friendships were becoming more

nuanced. Some of these learners expressed feeling upset and annoyed with others who they would have thought were friends. For example, Ellie discussed:

> It makes me unhappy when…. now this happens sometimes…people are just doing things, and I do it, and then I get told off by them, like by the children, and sometimes like people insult me… Ellie (Beech NS).

Ellie states that she likes the other girls and that it is important to have friends but she also clearly struggles to understand what has happened for them to be unkind. She speaks candidly about inventing a friend 'Sprunky' (Figure 4.11) who she uses for online gaming:

Figure 4.11: Ellie's Drawing Of Her Online Friend 'Sprunky'



Ellie was far more animated talking about her online adventures with Sprunky than she was talking about her friends at school, stating she could make them (Sprunky and the other characters) sing and stop singing when she wanted. Significantly, none of the characters that she discussed communicated using verbal means, with conversation being the aspect she reported as most challenging at school. Martin also reported challenges with friendships stating that he had no friends at school and that having friends was not important to him. When asked about outside school he stated that he was friends with his cousin, but that was not making him happy: *"he's gotten disrespectful to my brother and my dad which I don't really like"* Martin (Holly NS). Martin appeared socially isolated with his siblings being *"annoying"* and others *"bothering him".* He repeatedly talked about being bored and having no friends, only remembering at the end of the interview that he had one friend at soccer and

that was enough for him. He had an acute sense of fairness, feeling aggrieved at his cousin's disrespectfulness towards his dad and brother. When told the interview was finished and he could return to class he asked if he could not go back to class. When the reason was explained to him why he had to return, he accepted it. He may not have been happy with certain situations but when he understood the rationale it was easier for him to accept. His teacher viewed Martin's preference for explanation differently stating, "*it seems a little bit contrived [..] it's very controlling*" (Teacher 7, Holly NS). This negates Martin's preferences both in communication style and fairness.

Graham had a more positive experience of friendships however, these connections involved autistic peers outside of school who shared his interests:

> I can hyper fixate on something… but if I like the people I'm around I'll want to tell then everything about it. Some of my friends know that two of my very close friends out of school…. They understand that and do the same. Graham (Oak NS).

Graham understood the need to be sociable in school stating "*I'm fairly okay with everyone in my class"* but also spoke of the need to be alone when feeling tired and overwhelmed. He stated that he was careful to remove himself in time so as not to upset or antagonise those around him. He appeared to feel that the onus was on him to keep social communication open with his peers and that he should be the one to adapt.

The learners were perceptive about friendships and feelings. Some stated being confused by social interactions and were perplexed when others were unkind. Ellie (as discussed above) and Lottie in particular seemed to struggle with this. Lottie stated, "*I just want to run away"* when asked what was difficult for her in school. All spoke of needing time away to *"recharge my batteries"* Adam (Oak NS). They accepted the unkindness but were upset by it and felt unfairness very acutely both for themselves and if they saw it applied to others. They were particularly aggrieved when they felt they were not listened to and this was articulated clearly by many of them. These negative feelings of confusion; unfairness and unkindness evidently had an acute influence on the children's school experiences with many clearly demonstrating physically the unhappiness it caused, with some 'slumping' under the weight while talking. Most of the learners voiced how spending time on their own or with a trusted adult helped them make sense of negative experiences, but some clearly were still struggling. The importance of connectedness across and between the stakeholder groups, and the difficulty the absence of it brings, will be examined in the next subtheme.

United we stand.

This sub-theme focussed on the importance of connectedness between stakeholder groups and the shared understanding that strong relationships were a key factor to successful school experiences for learners. Relationships were discussed with each of the stakeholders, with nearly all principal and parent participants stating that "*communication is amazing"* (Parent, Beech NS).

All the parents had chosen to enrol their children in autism classes from Junior Infants - none of the parents had discussed the decision of enrolment into the autism class with their children either before they were enrolled or since. Without exception, all parents retrospectively stated that the autism class was the best choice for their child emphasising that the "*school have been amazing and so patient [..] absolutely unreal"* (Parent, Beech NS).

Parents also universally described the relationship with the autism class teacher as key, and all stated that they felt the teacher went "*above and beyond*" (Parent, Beech NS) what should reasonably be expected. For two of the parents (Oak NS and Beech NS) their children were not being educated in their local school due to lack of available autism class places. Both parents expressed their hesitation at placing their – at the time – very young children (four years old in both cases) in schools outside their home catchment and were grateful to the teacher for meeting them ahead of their children starting school in order to alleviate some of their fears. From the perspective of the parents, their main priority was that their children be nurtured and cared for and all stated that this happened. The findings demonstrate that the relationship between parents and autism class teachers is critical as it reconciles differences between what the child expresses at home and what they voice at school.

All of the teachers recognised the role of the parents as key for their learners but felt that the relationships often moved beyond what should professionally be expected and were not always supported by the principal or senior management team in efforts to place boundaries. Teacher 6 (Holly NS) found the intersectionality between parents, teachers and the principal difficult to negotiate:

> Some parents have a massive fear of what could go wrong you know in encouraging [their child] to become more independent… they feel their child is incapable and I feel they are capable…. I can't do stuff without their consent and if anything went wrong… I don't have the backing.

Some autism class teachers highlighted breakdowns in collaboration levels across stakeholders which were attributed to a lack of understanding with regards to including the

learners from the autism classes, alongside a lack of wider understanding of autism: "*they don't know what to accept as appropriate and inappropriate behaviour"* (Teacher 4, Oak NS). Conversely, many of the teachers spoke of very positive experiences with their mainstream peers acknowledging that both parties had to understand each other's roles "*I'm after building great relationships with the girls [teachers] above"* (Teacher 2, Beech NS). While all participating principals insisted that all mainstream class teachers spend time in the autism classes (all schools had a rotation policy for mainstream teachers covering breaks; absences and course attendance) Oak NS had taken a further step. Principal Oak NS used substitute cover to ensure that the autism class teacher could spend time in the same class that their students attended for mainstream, and for the mainstream teacher to spend time in the autism class so that targets could be discussed and agreed upon jointly:

> I observed them in class, because it's really hard to know how well they get on.. even though they might be a little behind they are better off being up there for literacy because I can't give them that level of attention in academics because of the level of need in my class… She [mainstream teacher] came to my class and she understood it better… a completely different perspective. (Teacher 1, Oak NS).

This quote clearly shows the importance of the interconnectedness between mainstream and autism class teachers in conjunction with the principal who facilitated the interaction by providing additional teaching cover. However, it also illustrated the missed opportunity of learner voices in the decision-making process. While some learners had limited say in the times they spent between their classes, this was dependent on the teacher and parental beliefs about what was best for the child. Rather than all stakeholders sitting together and making *joint* decisions where all parties could offer opinions and justifications, it emerged from the interviews that the administrative task of keeping channels of communication open rested almost entirely with the autism class teacher. In this way the stakeholders were not working interdependently but independently of the whole group in smaller sub-sections. This assumption that adult stakeholders knew what the learners needed more than they knew about themselves is challenged in the final theme 'Different, But Not Always'.

Theme 4: Different, But Not Always

This final theme explores issues of sameness and difference between the autism and mainstream classes. Strengths and differences of autistic learners are examined, both with respect to their autism and as young learners. Many of the learners felt that they were different in some way to other children, even without explicitly knowing they were autistic, and accepted that difference as an intrinsic part of themselves. The first theme explores stakeholder views on autism, autism classes and their understanding of the strengths and

challenges facing the learners. The second theme is the learners' views on school life: their likes and dislikes and their perspective on what needs to change. This final theme also looks at how the children see themselves as both the same and different from the others in the school.

Being neurodivergent: labels, language and identity.

This subtheme scrutinises adult stakeholders' views on autism classes and their understanding of autism. The data suggests that the views of the principals and parents are that the learners from the autism classes are largely able for mainstream classrooms as long as they have plenty of breaks "*down to the autism class"* (Principal, Holly NS). The parent from Holly NS has two children in the autism class and was keen for one of her children to experience mostly all his time in mainstream, but for her other child to spend time exclusively in the autism class. In this way, and as illustrated by the following quote there seems to be a misunderstanding of inclusion, with the practice being viewed more as physically present than meaningfully participating as discussed previously. In this way, the learners are viewed as 'just themselves' with their neurodivergent strengths and differences being underemphasised. For inclusion to be fully conceptualised, differences must be celebrated, accommodated and barriers to educational experience removed. Both parents and principals seemed unclear as to what happened in the autism classes:

> We actually did use the flexibility when he would go down [to the autism class] for lunches and breaks and things like that – more yard time, but not so much for class time. Principal Holly NS.

This clearly exhibits that the autism class work is seen as separate and different from that done in mainstream, and arguably by extension, that the learners in the mainstream class are working towards more academic or curricular based targets given that 'breaks and more yard time' happen in the autism class. This relates to the previous discussion on how inclusion is understood and enacted. The children's need for a break away from the sensory environment is facilitated. Arguably, this could be accommodated within mainstream, however, as also discussed the majority of learners in this research indicated they preferred the environment of their autism class. Harry (Oak NS, 6) listed his favourite places as "*I love the ball pit, and I love the bubbles, and I love the tent most of all".* Figure 4.12:

Figure 4.12: Harry's Favourite Place



When asked why that was his favourite he stated: "*I can shut the door and relax"* (Harry, Oak NS). The parents also felt that in order for their child to avoid sensory overwhelm the physical space offered by the autism class was the most suitable resource for their child to be in.

> He loved learning, and he loved what they were doing there [in the mainstream class] … but they are after increasing it [time in the autism class], just for a movement break, that's all he needs. He just gets a bit tired… (Parent, Oak NS).

When questioned further about how this change in timetabling happened Parent Oak NS stated that they had left the decision between the two teachers as they knew best. The child himself had questioned why he moved between the two classes:

> He's never questioned it too much…. And if we wanted to bluff him we could, the serious question of autism has not come up yet. He did ask once, why do I have two teachers?... He's too young to understand it yet…. (Parent, Oak).

Undoubtedly the child has noticed that he is one of only a few children who move between classes, and when he asked for clarification his curiosity was dismissed. A parent from Oak NS then continued to describe social situations that were tricky for his child, but again instead of explaining to his child why those situations may be difficult he distracted him to another location. Arguably, it may have been easier to explain his neurodivergence in a positive and affirming way, acknowledging that some circumstances may be uncomfortable but that strategies could be practiced alleviating stress or anxiety. Supporting children's awareness and understanding of their dual placement within their autism and mainstream class directly aligned with parent's willingness, or lack thereof, to disclose their child's diagnosis and discuss this with them. This issue was previously discussed within Theme

One, but in this context it is more than giving children an opportunity to use their voices to participate, it is providing them with a fundamental understanding of themselves.

Teachers were also acutely aware of this tension. The obfuscation of the purpose and enrolment criteria of autism classes is a barrier to both the acceptance of neurodivergence and the wider inclusion of autistic learners into mainstream classes "*they [the mainstream teachers] aren't really sure what to expect of the children, they are half afraid to say anything to them"* (Teacher 1, Oak NS). The learners are othered by being placed in a separate class away from their peers. The learners may prefer their autism classes and this was evidenced throughout the research:

> Researcher: Would you like to change the amount of time you spend in each of your classes?
>
> Martin (Holly NS): Yeah, I kind of want to spend all my time in my mixed class [autism class].
>
> Researcher: Do you get a choice about that?
>
> Martin (Holly NS): No.
>
> Researcher: Have you ever asked about it?
>
> Martin (Holly NS): Yeah, but I'm not allowed.

However, by denying the children the truth of their difference, schools and parents are perpetuating 'otherness'. Teachers were more open with the learners "*it's very much a balancing act of needing to be direct… and building a bit of resilience to try new things"* (Teacher 6, Holly NS) but again stated their frustrations at not always being open with the children about their autism due to parental preference. Universally the teachers of the older children believed the learners should be made aware of their autism in order that strengths and needs could be openly and honestly discussed, and that decision-making around any aspect of their lives could be informed "*[not knowing] can make him quite vulnerable, very vulnerable"* (Teacher 6, Holly). The teachers were cognisant of the impact on their relationship with the learner that their own with-holding of the truth could have, "*we have tried to say things… it's very much a balancing act of, needing to be direct, but also people are just trying to do their best"* (Teacher 6, Holly). This conversation was based around Teacher 6's discussion with the parents around informing their son of his autistic identity and their reluctance to do so.

The majority of the children were not aware why they spent time in two different classes, and some articulated that they did not know why this was the case. It is unclear how the uncertainty of their own personal status and place in the wider school impacts at some

level on their understanding of self. This will be examined further in the last subtheme "What do you expect, I'm just a kid?"

"What do you expect, I'm just a kid?"

This final subtheme draws on the learners' views of their educational experience and wider school life. They were questioned about likes and dislikes, and what they would change about school if they were the principal – a position they all viewed as the person holding the power. With the exception of Martin (Holly NS), all of the learners were largely content at school. All spoke of friendships, good relationships with their autism class teachers and enjoying the sensory breaks and activities that they participated in. These findings are united across all the learners including preferences for the sensory environment of their autism classes (apart from Graham who found the unexpected noises from younger peers in his autism class "*jarring").* However, all of them experienced challenges with the length of the school day *"it should only be on for one or two hours, we should get to go home early"* Kevin (Holly NS), with Lottie (Holly NS) and Chloe (Beech NS) finding the social aspect of a long school day exhausting "*I just like to do it by myself – sometimes they annoy me"* Chloe (Beech NS). Some experienced emotional exhaustion but stated that it was normal to feel overwhelmed in school:

> When I'm like really really upset… I don't get really upset normally… Sometimes I do because I'm a normal person… but some days I just get more and more angry and have to leave [mainstream]. Lottie (Holly NS, 10).

Lottie articulated that the mainstream class was just too much, and that at times she just needed to get outdoors. She also stated that she found it difficult to concentrate sometimes, and that this led to difficulties and needing to retreat outside. It was not clear why she did not have the visual supports she needed in both classes, but she did say she frequently forgot them "*I keep forgetting them [..] I don't have them around"* (Lottie, Holly NS, 11). A more consistent approach to visuals across the whole school may have helped to scaffold her day and make transitions easier. A number of the children also spoke of their wish to have school rules enforced more strictly: *"I'd have no bullying and be careful"* Fionn (Oak NS). Daisy (Beech NS), Harry (Oak NS), Jonah (Holly NS) and Ellie (Beech NS) also spoke of feeling anxious about getting into trouble or hurting themselves: *"my rule would be to stop people being bold"* Harry (Oak NS). Many of them recounted times when they had tripped or fallen and were clearly still upset by it. Jonah (Holly NS) in particular recounted incidents on the yard that he felt very aggrieved about *"I get really angry when we haven't started a game and [SNA] tells us to go in"* and Martin voiced that he would want to be given

a choice about how he spent his school day. Graham (Oak NS) acknowledges that everyone has their strengths and areas of difficulty, comparing the ability to draw as a good illustration of difference as illustrated by Figure 4:13, "*We all have our things. Things that we love and things that we hate. That's pretty normal"* (Graham, Oak NS).

Figure 4.13: Graham's Comparison of His Artistic Skills (right) to the Researchers (left)



Graham stated that everyone had to develop in their own time, and that sometimes he found being around others easier than at other times acknowledging that *"I can be a little irritating at times"* but also that most people could be. In this way he acknowledged both his sameness and difference. Arguably, he had a greater awareness of his own personality, and his strengths and differences than the majority of ten-year-olds. Graham, as the only learner aware of his autism diagnosis, was the only learner to speak about his autism demonstrating explicit knowledge of sameness and difference. Adult stakeholders clearly understood the difference in the enrolment criteria for the two classes, but it was unclear from some of the discourse if they understood the purpose of both.

It was evident that children communicated with their autism class teachers and that these relationships were well established. However, it was less clear that the children were consistently listened to or that their preferences were considered. With the exception of Graham (Oak NS), most children were not aware that they were autistic or that they were

placed in an autism class, and none of the schools reported conducting formal reviews of placement. This suggests limited opportunities for children to participate in decision-making regarding their class placement. The implications of this are considered further in the next chapter, which discusses the move towards a more equitable and inclusive education system.

Summary of qualitative data.

The qualitative data gathered was presented across four themes: Voices Heard and Unheard; Different Priorities, Different Perceptions, Different Experiences; Interdependence not Independence; and Different, But Not Always. These indicate that learners are not consistently included in decision-making processes relating to either their educational placement or day-to-day school experiences. Overall, learner voices are not routinely sought, and when children do self-advocate, their input is often reported as having limited influence on decisions.

Across stakeholder groups, there is a consistent assumption that others hold greater knowledge of learners' preferences and needs than learners themselves. However, data from learners demonstrate that their views can be clearly expressed using a variety of means (e.g. oral, pictorial etc.). This highlights the presence of complex power dynamics across the system, with adult stakeholders frequently attributing decision-making authority among themselves rather than to learners.

Notably, adult stakeholders across roles also describe experiencing constraints or limited agency in certain aspects of the education system. This creates a tension between perceived responsibility and perceived power, within which learner voices remains the least consistently enacted in decision-making processes.

Conclusion

The findings in this chapter indicate that autistic learners in primary autism classes are not currently included in decision-making about their special class placement. More broadly the learners are neither routinely being consulted nor meaningfully involved in decisions relating to their wider educational experiences. Although all of the learners who participated in this research were included in their mainstream classes there appeared to be a fundamental disconnect between the concept of inclusive education – where children, regardless of their neurodivergence, are valued and facilitated to participate fully with peers - and the enactment of inclusion in schools. Despite this, all children expressed a sense of belonging across both mainstream and autism class settings. Almost all spoke of friends in both environments and described experiencing success in both. Importantly, the learners

themselves were able to identify changes that would make school easier for them; however, they were not always provided with opportunities to express those views, nor were they always acted upon even when heard. For autistic learners to be meaningfully included in decision-making schools need to foster a culture where all forms of communication are actively sought, valued and acted upon.

The data from Phases One and Two, detailed in this chapter, informs the broader discussion presented in Chapter Five. This discussion considers how the core findings contribute to and extend existing knowledge in the field. In particular, the discussion focuses on three key areas: the involvement of autistic learners in school placement decisions; supporting autistic learners' quality and inclusive educational experiences across the school environment; and meaningful participation of autistic learners: lessons for inclusion.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

This doctoral research explored the extent to which autistic learners are included in decision-making about their placement in special classes within primary schools. Overall, the survey and interview findings demonstrated that those with the right to have the greatest say in their educational placement had the least input. Autistic children, in this research, were consistently overlooked and under-represented as part of this placement decision-making process whereby decisions surrounding special class placement remained largely within the control of adult stakeholders namely parents; teachers and school principals. This highlights a significant gap between policy aspirations to include autistic learner voices and current practices within schools. The findings also highlighted the discrepancies in the understanding and enactment of inclusive education. The third area which requires further discussion relates to authentic and meaningful participation of autistic learners. The findings here also indicated limitations in the opportunities for meaningful participation of autistic learners.

This chapter will discuss the implications of the findings in relation to the research questions:

Research Question: To what extent are autistic learners included in decision- making about their special class placement in mainstream primary schools?
RQ1: How are the voices of autistic learners in primary schools currently being included in decision-making with regards to their educational experience?
RQ2: What is the experience of inclusion for learners from autism classes?
RQ3: How can the voices of autistic learners be meaningfully included in decision-making in mainstream primary schools with regard to their educational placement?

The discussion will be structured under the following headings: *Involvement of Autistic Learners in School Placement; Supporting Autistic Learners' Quality and Inclusive Educational Experiences Across the School Environment and Supporting Authentic and Meaningful Participation of Autistic Learners: Lessons for Inclusion.* The research findings are considered in light of the current literature to identify a way forward for including autistic learner voices in decision-making about their placement.

Involvement of Autistic Learners in School Placement

The research findings consistently highlighted the under-representation of autistic children throughout the school placement process from the initial enrolment stage right through the duration of their school experiences. This section will examine the involvement

of autistic learners in school placement decisions through interrogating: learner views; the limited opportunities and influence for autistic learners over all school decisions and the power dynamics that are at play in placement decisions.

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, children have a right to be educated in the most inclusive environment available to them (UNCRC, 1989: UNCRPD, 2007; UN, 2016) and to have a say on their education (UNCRC, 1989). This research highlights the under-representation of learner voices as part of the placement review process and associated disparity between policy versus practice. A striking finding from both the quantitative and qualitative data is that the majority of the participating schools do not review placement and do not elicit the opinion of the learners about their placement. More concerning is that 30.5% of school respondents to the questionnaire were unaware that placement should be reviewed and 13.4% were aware but still did not engage in the process. Learners have the right to express an opinion on matters relating to their education, and for those opinions to be given due weight and attention (UNCRC, 1989). When schools do not provide opportunities for inclusion of learner voices, the learner is denied their right to have a say about their education. This absence of voices is in direct contradiction with international human rights laws alongside Irish educational policy (NCSE, 2024a; DE, 2025b) and best practice (DE Inspectorate, 2022, 2025; DEY Inspectorate, 2025). To enhance practice within primary schools, children's voices must be elicited around matters pertaining to their education. With reference to this research, autistic learners in special classes must be included in decisions about initial and continued enrolment into separated provision by hearing their voices and respecting their knowledge and opinions. If schools are unaware of their obligation to review and/or how to go about this, that points to a systemic issue. There is a responsibility on schools but also on the system to support schools, especially in the context of constant initiatives; policies and new curriculum documents being introduced to schools (Harford, Bruton and Fleming, 2026). However, as will be discussed the issue of power dynamics was problematic for all stakeholders in this research.

A key issue arising from this research was the unequal distribution of power in the decision-making process about special class placement. As evidenced by the quantitative data collected in this research, no school involved in Phase One believed that the learner had a role in the decision-making process. While the majority of respondents believed that learners' views were extremely important to be included in decision-making, none actually believed that learners had a role in decision-making. Arguably, while respondents acknowledged the importance of learner voices, none believed them to be fundamental to the decision-making process. At the top of the decision-making chain was the NCSE, which

sanctioned the initial opening of the autism class(es) and provided letters of eligibility to parents who were seeking a place for their child(ren). Once the place is secured, there is a reluctance across adult stakeholders (parents, teachers, principals) to move learners due to a fear of losing resources. This leads to learners spending their whole school careers in special class provision, with little real engagement with either the learner or the review of placement process (DES, 2020; Kearney, 2024; NCSE, 2024a; DE Inspectorate, 2025; DEY, 2025a; DEY Inspectorate, 2025). The current autism class provision in primary schools is characterised by a high degree of inflexibility, whereby enrolment is capped and learners are either granted a place or excluded from access altogether. This binary model reinforces existing power dynamics and limits schools' ability to use physical spaces and staffing resources more flexibly in response to learners' needs. Enhancing learner voices within the placement decision-making process has the potential to reduce these power imbalances and create greater opportunities for autistic learners to influence decisions affecting their education, even where such influence may be indirect. Furthermore, providing schools with a structured pathway through the decision-making that meaningfully incorporates learner voices may help shift aspects of decision-making power away from centralised bodies like the NCSE towards individual schools. This could support greater learner autonomy and enhanced professional agency within schools.

Defining the purpose of autism classes.

Many schools are unaware of the recommendations to conduct a 'Review of Placement' as evidenced both in the quantitative data obtained in this research and similar figures obtained by the DEY when they conducted research into Special Classes for Autistic Pupils in Primary Schools (DEY Inspectorate, 2025a). Stakeholder discussions indicated there was a misalignment between best practice as set down by the NCSE and DEY and what happened at school level, with school and parents having different priorities for the learners with learners once again being omitted from the decision-making process. This highlights a contradiction between policy and policy messaging.

The adult stakeholders in this research had little expectation that learners could or should be transitioned into mainstream. Resourcing was cited as the major barrier – the loss of preferential staff: student ratio or increased enrolment in mainstream classes. However, for the purpose of teacher allocation autistic learners who avail of a special class place are counted twice in order to facilitate inclusion (NCSE, 2024b, p. 14) so while the lack of resources may be a felt reality, schools with autism classes whose learners did not avail of SET hours are better resourced than those schools who do not have special classes.

An additional level of nuance which reiterates the ‘segregation by neurotype’ view held by the Oireachtas Committee, and isolation over inclusion is that while school staff feel they have the choice about including learners from the autism class, no other groups of children fall into this debate (NCSE and Banks, 2013; Shevlin and Banks, 2021; Egan and Kenny, 2022; Jones, 2022; Rice, Kenny and Connolly, 2023a). The model of special class provision for learners with a specific speech and language difference ensures that learners are included with mainstream peers (DE Inspectorate, 2021). Any amendments to autism class provision must be enacted with the voices of the learners at the core and elicited in a way that encourages their advocacy. The findings demonstrate that there are limited opportunities for the inclusion of learner voices in relation to any aspect of decision-making. Many of the learners stated in their interviews that they were either not given options about where they spent their day, or they were unable to communicate to their teachers that they would prefer to be in their other classroom. Only one child spoke of choosing to attend his autism class or not, but still stated his options for breaks, or time away from the sensory challenges of the mainstream environment, were limited. Both this research and the research of others have clearly demonstrated the existence of sensory challenges for autistic learners (Goodall, 2018a; Guldberg, 2019; Griffin, 2023; Kohn, 2025). The teachers justified their choices about where and when. However, none of the interviewed teachers had a structured method of including, or recording, the students’ own views around those options despite several national and international guidelines available to them (DCEDIY, 2021; McCall-Smith, 2021; DCEDIY, NDA and DCU, 2024; Scottish Parliament, 2024). This omission of learner voices in everyday education not only denies children their rights to have a say about their education but also removes their influence in making their schooling more meaningful and successful (Guldberg, 2019; Cunningham, 2022; DE, 2024e). All learners in this research had clear and thorough opinions as to how school could be easier for them. Furthermore, the learners’ thoughts on ways in which school could be made more enjoyable appeared to be practical, achievable and realistic, demonstrating an opportunity to enhance inclusion. For example, two of the learners spoke about learning being easier if they were given time to eat a snack; four spoke of the difference in visual timetables between the classrooms and how that was confusing. The learners offered these solutions as part of the research but were not provided with opportunities to advocate for these approaches themselves in school. In order to support autistic learners’ quality and inclusive educational experiences across the school environment greater focus has to be placed on the enactment of inclusion by ensuring that learner voices are heard and staff are provided with additional teacher professional learning (TPL) to support their understanding of autism (Cook and

Ogden, 2022; Roberts and Webster, 2022; Murphy et al., 2023; Shabnam and Benson, 2026). Issues pertaining to inclusive practices will now be discussed.

Supporting Autistic Learners Quality and Inclusive Educational Experiences Across the School Environment

A number of system-level issues identified in this research warrant further exploration in order to enhance the inclusive educational experiences of learners enrolled in autism classes across the wider school environment. These issues include the centralised sanctioning of autism classes and class placements by the NCSE, rather than by schools themselves, as well as previous inconsistencies in policy guidance relating to placement reviews prior to the publication of Circular 0023/20205. Collectively, these systemic structures have contributed to inconsistent practices across schools and have placed limited emphasis on the rights-based dimensions of education. All of the learners who participated in this research had spent their entire primary school career enrolled in an autism class. As a result, they had not been afforded the opportunity to belong *only* with their mainstream peers and, in that way, were continually being 'othered'. If inclusive education is understood as fostering belonging and removing barriers, then the framing of 'special education' may contribute to the marginalisation of autistic learners by reinforcing notions of difference and separateness (Knight et al., 2022). The DEY and NCSE enforce this 'otherness' at a systemic level by referring to autism classes as 'Special Classes for Autistic Learners' (NCSE, 2022b, 2024a, 2024b, 2025a, 2025b; DE, 2024d; DEY Inspectorate, 2025; DE, 2025). By honouring the subjective and inward qualities of the feeling of belonging for autistic learners rather than the 'observable' or 'inclusion as placement' meaningful, authentic and quality inclusion is enacted, disregarding the need for othering language. Systemic and inclusion issues will be discussed in light of the findings of this research. Particular attention will be given to the implications for how autistic learners can be supported to experience a high quality and genuinely inclusive education across the whole school environment.

When discussing experiences in both their classrooms, none of the children spoke of feeling unwelcome and all acknowledged that they had their own desks and spaces in both of their classrooms. In this way the school setting could be envisioned to be inclusive, as inclusion for autistic students can be defined as feeling a sense of felt belonging (Goodall, 2020). However, there was evidence of uncertainty amongst the majority of the learners as to why they were in different classrooms, with only Graham explicitly stating the rationale for having both an autism class and a mainstream class. Efforts had clearly been made by two of the schools to name classes in a consistent manner, either by teacher name or by year

group name, whereas one of the schools had a different naming strategy for the autism classes which were named after trees. The naming of classes in line with school policy was introduced in order not to 'other' autism classes (NCSE, 2016a) however, it is unclear if this is successful or is masking a greater unwillingness at a systems level to address neurodivergence in a positive, open and honest way by changing teacher attitudes towards the inclusion of neurodivergent learners (Gregor and Campbell, 2001; Norwich, 2014; Hamilton and Cook, 2026). This use of 'othering' language may also contribute to learners from the autism class being socially less included, or even isolated, from mainstream peers (Mamas, Daly and Schaelli, 2019; Dias, Mamas and Gomes, 2020; Black et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025) further impacting on a successful transition to mainstream education. These issues are at the core of whether learners from the autism class are included or integrated in mainstream. The autistic children were expected to adapt – arguably by all of the adult stakeholders as evidenced by this research - to the mainstream class: the different communication styles of the teacher; the different sensory environments; the different rules and expectations; the different children. As Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is embedded through the School Self-Evaluation process (DE, 2024f) certain supports are available in many mainstream classrooms such as 'Cosy Corners' (sensory spaces) and visual timetables and schedules. However, this is at the discretion of the mainstream class teacher so may be inconsistently available. If autistic learners are to be meaningfully included, as opposed to integrated as was discussed in Chapter Four, the model of provision needs to be critically examined. Amendments should be made to classroom sensory environments; consistent and predictable use of visual and communication supports should be used in every classroom with clear and consistent expectations across the school. This adaptations are in line with UDL, which is highlighted in inclusive education as the way forward for systemic change (UNESCO, 1994a, 2024b; Ainscow, 2024b; DEY, 2024b).

Arguably, learners should be given a chance to fully belong in their mainstream classroom before providing them with an alternative placement in an autism class (Croydon et al., 2019; Fletcher-Watson, 2019; Happé and Frith, 2020; Goodall, 2021). As the system is set up at the moment, autistic learners have to adapt to both their autism and mainstream class environments. If a UDL approach was implemented in schools, supports would be embedded into the classroom environment and structures which would, in turn, reduce the burden for change on autistic learners. This links many of the elements of the findings of this research. At a macro systems level, if there was more flexibility about who could access an autism class and the supports therein such as preferential staff-to-student ratios (one teacher and two SNAs for six learners); sensorily safer environments and visually supported learning environments then learners could use the space when needed. At a school's level,

the responsibility for teaching autistic learners would be more explicitly shared amongst teaching staff with learners primarily based within mainstream peer groups. By enabling all children to learn together from the outset, the need for autistic learners to repeatedly transition to different classroom environments during the day may be reduced. This stability could support the development of sustained peer relationships within mainstream contexts. It may also create opportunities for other learners to benefit from access to the quieter environment of the autism class in ways that align with more flexible models such as the New Brunswick approach (AuCoin, Porter and Baker-Korotkov, 2020; Muñoz Martínez and Porter, 2020; Simón, Muñoz-Martínez and Porter, 2022). The 'Final Report of the Joint Committee on Autism' described current school systems as *"segregation by neurotype"* (2023, p. 20). Reframing provision so that autistic learners are enrolled primarily in mainstream classes, while accessing additional support through the Continuum of Support model (DEY, 2024a) as is available to other learners would represent a shift away from this model of segregation and towards a more inclusive system.

Autistic identity and awareness.

Autistic identity and awareness are important considerations as they provide a lens through which to interrogate the quality of the children's inclusive educational experiences within both the autism class and the wider school environment. This is important as the findings from this research indicate that many of the learners find their mainstream class challenging due to the demands of classwork; the lack of choice around how learning is demonstrated and the sensory and communicative environments. None of the learners in this study was aware that they were autistic apart from Graham who demonstrated a deeper understanding of his differences. Recent research on the experience of children in autism class provision in mainstream schools reported that children who were aware of their autism and their placement were more likely to have a greater understanding of both their strengths and challenges (Atkinson, Wood-Downie and Wright, 2024). Further this knowledge enabled the learners to advocate in order to have needs met in a more effective way (Ward, Gormley and Coulter, 2026). These research findings support the argument for greater openness with learners as to why they are present in two classes. Reported challenges experienced by autistic learners in this research when trying to advocate for themselves such as using non-preferred methods of communication (i.e. normative methods, not the autistic learners' preferred methods) and expressing their voices but their opinions going unheard or unenacted, are evidence of the need for greater understanding among all stakeholders of the support needed by learners (Cook and Ogden, 2022; Hamilton and Cook, 2026). The issue of autistic identity and withholding information about the learners from learners

recurred across all adult stakeholders. Parents stated that their children were either too young to understand or would not understand their autistic identity, alternatively, teachers believed it was the role of the parent to disclose. Autistic identity and awareness will form part of the discussion for systemic issues affecting autism classes and the overall school experience for learners.

Issues regarding meaningful participation and reviews of placement.

As evidenced in Chapter Four, there was no expectation among the adult stakeholders in this research that learners will permanently transition from an autism class into mainstream education. This finding aligns with previous research conducted by the NCSE (2024) and points to a broader systemic positioning of autism classes as enduring placements rather than transitional or permeable supports. In parallel, the limited emphasis on rights-based education within national policy (NCSE, 2024b; DE, 2025b) further constrains the development of learner agency, as pupils are not routinely supported to understand their right to participate in decision-making processes. This is reflected in policy frameworks where learner voices are positioned as only one of seven procedural *"provisions made by the school"* (DE, 2025, p. 18), rather than as a central principle of educational decision-making. Taken together, these systemic features both reinforce the permanence of autism class placement and limit learners' perceived or actual capacity to influence decisions about their educational pathways.

Recent language in DEY documents has suggested that this framing may be starting to shift. Language within Department of Education and Youth documentation indicates a potential reconsideration of class structures and enrolment practices, with notably more direct phrasing regarding placement review and enrolment policies e.g. *"At the time of evaluations, the maximum enrolment in each class was six pupils"* (DEY Inspectorate, 2025a, p.3). The introduction of five 'Inclusive Special Classes' at post primary level is a stronger indication that change may be imminent (DEY, 2026b) as these classes do not operate within a defined disability category under the Education Act (1998) and without a cap on enrolments. This may be a signal of a move away from a diagnosis-based system of resourcing. A more flexible use of the space and increased reverse inclusion may remove some of the barriers created by having many autism classes separate, and often isolated from, from peer classrooms (Sweeney and Fitzgerald, 2023; Travers, 2023) and enhance mainstream learners' understanding of difference and sameness.

While such systemic developments are significant, this research also indicates that meaningful change can occur at school level irrespective of broader structural reform. One key mechanism is the development of shared understanding across the school community

regarding neurodiversity, including explicit teaching about neurotype, strengths, and support needs. For example, understanding that communication preferences change depending on sensory comfort (Becky, Beech NS) may better enable autistic learners to articulate preferences and advocate for their own needs. This requires reciprocal understanding between neurodivergent and neurotypical stakeholders (Gormley et al., 2024; Dervan, Egan and Ring, 2025) and aligns with Double Empathy theory (Milton, 2012; Crompton et al., 2021) which emphasises mutual rather than one-side understanding. In addition, increased opportunities for TPL alongside a shift to whole school responsibility for autistic learners would support more inclusive practice. Ensuring that autism classes are not conceptualised or enacted as separate and isolated spaces is central to this, and would strengthen staff confidence in teaching learners across neurotypes (Holquist et al., 2023; Sweeney and Fitzgerald, 2023; Brennan, Pennycook and Barr, 2025; Petersson-Bloom, Leifler and Holmqvist, 2025). However, any new or additional workload added to schools must be supported and scaffolded. Principals highlighted the increased workload due to the diversity of learners in their schools (including children experiencing displacement, homelessness, and other social vulnerabilities); a lack of therapeutic services for their learners; the implementation of the new Primary Curriculum and the difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff. Teachers also spoke of the challenges of increasing diversity; lack of TPL opportunities; the curriculum changes and – for some – the lack of a permanent contract. If schools are to implement a 'Review of Placement' as advised in circular 0023/2025 this process needs to be provided in a format that is accessible and user-friendly for staff.

Supporting Authentic and Meaningful Participation of Autistic Learners: Lessons for Inclusion

The findings of this research suggest the need for both systemic and school-level changes in how autism class provision is understood and enacted. While policy guidance increasingly emphasises inclusion and the review of placement there remains inconsistency in how these principles are interpreted and implemented within schools. Stakeholder discussions indicated that schools, parents, and educational professionals often held differing understandings of the purpose of the autism class, with learners themselves frequently absent from these conversations. This points to the need for a clearer and more widely shared understanding across all stakeholders regarding the role of autism classes within an inclusive education system.

At school level, greater collaboration and dialogue between staff, parents and learners is required to establish whether autism classes are intended to function as long-term placements, flexible support spaces, or pathways towards increased participation in

mainstream education. Without this shared understanding, decision-making risks becoming shaped primarily by practical concerns such as staffing, class size or resource allocation, rather than by the educational experiences and preferences of learners themselves. Although concerns regarding resourcing were consistently raised by adult stakeholders, particularly in relation to staffing ratios and mainstream class capacity, the findings suggest that these concerns can sometimes overshadow discussion of learner autonomy, belonging, and participation. The findings also highlight how autism class provision continues to be conceptualised differently from other educational supports. Unlike other groups of learners, autistic children are frequently positioned within debates around whether they can or should be included in mainstream settings. This reinforces concerns regarding 'segregation by neurotype' and suggests that inclusion is still often viewed as conditional for autistic learners. In contrast, models of specialist provision for other learner groups, such as speech and language classes, more explicitly facilitate participation alongside mainstream peers (DE Inspectorate, 2021).

For this reason, any future developments in autism class provision should prioritise the creation of whole-school cultures of inclusion in which responsibility for autistic learners is shared across the school community rather than located primarily within the autism class. Central to this is ensuring that autistic learners themselves are meaningfully involved in discussions about their educational experiences and are supported to advocate for their preferences and needs in ways that are accessible and authentic.

Ways forward: effective approaches to including autistic learner voices.

In order to support authentic and meaningful inclusion of autistic learners schools need to enact meaningful inclusion by creating classroom environments where everyone can belong and where difference is valued and proactively prepared for (Wood et al., 2022; Alcorn et al., 2024; Alcorn, Nic Thaidhg and Flynn, 2026). Furthermore, the authentic inclusion of autistic learner voices requires the enactment of children's rights. Lundy's Framework is built upon the right of children to have a say in their education and for those views to be treated seriously and given due weight and consideration (UNCRC, 1989; Lundy, 2007). The participation of all learners – and in this context autistic learners in special class enrolments – must be central to education policy and not viewed as an 'add-on'. The UNCRC must be embedded in the curriculum of all schools so that all learners are enabled to understand and exercise their rights. The Scottish government recently entered rights-based education into Scottish law ensuring that no child's rights should be overlooked (McCall-Smith, 2021; Harris and Riddell, 2022; Education Scotland, 2023; Scottish Parliament, 2024) and more importantly that all learners were aware of their rights. With

political will, this could be replicated in Ireland. Children's rights should not be seen as an additional burden on the curriculum, but an integral philosophical underpinning for all regardless of background, faith or neurotype.

There is a lack of clarity with regards to how best to operationalise the practices and processes recommended in DEY and NCSE documentation. Indeed, both quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrate the burden on schools to interpret and enact these complex procedures with limited guidance and support and associated implementation gaps between policy and practice. The circular highlights the information should be included in a learner's School Support File, which should include the *"perspectives of the child or young person on their experiences in school and aspirations for the future"* (p. 5). It is suggested that these perspectives should be gained using the Lundy Framework. However, no guidance is given as to what should be asked; how often the child's perspective should be sought or indeed how much influence that will have on the review process. This lack of guidance on perspective gathering could result in it simply being an annual event ahead of the review, without due weight being afforded to either the perspectives or the importance of collecting them, which amounts to no more than the tokenism discussed in Chapter Two. As discussed in Chapters Four and this chapter, the learner perspectives are not sought in the majority of schools – less than half who participated in Phase One and none in Phase Two. Schools need meaningful support to ensure that they equipped to support the inclusion of learner voices. Schools and teachers are required to understand the highly complex constructs of eliciting and enacting voices which is a messy and complex issue, notwithstanding the fear of some teachers that by asking for voices they may be inviting criticisms of their own professional practices (Skerritt, 2023; Skerritt, Brown and O'Hara, 2023). However, with scaffolding and support enhanced quality inclusion of voices is possible (Lundy and Cook-Sather, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2020; Ainscow and Messiou, 2021). For example, schools could be provided with an exemplar and framework for enhancing participation, which could be amended, to provide clarity about ensuring the rights-based approach was satisfied. This framework, as suggested in the EPSEN review (DE, 2025c), would need to extend beyond the annual review to incorporate voices across both different places and times in order to obtain a full picture of the learners' views. While these systemic issues should be prioritised there are issues which could be addressed at a practice level which would enhance quality practice for including autistic learner voices.

Lundy (2007) highlights that voices collected must be enacted – it is not enough for learners to be heard but their participation in conversations must be honoured by enacting changes. This is furthered by Flynn (2017) who emphasises authentic listening, highlighting

a partnership between speaker and listener. Lundy is a strong supporter of quality participation with the onus on the adults to both facilitate, guide and create opportunities – in other words, to provide the 'space' element of her model. Schools must provide opportunities for voices to be heard by facilitating and guiding quality conditions (Lundy, 2007, 2024a). Documents provided to schools with 'Getting to Know Me' templates (NEPS, 2007; NCSE, 2025b) are a great starting point, but as discussed previously, the requirement to involve learners in decision-making must become embedded throughout many levels of decision-making. While the templates may facilitate the initial building of relationships, it is the on-going and changing nature of the learners' educational experience which needs to be frequently updated. As many of the learners in this research spoke about, events like changing of seats; differences in timetables; unexpected classroom events can be challenging for them and difficult to communicate to school staff. In order to gather voices authentically, opportunities must be frequent and not always formalised. It is critical then that what Lundy refers to as 'space' for gathering quality voices is accessible if not always, then certainly many times throughout the term. Furthermore, learner voices must be embedded in the annual cycle of review of student support plans – at least – and more frequently preferably. None of the adult stakeholders in this study included the learners in these review meetings. All of the parents were asked opinions about their child's targets, but none of the children had an input. A move towards monthly or termly 'check-ins' with learners about their perspectives based on the understanding that they were aware of both their autism and their special class placement would enhance and deepen knowledge-based decision-making. More frequent eliciting of participation can provide a more complete picture of the learner's preferences which can support better learner outcomes (Williams, Gleeson and Jones, 2019; McNally, Sweeney, Keenan, Lynam, Radhakrishnan, et al., 2025).

The findings in this study demonstrate the need for enhanced and meaningful inclusion of autistic learners' voices about their school experience. However, there is a gap between policy intention and reality in practice due to inconsistency and understanding of inclusion and a lack of support for schools to engage in the process. There are ambiguities around the operationalisation of policy advice and circulars, with the principals (in this research) unclear whether 'Review of Placement' was compulsory or an additional element to School Support Plan reviews. Again, emphasising the importance of eliciting learner voices in 'Review of Placement' and not assuming that full-time inclusion in mainstream is the only indicator of success of placement. This highlights the gap in this system illustrated by this research. A conceptual framework for both enhancing participation, while embedding the process in preparation for teaching and learning practices (DEY, 2021b) in line with both the Lundy Framework, the AsIAm Autism Friendly Schools project (Lynam et al., 2024;

McNally, Sweeney, Keenan, Lynam, Radhakrishnan, et al., 2025) and circular 0023/2025 ‘Review of Enrolment in Special Class’ will be created as a way forward for increasing voice.

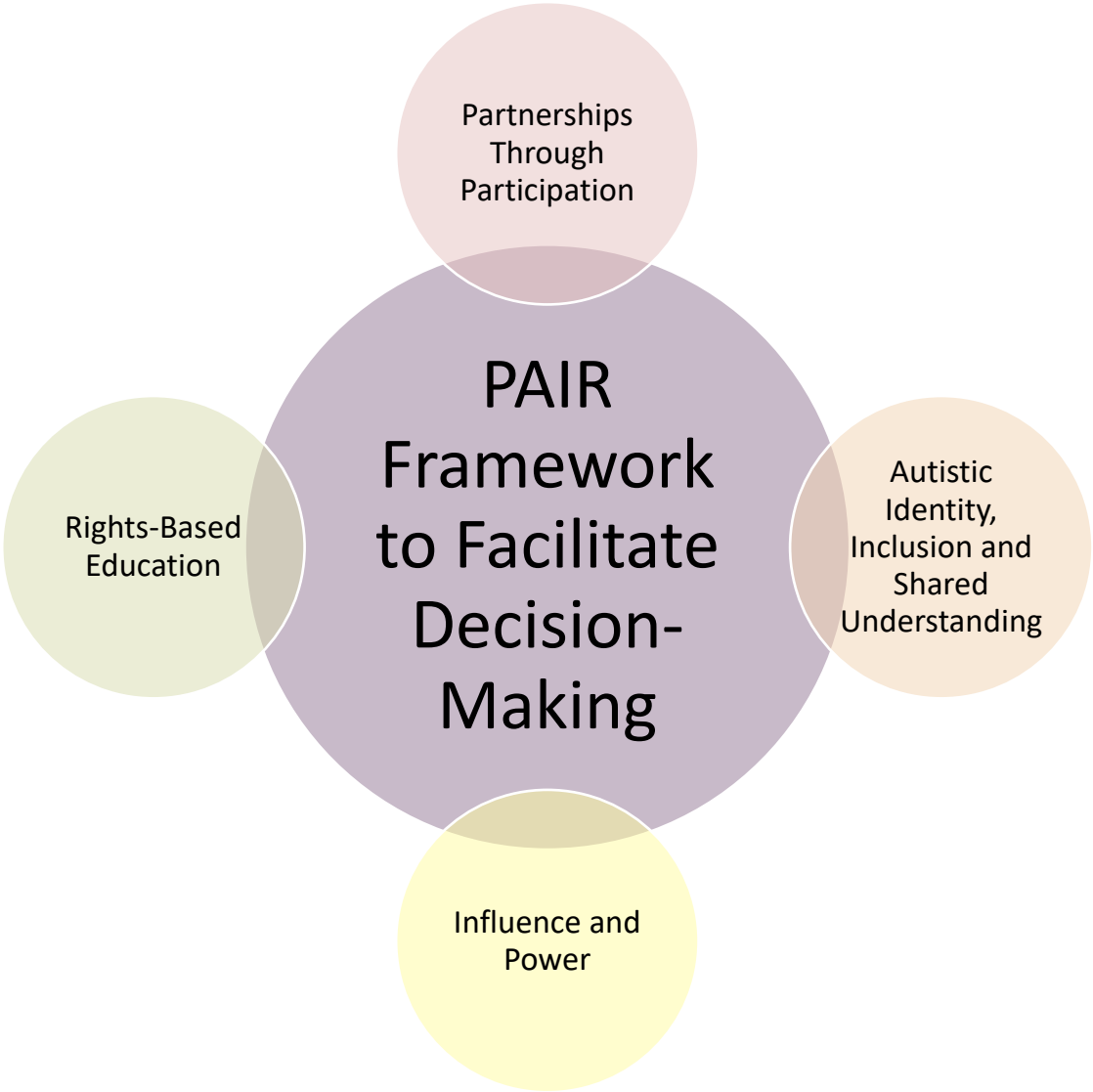
The PAIR Framework for Including Autistic Voices in Decision-Making

This research identified that a significant gap existed across school practices regarding the extent that autistic learners are included in decision making about their special class placement and educational experiences. The voices of autistic learners are consistently overlooked, and by implication, not included in almost any level of decision-making with regards to their educational experiences. While the majority of learners spent time in both their autism and mainstream classrooms and reported a sense of belonging in each, the enactment of inclusion remained questionable, with many adult stakeholders describing practices more closely aligned with integration than genuine inclusion. The findings suggest that the autistic learners were expected to adapt more often and across more environments than both their mainstream peers and staff, in contrast with the neurodiversity paradigm which promotes environmental adaptations. The survey conducted as part of this research indicated that schools are not involving autistic learners in placement reviews, suggesting that this issue extends beyond the case study schools and reflects a broader systemic concern. Taking these findings into account, a framework to support learners’ rights to participate in decision-making around their own educational experiences has been devised to support policy and practice. This framework provides a suggested process for schools to follow in order to meet their obligations in terms of learners rights to participate in decision-making and weaves together key frameworks, literature and findings from this research (Table 5.1). The PAIR Framework includes four elements: Partnership Through Participation; Autistic Identity, Inclusion and Shared Understanding; Influence and Power; Rights-Based Education (Figure 5.1).

Table 5.1: The Development of the PAIR Framework

	Partnerships Through Participation	Autistic Identity, Inclusion and Shared Understanding	Influence and Power	Rights-Based Education
Definition	At the core of this element is reciprocity and voluntarily taking part in activities. This links a number of issues around voices; communication and neurodiversity. It incorporates the myriad of communicative forms of the learners; the importance of emotional safety and the sense of belonging; the onus on adult partners to 'listen' rather than privileging normative forms of communication.	This element looks at the promotion of autistic identity and promoting neuroaffirming practices. It also addresses the inclusion of learners in a way that is meaningful for them which requires a shared understanding of autistic identity by all stakeholders.	Drawing very strongly on Lundy's conceptualisation on influence, this element embeds the importance of learner voices and opinion being enacted, or at the very least, explanations given as to why their ideas cannot be enacted. The power element refers to the 'checking of power' by adult stakeholders – the power should lie with the learners and this serves to remind adults.	As demonstrated throughout this research, school staff were either unaware or unwilling to enact the rights of the learners to have a say in matters that concerned them and for their voices to be given due weight and attention. This must change. Learners have rights, they must be educated about them and enabled to utilise them.
Key Literature	(Lundy, 2007, 2024b; Nind, Boorman and Clarke, 2012)	(Goodall, 2020; Alcorn et al., 2024; Alcorn, Nic Thaidhg and Flynn, 2026)	(Lundy, 2007; Flynn, 2017; Ainscow and Messiou, 2021; DCEDIY, 2021)	(UN, 1948; UNCRC, 1989; UNCRPD, 2007; UNCRPD/C/GC/4, 2016)

Figure 5.1: Visual Representation of PAIR Framework to Facilitate Decision-Making



Element One: partnerships through participation.

Partnerships through participation emphasises the reciprocity of communication, from the outset of this framework, thereby fostering a partnership between the learner and adult. As has been discussed in the previous chapters, many of the decisions regarding educational experience are made by adult stakeholders for the learners. This research also highlights the lack of partnerships between adult stakeholders with each feeling the other had more 'say' in decision-making. This first element then focuses on the importance of participation through partnerships. The terms partnership and participation are used alongside voices to highlight the reciprocity of communicative interactions (Nind, Boorman and Clarke, 2012; Nind, 2017). The Lundy Framework (Lundy, 2007; Flynn, 2019; DCEDIY, 2021) uses the term audience. Based on the findings of this research the terms partnership and participation are preferred as it places the onus on the educators to actively 'listen'.

Partnership through participation embodies the holistic understanding of listening, with voices being at the heart of these concepts. By using partnership through participation, it empowers educators to understand that voices need to be heard, but that the method of 'hearing' can also be felt or seen through visual means. It is important that educators build a positive relationship with their learners in order for the school experience to be successful (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015; Warren, Buckingham and Parsons, 2021; Dervan, Egan and Ring, 2025). Participation is wider than just communication with educators, it extends to interpersonal relationships with friends and peers (Black et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025; Ward, Gormley and Coulter, 2026) where autistic learners may be supported to negotiate both the positive and negative experiences of partnership. Through participatory experience learners gain the ability to self-advocate (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015). The findings from this research clearly showed that learners' voices are not always heard or noticed and that the reciprocal nature of partnerships and participation is not being enacted therefore the learners are not impacting decision-making.

The term voices has been used throughout this research to indicate the myriads of ways that autistic learners use to communicate. As discussed in both Chapters Four and Five, many of the learners in this research adopted multiple means of communication to express their views including verbal, non-verbal and written forms. In order to respect both their communicative preferences and the variability of communication methods present depending on how emotionally safe the child feels (Zisk and Dalton, 2019; Donaldson, Corbin and McCoy, 2021), it is important that we always provide the learners with a range of options. This also links back to issues around the variability of communication in terms of how emotionally and physically safe the learner feels, which further links to the relational nature of communication and voices as discussed in Chapter Two.

Element Two: autistic identity, inclusion and shared understanding.

As examined in this chapter the issue of autistic identity can have an impact on the learners' understanding of themselves and their educational experiences (Mogensen and Mason, 2015; Horgan, Kenny and Flynn, 2023; Atkinson, Wood-Downie and Wright, 2024). Thriving with autism in a mainstream educational setting can be challenging (Goodall, 2018b; Williams, Gleeson and Jones, 2019; Horgan, 2025), but central to these challenges is whether learners have an understanding of themselves in order to flourish (Pellicano and Houting, 2022; Pellicano et al., 2022; Pellicano and Heyworth, 2023). Many of the learners in this research spoke about the challenges of social interactions; many were visibly upset when speaking about times they felt they had been treated unfairly and the majority were

unclear why they spent time in more than one classroom. This research highlights the need to move away from learners viewing themselves negatively for seeking comfort and support, towards a more neuroaffirmative approach that promotes greater understanding of autistic learners' strengths, preferences, and identities among educators, parents, and learners themselves. This is particularly important given that many learners were unaware of their autism diagnosis, while some parents appeared reluctant to engage in discussions around autism and placement decisions with their children. There is emerging research from Irish contexts about how school can be better for autistic learners by adopting key principles to strengthen autistic well-being through understanding sensory, play and communication preferences for example (Goodall, 2021; Horgan, Kenny and Flynn, 2023; Lynam et al., 2024; Dervan, Egan and Ring, 2025; Horgan, 2025; McNally, Sweeney, Keenan, Lynam, Radhakrishnan, et al., 2025; O'Keeffe and McNally, 2025). Educators can empower learners by understanding their preferences rather than autistic learners adapting to the normative assumptions (Milton, 2012). As stated in the Findings chapter, the learners are very articulate and insightful as to their strengths and needs. By encouraging participation while educators make environmental adaptations to ensure 'felt' safety (Purvis and Cross, 2007) schools can enact inclusion and enhance participation leading to learners exercising greater decision-making powers, starting to redress the existing power imbalances.

The concept of inclusion and inclusive education is firmly embedded in policy, practice and research (Ainscow, 2020, 2024b, 2024a; Waltman, 2021; NCSE, 2024a) and yet eludes a single definition as discussed in Chapter Two. Adult stakeholders – the parents in particular – had an ambiguous understanding of inclusive education. The data from this research suggested that schools did not fully understand or embrace that for learners to be included in mainstream classrooms barriers had to be removed. The autistic learners voiced sensory and emotional barriers to being in mainstream settings, with many speaking of the noise and amount of people as being challenging for them. The seating position in class was an issue for many. For the full enactment of inclusion, educators must understand that inclusion is the right of all learners. The autism class teachers in this research spoke of the challenge in some mainstream teachers accepting the learners from the autism classes into 'their' classroom. By implementing the 'Review of Placement' (DE, 2025a) the issue of inclusion happening at the discretion of mainstream teachers is reduced as the oversight is spread across a larger number of people. Inclusion becomes not the goal, but a process which should be evolving and adapting over time. This is clearly a gap in practice that was highlighted in this research - there were very little expectations by any of the adult stakeholders that learners would transition into full-time mainstream placements. Inclusion was not seen as a process that would develop over time.

By valuing autistic identity and inclusive education, barriers to learning and belonging can be removed. The findings from this research showed that learners could both clearly articulate the barriers to participation and how these may be amended and overcome. The PAIR Framework provides educators with the tools to elicit both what learners enjoy and find easy about school, but also what challenges they may be facing which need support.

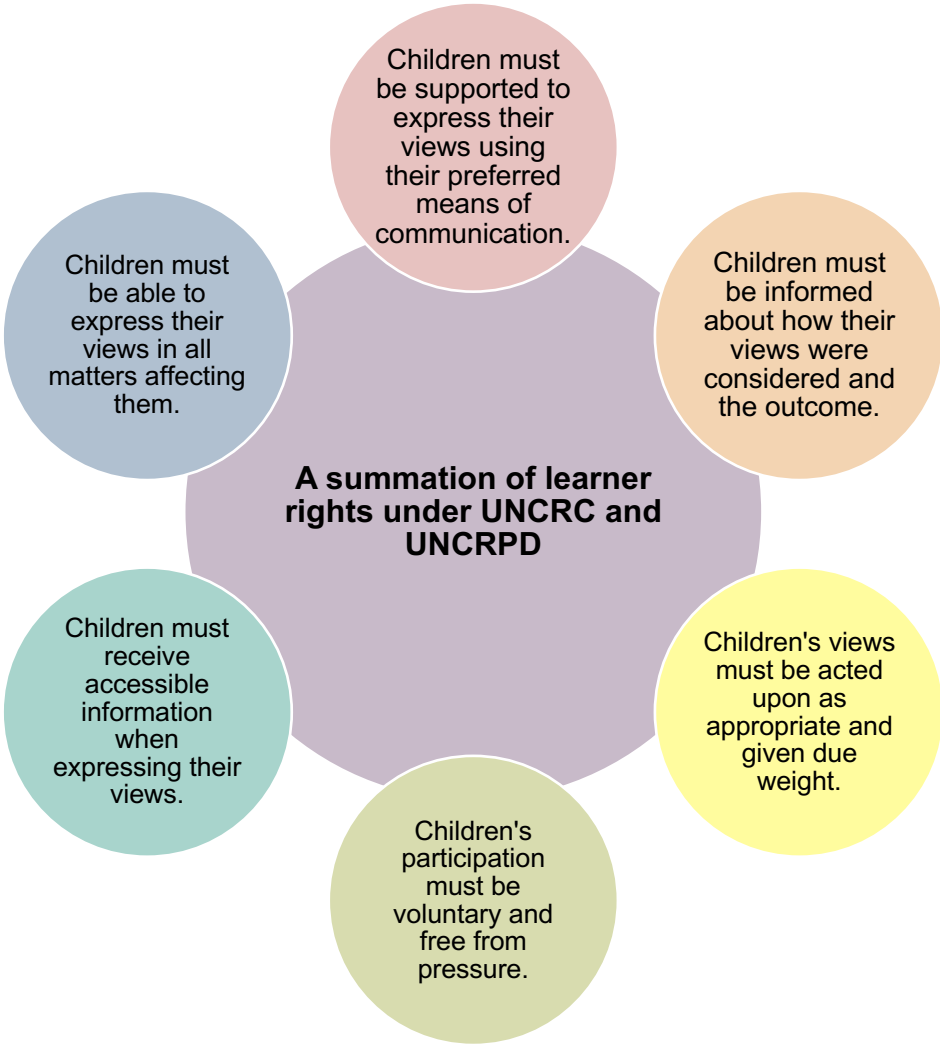
Element Three: influence and power.

This element is adopted directly from Lundy's model which is widely used nationally and internationally to ensure that the views of learners must be acted upon as appropriate (Lundy, 2007; O'Donnell, 2016; Flynn, 2019; DCEDIY, 2021; McCall-Smith, 2021). The previous two elements highlight the need for partnerships through participation, and the valuing of autistic identity and enhancement of inclusive education. However, without those elements being acted upon they amount to nothing more than tokenism (Lundy, 2018). This also raises important questions regarding power within educational settings: who holds decision-making power, whose perspectives are prioritised, and whether learners are genuinely enabled to influence outcomes that affect their daily school experiences. Many of the learners in this research – Martin (Holly NS) in particular – were visibly annoyed that they had asked for changes to be made either to their schedules or a schoolwork-based change and that these requests had not been met. Although learners were invited to express their views, institutional power ultimately remained with adults who determined whether those views resulted in action. Learners, in this research, also articulated that they stopped requesting change as it did not appear to them to happen. This demonstrates how repeated experiences of powerlessness may discourage self-advocacy and participation over time. It is essential that learners continue to advocate for themselves and including an element dedicated to influence encourages the feedback loop. The PAIR Framework prompts how issues raised by learners may be used to enact change, or if changes are not to be made how this should be communicated back to learners. In doing so, element three recognises autistic learners not merely as participants in the consultation processes but as credible knowers of their own educational experiences.

Element Four: rights- based education.

As demonstrated by the findings the rights of the learners in this research in relation to participation in decision-making around educational experiences was not being realised. The rights of all learners, including autistic learners are summarised in Figure 5.2:

Figure 5.2: Summary of Learner Rights With Respect to UNCRC and UNCRPD



It is essential that the rights of all learners as summarised above, become embedded and realised as part of the ‘Review of Placement’ process (Byrne, 2022; Crowley, 2024) and that they are a critical part of any framework for inclusion. For this to occur meaningfully, teachers and all stakeholders within the education system must possess a clear understanding of children's rights principles, including the obligations outlined within the UNCRC and UNCRPD, and how these translate into everyday educational practice. Learner rights are not a privilege that educators can choose to bestow on children, but are a fundamental entitlement (Lundy and McEvoy, 2009; Lundy and Cook-Sather, 2016; Lundy et al., 2024). These rights extend to issues of understanding the purpose of participation; the right to choose not to participate and the need for learner assent to be granted ahead of any participatory session. As has been acknowledged schools are under on-going pressure in terms of new initiatives, curriculum reform and increasing diversity in the learner population, however, educators cannot withhold rights from learners. Consequently, rights-based practice requires not only institutional commitment, but also sustained professional understanding of participation, autonomy, assent, and inclusive decision making as matters of entitlement rather than discretion.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the key findings of this research through interrogating the involvement of autistic learners in school placement; supporting autistic learners quality and inclusive educational experiences across the school environment and how schools can support authentic and meaningful participation of autistic learners. The research found gaps in each of these areas and offered the PAIR framework to address these issues. By embedding the elicitation of partnership through participation, learners’ opinions should be sought and embedded. The autistic identity and enactment of inclusion element shift the thinking of educators to better understanding the strengths and differences of their learners, moving the onus of adaptation from the learner to the teachers. The enactment of inclusive education requires the removal of barriers to participation and ensuring that there is a sense of belonging for all. This is an on-going process, one that must be reviewed and renewed. While this process is a moral responsibility for the school, schools cannot do it without support. The PAIR Framework provides a pathway for schools to follow in order to ensure that partnerships are fostered; autistic identity is respected and valued; influence is effective and visible in conjunction with the rights of the learners being enacted and valued. The framework provides a way forward for schools to address the gaps identified by the findings

of this research. It can also inform policy and provide a foundation for future research in this area.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Introduction

This research set out to determine whether autistic learners are currently included in decision-making about their special class placement and address the dearth of research in this area. The research also examined the differences between stakeholder perspectives and the impact that power has on the decision-making process. The inclusion of children's voices in decision-making on educational experience is a right established in international policy and legislation (UNCRC, 1989; UNESCO, 1994a; UNCRPD, 2007). Children have the right to have their voices heard on matters affecting them and for their opinions to be given due weight and attention. However, in practice the findings of this research demonstrate that this does not happen. This chapter will provide a brief overview of the nuance of the issues at the heart of this research before stating what the contribution has been to knowledge in this field. Given the lacuna of knowledge in this specific subject area, the research did not answer all the questions that need to be resolved so both the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research will be provided. Finally, there will be insights and reflections for professional practice before the final conclusion.

Overview of the Research Study

This study drew on a number of core conceptual and theoretical models: the UNCRC; UNCRPD; inclusive education; the neurodiversity paradigm and the contradiction between Irish educational policy and international obligations. By pulling these strands together, a new approach was taken to interrogate how the voice of autistic learners could be meaningfully and fairly included in decision-making. The extensive examination of international and national policy developments in Chapter One highlighted the need to move towards an education system where inclusive education policies were enacted and a rights-based system was respected and implemented (UNCRC, 1989; UNESCO, 1994b; UNCRPD/C/GC/4, 2016; Ainscow, 2020; NCSE, 2024b, 2024a). The critical analysis of the existing literature in Chapter Two highlighted the limited amount of research including the voices of young autistic learners and the lack of research addressing learners' views on decision-making around placement. The research drew from Lundy's Framework for participation (Lundy, 2007) and recent work including autistic learners both nationally (Goodall, 2021) and internationally (Pellicano and Heyworth, 2023) amongst others. Work by researchers in Ireland also underpinned best practice methods for eliciting voice and ensuring communication preferences were considered (Flynn, 2019; DCEDIY, 2021; DCEDIY, NDA and DCU, 2024; McNally, Sweeney, Keenan, Lynam, Radhakrishnan, et al., 2025).

Chapter Three provided an in-depth description of this mixed-methods study which involved a sequential explanatory design. Phase One involved issuing a survey to every primary school in Ireland with at least one existing autism class. Phase Two consisted of a multi-site, bounded context, semi-structured set of interviews with multiple stakeholders. In total, thirteen learners (aged 5-11 years); three parents; seven teachers and three school principals were individually interviewed. The quantitative data was analysed descriptively using the SPSS™ package. The qualitative data was interpreted by following Braun and Clarke's six step Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach (2022) and coded using NVIVO 15 software. Using this branch of thematic analysis allowed for "*deep, complex, nuanced meaning and understanding"* (p. 247).

The findings of the two phases of data collection were presented in Chapter Four. The survey data showed that annual reviews were undertaken by less than half of the participating schools. Additionally, no respondent thought that the learners should be the most important person in that decision-making process. The analysis of the qualitative data generated four themes: Voices Heard and Unheard; Different Priorities, Different Perceptions, Different Experiences; Interdependence, Not Independence and Different, But Not Always. Voices Heard and Unheard referred to what stakeholders were both prepared to talk about and what they avoided talking about. These themes incorporated issues of the enactment of inclusion, the emotional and relational aspects of inclusion and the power dynamics underpinning decision-making. Different Priorities, Different Perceptions, Different Experiences interrogated the positionality of stakeholders and how that position influenced priorities, perceptions and experiences. The third theme, Interdependent, Not Independent, examined the importance of the relationships between stakeholders and emphasised the importance of connectedness. The final theme addressed issues of sameness and difference, looking at autism through the lens of the stakeholders and educational experiences from the learners' perspectives.

Chapter Five discussed the Involvement of Autistic Learners in School Placement; Supporting Autistic Learners' Quality and Inclusive Educational Experiences Across the School Environment and Supporting Authentic and Meaningful Participation of Autistic Learners: Lessons for Inclusion. The PAIR (Partnerships Through Participation; Autistic Identity, Inclusion and Shared Understanding; Influence and Power; Rights-Based Education) Framework was introduced as a support model for schools to meaningfully include autistic learners in decision-making about their placement. The framework has the potential to enhance autistic identity and neurodivergence awareness; enact meaningful inclusion through recognition of barriers for autistic learners and finally ensure the rights of

the learners under both UNCRC and UNCRPD are met. It is envisaged that this Framework will provide a pathway for schools to collate information around 'Review of Special Class' placements.

Contribution to Knowledge

These findings are particularly relevant given the recent focus on autism classes both by the DEY, NCSE and as part of the Autism Innovation Strategy (DCEDIY, 2024). Ireland was late to ratify the UNCRPD, only doing so in 2018 with the optional protocol being later still in 2024 (DCDE, 2024). These findings are relevant to both practitioners and policy makers and will be outlined in the following sections.

The findings from this research indicate that autistic learners were largely excluded from decisions regarding their school placement. In many cases, this exclusion was linked to the absence of a formal placement review process in schools, meaning that learners were not routinely given opportunities to express their views. This lack of involvement represents a potential infringement of their rights (UNCRC, 1989; UNESCO, 1994a; UNCRPD, 2007). The data also indicated that there were complex power dynamics at play, with all stakeholders believing that others held more power. The NCSE (through the Special Educational Needs Organisers) was viewed as the majority holder of power as it sanctioned new autism classes and issued letters of eligibility to parents for places in autism classes. Parents, teachers and principals were reluctant to transition learners from the autism class into mainstream placements as they were concerned about the lack of flexibility around accessing the autism class at a later date if they felt the learner needed it - resourcing was an issue discussed by all adult stakeholders. Taken together, these findings point to a system in which structural constraints and perceived risks limit both learner participation and placement mobility. Addressing this requires a triple focus: increasing awareness within schools of learners' rights to have their views heard and given due weight; creating more meaningful opportunities for learners to contribute to decision-making processes and creating a more flexible system that learners and teachers should not have to fix by working harder. Support for schools and teachers is key to reduce the constant initiative overload. Such steps would support more inclusive practice and inform both school level approaches and wider policy development.

The present study enhances our understanding of how educators can best support autistic learners' quality and inclusive whole school educational experiences. The learners themselves articulately communicated the types of support which would meaningfully enhance their school day. In the majority of instances these supports could be easily implemented within the existing resources and structures in place in school: increased

breaks; use of ICT to type or dictate answers rather than handwriting; additional time for eating. School staff spoke of difficulties including learners from the autism classes into mainstream settings due to sensory differences, or lack of resources. However, the learners themselves were clear as to how those differences and challenges could be supported, further emphasising the need to include learner voices and enhance opportunities for learners to express their views, and for those views to be listened to. The findings show that there is a need for greater enhancement of children's authentic and inclusive educational experiences. A greater awareness by educators about autistic identity is needed, and there is a requirement for additional TPL to be provided by the NCSE in this area. Beyond autistic identity, there needs to be a wider whole school understanding of autism that aligns with both the neurodiversity paradigm and the social model as discussed in Chapter Two. Policy recommendations with regards to enhancing support services would also alleviate the gap between what is available to school staff and the increasing requirements of TPL. The contribution to knowledge that these findings illustrate is that learners who feel meaningfully included schools need to increase their knowledge of autistic identity. The gap between policy enactment and policy in practice must be reduced by ensuring schools are supported through TPL and clear, scaffolded guidance. Ensuring the facilitation of autistic children's inclusive educational experience directly informed by children themselves is upholding their right to voice and influence and aligns with the neurodiversity paradigm of promoting difference and strengths.

There were a number of contributions to knowledge in terms of lessons for inclusion. Firstly, there is a need for greater clarification around defining the purpose of autism classes – both to alleviate the fear of adult stakeholders that resources will be lost and that systemic changes can be made to allow more flexible use of both the space and the resources (Travers, 2023). Coupled with this is the need for autistic learners to have greater autonomy over their school day – all the learners expressed changes that could be made to make school more enjoyable and comfortable for them. However, there was no consistent way of capturing voices in order to facilitate agency for learners. The creation of the PAIR Framework should provide schools with a roadmap to enhance the elicitation of voices and in doing so offer a way forward to increase the decision-making opportunities for autistic learners.

The PAIR framework will contribute to knowledge as it provides a guide for educators to ensure authentic and meaningful participation of autistic learners through partnership and participation across their educational experiences. There is value in providing a framework for policy advice enactment to address both the recommendations made in the EPSEN

Review (2025) and to scaffold staff through a necessary element of the review of placement process. Recent documentation produced by both the DEY (2025) and the NCSE (2024) highlight the importance of student voices but provided little guidance of a way to structure the eliciting and recording of voices (DES, 2019a, 2020; DCEDIY, 2021; DEY, 2021a). The PAIR Framework itself could be an evolving piece of research enabling schools to collect data on the educational experiences of the learners, linked to the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) process, which could lead to both improved practices and outcomes. The PAIR Framework is informed by the research findings in this study. It also draws on both literature and policy to provide a coherent method for schools to meet their obligations and engage in rights-based educational practice. It supports teachers in operationalising processes but also has the potential to address wider gaps surrounding how best to support the authentic and meaningful inclusion of learner voices as part of the wider decision-making processes across schools (DES, 2019a, 2020; DCEDIY, 2021; DEY, 2021a; NCSE, 2024b, 2024a).

Limitations of the Study

With regard to the research methods adopted in this study, some limitations need to be acknowledged. While the study captured insights from a broad range of schools, the response rate may have limited the extent to which all regional, demographic, and contextual differences were reflected in the findings. Increasing participation in future research could help to strengthen the reliability of the data and allow for a more comprehensive understanding of current practices across the Irish primary education sector. Ideally it would have been advantageous to have had a greater amount of time in building a relationship with the learners ahead of the interviews. While this has been documented as best practice in literature (DCYA, Barnados and McEvoy, 2015; Mannion, 2018; DCEDIY, 2021; Skauge, Storhaug and Marthinsen, 2021; Olsen, 2025) it just was not possible given the time constraints of the project. While efforts were made to mitigate the lack of pre-interview visits such as ‘talking presentations’ and information leaflets being provided to the learners it may have been beneficial to have had additional time. It would have been useful to have additional stakeholders to provide further insight in Phase Two e.g. members of multi-disciplinary teams, SNAs, representatives of the NCSE. It would have been beneficial to have stakeholders from both the NCSE and DEY to interrogate their understanding of autism classes, the role of learner voices in decision-making and how schools could enhance those practices. An additional limitation was the diversity of the autistic sample. While there was a good representation of ages, data on co-occurring needs was not requested. This may have unintentionally excluded underrepresented groups from

participating in this research (Pellicano, Bölte and Stahmer, 2018; Pellicano and Houting, 2022; Øverland et al., 2025).

The second limitation was concerned with the inability to trial the PAIR Framework in schools. However, this limitation only applies to the reporting of any trial within this document. It is expected that the framework will be piloted in schools in the coming academic year. Following this pilot, feedback from all stakeholders would be sought. For teachers and principals the feedback would centre around both the practicality of the document and its usefulness. It would be hoped that the learners could provide additional feedback on alternative or additional ways of participation and gathering voices; what questions they might want to be asked or what information they may wish to provide. Following redrafting it would be hoped to roll the PAIR Framework out nationally in primary schools, before working on a framework that functioned for post primary and special schools as those learners are equally entitled to have their voices heard and respected around their educational experiences and placements.

The final limitation is in regard to the schools who participated. Schools who volunteer not only to participate but facilitate participation paying for additional staff so that learners can have their choice of adult; making sure spaces are available for both researcher and participants and ensuring both staff and learners have sufficient time, are arguably already invested and wanting to improve inclusive practices and are open to change. All the participating schools were aware of their obligations, and by not implementing reviews of placement stated that they believed they were acting with the best of interests of the learners. There were great examples of practice in each of the schools, with everyone working to try to ensure the best outcome for the learners. Arguably, those would be the easiest, and most willing, schools to make recommendations to and not necessarily reflective of all schools. Future research would benefit from a wider and more diverse sample.

Recommendations

There are a number of recommendations which could be made following the findings of this research in the areas of policy; practice and future research. These will now be examined.

Recommendations for policy.

The findings from this research very clearly demonstrate that eliciting the voices of autistic learners around their special class placements does not happen. Of the schools sampled the learners were not involved in decision-making about their own educational

experiences at any level. Consequently, the first recommendation is that the contradiction between parental rights that exists in Irish law and learner rights under UNCRPD must be disentangled. In Irish law, parents are viewed as the natural educators of their children and therefore have the right to make educational decisions (Government of Ireland, 1998), whereas the UNCRPD (2007) places the rights with the child. As is evidenced in this research, parents are making decisions for their children without consulting them or explaining to them why their educational experience is different and separate to that of their peers. This can limit opportunities for autistic learners to develop a clear understanding of their identity and to meaningfully participate in decisions that affect the school. Embedding knowledge and discussion of autistic identity within the School Support planning process (for example, as part of the PAIR Framework during the review of placement or as a criteria for enrolment into schools) could promote greater self-understanding, informed participation, and student voices in educational decision-making.

Secondly, learner rights must be respected and enacted – all learners must be able to exercise their right to participate in educational decisions which affect them. The PAIR Framework can support this by scaffolding teachers' practices around eliciting voices to ensure they are rights-based. The numerous recommendations in 'An Inclusive Education for An Inclusive Society – Policy Advice No. 7' (NCSE, 2024a) must be implemented in full. Realising the vision set out within this policy will require sustained adaptation of the current education system over a number of years, but this process must begin if inclusive education is to become a reality. The findings from this research demonstrate that the participating schools were not making steps towards the increased inclusion of autistic learners into mainstream. In fact, the year-on-year increase in the opening of autism classes far outstrips population growth or significant changes in the incidence of autism. If the education system has to close the gap between our obligations under UNCRPD and the increased segregation of autistic students, existing policy around review of placement and international rights-based practices have to start being meaningfully enacted in schools. In this context, the 'Review of Placement 0023/2025' circular must become a compulsory piece of work and embedded in the school planning cycle. By embedding the participation of children in educational decision-making in legislation along the lines of the Scottish education system (Gregor and Campbell, 2001b; McCall-Smith, 2021; Harris and Riddell, 2022; Education Scotland, 2023; Scottish Parliament, 2024) focus would be on these practices to happen. As highlighted by the findings of this research, there is no expectation by parents that learners should be included in decision-making or that their children should have their voices heard. As a result, the expectations of all stakeholders including schools, parents and policymakers, must shift in order for practice to change. Rights are difficult to exercise when

individuals are unaware that they possess them. Therefore, legislative reform may also contribute to increasing awareness and understanding of learner rights across the wider educational community.

Recommendations for practice.

While policy recommendations have to be implemented in order to make permanent changes within the educational system, arguably much of the change could happen at the level of everyday practice if educators were provided with clear guidance, expectations and practical supports regarding inclusive approaches and rights-based participation. The findings point to the need for a more coherent, rights-based and neuro-affirmative approach to practice, underpinned by targeted Teacher Professional Learning (TPL). Crucially, this TPL should not be limited to one group but must be provided to all relevant educators, including SET teachers, autism class teachers, and mainstream class teachers (Leonard and Smyth, 2022; O'Neill and Kenny, 2023). The evidence from this study indicates that differences in teacher knowledge, understanding, and attitudes significantly shape autistic learners' experiences and their ability to thrive across educational placements. A more consistent, shared knowledge base is therefore essential. All schools with autistic learners should participate in introductory TPL around autistic identity, communication preferences and a strengths based understanding of autism in line with the findings of this research. All teachers, regardless of number of years teaching, should be expected to participate in ongoing TPL to both upskill and inform themselves on inclusive practice to meet the needs of all, including autistic learners. Further TPL around embedding Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into all classes would further enhance planning for inclusion. This would involve schools implementing whole school practices which while essential for some learners would benefit all. Neuroaffirmative practices should be modelled and taught. Differences should be 'usualised' (Sanders, 2007) across the school population to remove, or reduce, the 'othering' of autism classes. Arguably the main recommendation for practice around TPL could be that teachers as part of their on-going Teaching Council registration have to participate in a compulsory amount of TPL every year.

In addition to TPL, a further recommendation for practice involves the School Support Plan (SSP) process where gaps in practice are evident (DEY Inspectorate, 2026b). In Phase One of the data collection 80.6% (*n*=150) of school respondents stated that they reviewed the SSP at least twice a year or more often. This finding was supported by all the teachers in Phase Two. The PAIR Framework could become embedded in this process thereby ensuring that learners were given an opportunity to actively participate in decisions being made about them and their educational experiences.

Recommendations for future research.

Chapters One and Two of this thesis highlighted the lack of research both in the area of gathering autistic voices with primary aged children and examining the efficacy of autism classes attached (DEY, 2020) to mainstream schools. Further research could explore the piloting of the PAIR Framework in primary schools. This would inform schools about the experiences of autistic learners in both their special class setting and their experiences in mainstream classrooms. This further research could inform schools how they could make both their autism and mainstream classes more inclusive, and how school experiences could be enhanced for autistic learners. By making both classes more inclusive, additional research may also inform how autism class spaces could be used more flexibly to support more learners, or to better support current learners.

This research did not seek to include information about learners cognitive profiles. However, it would be useful to explore how learners who used Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices; were non-speaking or minimally speaking could more meaningfully participate in decision-making. It would also be critical to ensure learners with intellectual disabilities were being meaningfully and authentically included. This would require additional time spent by researchers in building relationships and adapting their own communication styles to better suit those learners.

Further research to examine the preferences of autistic learners who were not enrolled in autism classes as to their educational experiences would add to knowledge about how autistic learners feel about school. As is clear from existing literature, the preference of many autistic learners is not a mainstream class. However, as the educational system currently stands only autistic learners enrolled in an autism class are eligible to access the supports of the autism classes. While some schools are more flexible in the use of the autism class environment this practice is neither widespread nor included in DEY guidance. Further research may help to explore how more autistic learners could be supported with their educational experiences.

It is clear from this research that further exploration is required to identify the specific gaps that exist within teacher learning in relation to inclusive and rights-based practice. As school populations have become more diverse, additional research is needed to examine whether current models of teacher professional learning (TPL) adequately prepare educational staff to support autistic learners and other marginalised groups in meaningful and participatory ways. Future research should also explore the structural barriers that limit engagement with TPL, including issues of time, accessibility, workload, and financial cost to individual teachers. Such inquiry may help determine whether participation in sustained and

appropriately resourced professional learning should become a more explicit requirement of on-going professional registration, rather than remaining largely the responsibility of individual teachers to source and complete independently, often outside of working hours and at personal expense.

It is anticipated that this research will be disseminated through educational conferences and journal articles in professional and academic journals to reach a wide audience of researchers, policymakers and practitioners.

Conclusion

In summary, this research offered valuable insights into the extent to which autistic learners are included in decision making about their special class placement. The findings show that autistic learners in primary schools are not currently included in decision-making across almost all levels of their educational experience, but that school staff do not believe that learners have a say in the process of decision-making around placement. These findings address an absence of literature examining young children from autism classes in mainstream schools in Ireland experiences of inclusion. The key contribution of this study, the PAIR Framework, offers schools a structured and rights-based pathway for ensuring that autistic learners' voices can be meaningfully included in decision-making in primary schools with regard to their educational placement.

Appendix

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Appendix A: UNCRC Actual Wording of Articles 12 and 28

Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Article 28

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:

(a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;

(b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;

(c) Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means;

(d) Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children;

(e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates.

2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and in conformity with the present Convention.

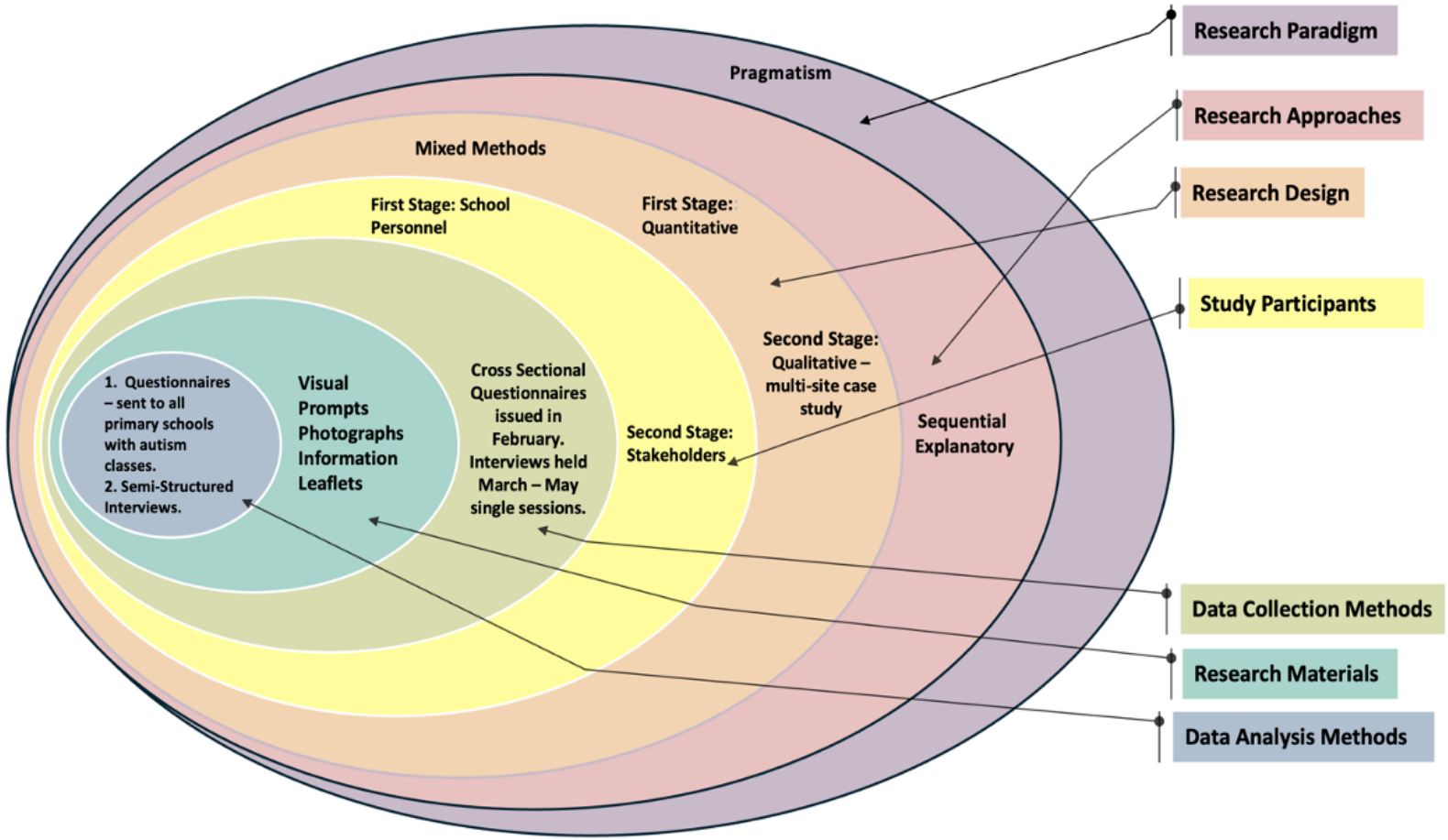
3. States Parties shall promote and encourage international cooperation in matters relating to education, in particular with a view to contributing to the elimination of ignorance and illiteracy throughout the world and facilitating access to scientific and technical knowledge and modern teaching methods. In this regard, particular account shall be taken of the needs of developing countries.

Appendix B: Justification for Philosophical Assumptions

What	Type of Research	Definition	Selected – yes or no?
Paradigm			
Post–positivism	quantitative	Emphasis is placed on the identification of causality and its effects, careful observation and measurement, characterised by a singular view of reality and in which the researcher imposes the research on the phenomenon.	No. There is no causality to identify and given the multiple stakeholder interviews in Phase Two of the research there will not be a singular view of reality.
Constructivism	qualitative	The objective of the research is to understand a phenomenon as it is seen and interpreted by the participants themselves. Characterised by a multiple view of reality and of which the researcher works with the world as it is constructed by its participants.	No. The objective of the research is not to understand the phenomenon of autistic learners and their involvement in decision-making processes as it is interpreted by others. While there will be a multiple view of reality Phase One will measure phenomenon.
Transformative	qualitative	The research has a deliberate agenda of seeking to improve the situation of its participants all in a world view characterised by a politically negotiated view of reality and what should be. The researcher works collaboratively with participants to improve the life situation of disempowered groups and individuals.	No. The research does not have an agenda to improve the situation of the participants. Researcher will not be working collaboratively with participants to improve their personal situations. There is a wider philosophical argument as to whether autistic learners are part of a disempowered group – this research is not interrogating this issue.
Pragmatism	quantitative and qualitative	The research focuses on framing and answering the research question or problem, which is eclectic in its design, methods of data collection and analysis, driven by fitness for purpose and employing quantitative and qualitative data as relevant. The researcher employs both inductive and deductive reasoning to investigate the	Yes. This paradigm aligns with the purpose of this research. Both quantitative and qualitative data will be collected and both inductive and deductive reasoning will be present to investigate the research and sub-questions.

		multiple, plural views of the problem and the research questions.	
Ontology			
Realism	quantitative	There is a singular object of reality that exists independent of individuals' perceptions of it.	No. Not across both phases of the research.
Critical realism	quantitative and qualitative	Certain facts are universally true – or are beyond doubt - but most can be contested.	No. Certain facts are beyond doubt in this study – learners are enrolled in autism class; each of the parents have an autistic child and the school staff work in schools with autism classes. The rest of the knowledge can be contested depending on the stakeholder position.
Constructivism	qualitative	Reality is neither objective nor singular, but multiple realities are constructed by individuals.	Yes. The individuals have their own reality based on their lived experience – however, they are being questioned on one reality.
Epistemology			
Positivism	quantitative	Knowledge is discovered through observation and measurement	No. The knowledge will not be discovered through observation or measurement.
Pragmatism	quantitative and qualitative	Judged by usefulness in solving problems.	Yes. While the knowledge gained will not solve problems it will further and deepen understanding of the area.
Interpretivism	qualitative	Created through meaning making.	Not entirely. While some of the data from Phase two will be, none of it from phase one will.

Appendix C: Research Onion



Appendix D: Stages of Research Journal for Reflexivity

Stage	When	What
Stage 1	Before interviews	Note down any assumptions or expectations. Concerns or adaptations always also need to be noted at this stage. Any conscious biases may be noted.
Stage 2	During interviews	Anything surprising, unexpected or particularly salient to the research questions should be noted. It is important to note key or repeated words from participants and use of non-verbal communication.
Stage 3	Immediately after	Write down anything that immediately struck a chord or was jarring; any non-verbal communications – use of pauses or omissions. It is useful to note down any emotional reaction to the conversation from a researcher perspective.
Stage 4	During transcriptions and before coding	There may be more than one entry at this stage depending on the time lapse between interviews, transcriptions and coding. Note down anything that becomes clear during transcriptions; any pauses or changes of topic and what that may suggest; anything that was missed when initial interview happened.
Stage 5	During analysis	When coding, and when themes start to be generated there may be multiple thoughts about how and what was said. This is the time to go through the transcripts and introduce a 'critical friend' to the process for an 'outsider' perspective and to check bias.
Stage 6	Writing findings chapter	While writing the findings chapter, it is important to keep a constant check of reflecting both on what is written and that the interpretation of what was said during the interviews is a true reflection of the participants meaning. At this stage, multiple readers may have different interpretations so it is critical that self-reflection and questioning still happen.

Appendix E: Autism Class Survey

Autism Class Questionnaire

Survey Flow

Block: (0 Questions)
Standard: General School Information (6 Questions)
Block: (1 Question)
Standard: General Information Around Classes (8 Questions)
Standard: Opinions Influencing Class Placement (1 Question)
Standard: Factors Influencing Class Placement (1 Question)
Standard: Barriers to Inclusion (1 Question)
Standard: Benefits to Inclusion (1 Question)
Standard: Final Section (2 Questions)

Page Break

Start of Block: General School Information

Q1 Are you replying to this survey?

- On behalf of your school (for example Principal, SENCO) (1)
- As an individual autism class teacher (2)

Display this question:
If Q1 = As an individual autism class teacher

Q2 How many years are you teaching in total?

- I am a newly qualified teacher (1)
- 1-5 (2)
- 6-10 (3)
- 11-20 (4)
- >20 (5)

Display this question:
If Q1 = As an individual autism class teacher

Q3 How many years are you teaching in an autism class?

- ○ This is my first year (1)
- ○ 2-5 (2)
- ○ 6-10 (3)
- ○ 11-20 (4)
- ○ >20 (5)

Q4 Select which of the following best describes your school category:

- ○ Urban DEIS Band 1 (1)
- ○ Urban DEIS Band 2 (2)
- ○ Rural DEIS (3)
- ○ Ex-Disadvantage (4)
- ○ Non-DEIS (5)
- ○ Unsure (6)

Q5 Select which of the following best describes the ethos of your school:

- Denominational (Catholic) (1)
- Denominational (Church of Ireland) (2)
- Denominational (Muslim, Jewish, another religious group) (3)
- Multi-denominational (CNS, ETNS) (4)
- Gaelscoil (5)
- Gaeltacht (6)
- Other (7)

Q6 How many students are enrolled in your school?

- Less than 50 (1)
- 51 - 100 (2)
- 101 - 200 (3)
- 201 - 300 (4)
- 301 - 500 (5)
- >500 (6)

End of Block: General School Information

Start of Block:

Q7 How many autism classes are currently in your school?

- 0 (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3-4 (4)
- 5 or more (5)

Skip To: End of Survey If Q7 = 0

End of Block:

Start of Block: General Information Around Classes

Q8 Are you aware of autistic students in your mainstream classes who do not have a placement in an autism class?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Don't know (3)

Q9 Thinking only of the students enrolled in the autism class, do they spend time in their mainstream classroom?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- I don't know (4)

Q10 How important do you think it is that students from the autism classes have time with their mainstream peers?

- ○ Not at all important (5)
- ○ Slightly important (6)
- ○ Moderately important (7)
- ○ Very important (8)
- ○ Extremely important (9)

Q11 From the list below, select who you think has the greatest decision-making power in relation to a learner's placement in a mainstream classroom?

- ○ The autism class teacher (1)
- ○ The mainstream teacher (2)
- ○ Both teachers who work with the student jointly (3)
- ○ Whole team decision - all school staff working with student (7)
- ○ School management team (9)
- ○ The individual student (4)
- ○ Student, parents and school staff (8)
- ○ Parents (5)
- ○ Not applicable (6)

Q12 If integration can be defined as children being in a mainstream class with no changes to the environment or curriculum, and inclusion as children being included with reasonable accommodations, how would you describe your school's approach?

- ○ We integrate autistic students into mainstream classes (1)
- ○ We include autistic students into mainstream classes (2)
- ○ Depends on the teachers (3)
- ○ Depends on the students (4)
- ○ Don't know (5)

Q13 How is inclusion/integration time in mainstream classes decided? Please choose the statement which fits best:

- ○ Not applicable (1)
- ○ It is student led - they choose the subjects (2)
- ○ It is teacher led - consideration needs to be given to staffing and timetabling (3)
- ○ It is teacher led - individual strengths and needs of the student are considered (4)
- ○ It is guided by professionals working with the student (5)
- ○ It is guided by the parents (6)
- ○ It is guided by the Principal/senior management team (7)

Q14 As part of an autism class placement the student may have a Student Support Plan (SSP) or Individual Education Plan (IEP), how often is it reviewed?

- ○ We don't use them (1)
- ○ Once a year (2)
- ○ Twice a year (3)
- ○ Termly (4)
- ○ Don't know (5)

Q15 The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) recommend that the autism class placement is reviewed annually. Do you build in an annual placement review?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)
- ○ Sometimes (3)
- ○ I was unaware of this recommendation (4)

End of Block: General Information Around Classes

Start of Block: Opinions Influencing Class Placement

Display this question:
If Q15 = Yes
Or Q15 = Sometimes

Q16 When you are reviewing the class placement, rate the importance of each of the following opinions:

	Not at all important (1)	Slightly important (2)	Moderately important (3)	Very important (4)	Extremely important (5)
Principal (6)		○	○		○
Autism Class Teacher (7)		○	○		○
Parents/Carers of Students (8)		○	○		○
Student (4)		○	○		○
Any external professionals working with the student (5)		○	○		○

End of Block: Opinions Influencing Class Placement

Start of Block: Factors Influencing Class Placement

Display this question:

If Q15 = Yes

Or Q15 = Sometimes

Q17 When you are reviewing the class placement, rate how important you consider each of the following factors:

	Not a Factor (1)	Moderate Factor (2)	Major Factor (3)	Unsure (4)
Student Readiness (1)	○	○	○	○
Available supports in the mainstream class (2)	○	○	○	○
The need to make places available in the autism class (3)	○	○	○	○
The mainstream class that the student will be included in (5)	○	○	○	○
The student's preferences (6)	○	○	○	○
The parents' preferences (7)	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Factors Influencing Class Placement

Start of Block: Barriers to Inclusion

Q18 What are the barriers, if any to including students from the autism classes in mainstream classrooms? Rate how important you would consider each of the following:

	Not a Barrier (1)	Minor Barrier (2)	Moderate Barrier (3)	Strong Barrier (4)	Severe barrier (5)
The mainstream classroom sensory environment, for example, noise, lighting, lack of space etc (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Large mainstream class sizes (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Students from the autism class(es) being unable to meet curriculum targets (3)	○	○	○	○	○
Teachers being uncomfortable with including students from the autism class(es) (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Parents not wanting to lose their Childs autism class placement (5)	○	○	○	○	○
Lack of staff to support inclusion (6)	○	○	○	○	○
Autistic students being unable for the demands of the mainstream class (7)	○	○	○	○	○

The school has not yet formally planned for the inclusion of autism class students into mainstream class(es) (8)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Barriers to Inclusion

Start of Block: Benefits to Inclusion

Q19 What are the benefits, if any to including students from the autism classes in mainstream classrooms? Rate how important you would consider each of the following: A greater awareness of neurodiversity amongst staff

	Not a Benefit (1)	Minor Benefit (2)	Moderate Benefit (3)	Strong Benefit (4)
A greater awareness of neurodiversity amongst staff (1)	○	○	○	○
A greater awareness of neurodiversity amongst students (2)	○	○	○	○
Including students from the autism class promotes a more diverse classroom where novel approaches to learning and teaching are encouraged (3)	○	○	○	○
Including students from the autism class is more reflective of society in general (5)	○	○	○	○
If students from the autism class are in mainstream, it allows mainstream students to access the space in the autism class(es) (10)	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Benefits to Inclusion

Start of Block: Final Section

Q20 Thank you for completing the survey. Please feel free to provide any further information you wish to be included:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q21 If you, or your school, would be interested in participating in Phase 2 of this research please contact: yvonne.hodgins4@mail.dcu.ie Please note that an expression of interest does not compel you to participate further. Thank you.

_____

End of Block: Final Section

Appendix F: Ten Criteria for Ensuring Quality in Mixed Method Research

Criterion (End Goal)	Description	Relevance to this Research
Validity	As mixed method research (MMR) is not a quantitative piece of research followed by a qualitative element, validity must be viewed through a different lens. It has been postulated by researchers that legitimation is a more suitable way of viewing validity (Onwuegbuzie and Johnson, 2006), but also that legitimacy, truthfulness, rightness and understanding (Habermas, 1979; Long, 2017) play an integral role. The data measured what it aimed to measure, with analysis undertaken whilst acknowledging researcher bias and prior knowledge. Results were not interpreted with the aim of confirming predetermined theories.	Phase One of this research provided data on review of placements; whose voices were important in decision-making and benefits and barriers to inclusion as seen through the lens of school staff with experience of autism classes. Phase Two used this information to interrogate multiple stakeholder attitudes around these issues drawing on both the data gained from the quantitative phase and the researchers' knowledge and experience. As there is an absence of research in this particular area, the questions in Phase Two were created in order to deepen our understanding of current practice as opposed to confirming predetermined codes and themes. The data has both dependability and credibility because it draws upon two types of data collection and the knowledge of both the stakeholders and the researcher.
Reliability	Reliability refers to how easily and accurately results can be replicated. This is easier to test in quantitative research – if a questionnaire is issued again to a different cohort of participants with similar experiences it should yield the	The reliability of this research was checked in two ways. Both phases were piloted ahead of the main research in order to check for clarity of language and relevance of questions. While reliability more often

	same results. Reliability in qualitative research, by these criteria, would be harder to obtain. However, when thinking of reliability in terms of stability or trustworthiness, 'parallel forms' and inter-rater then it can be shown to exist in qualitative data too. In other words, if the same questions had been asked on a different day, in a different school by a different interviewer the results be largely the same and interpretable in the same way.	refers to quantitative data, as multiple stakeholders from each group were questioned, reliability in terms of the same questions being given and similar answers being received was shown. There were marked similarities in responses in each of the separate stakeholder groups despite the educational settings being different from each other; the teachers having different years of teaching experience and the parents having different children.
Worthy Topic	Good research in whichever form is "relevant, timely, significant, interesting or evocative" (Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017) with "educative authenticity" (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).	This research is worthy as it is an area in which tensions between Irish legislation and international policy are divergent. The research also highlighted that autistic learners are not being included in decision-making about their educational placements in any way. Furthermore, their voices are rarely included in any educational experience raising issues for rights-based education and the enactment of inclusive educational practice.
Rich Rigour	If quantitative research is valued for its precision then qualitative is valued for the abundance and complexity of its data. Good MMR will demonstrate both. In order to show rigour the researcher must consider: the amount of data is sufficient to support claims and findings; the	There was a large sample size for Phase One of the data collection (*n*=189) encompassing a wide geographical spread of schools and variety of size. There was a sizeable amount of qualitative data gathered for Phase Two – saturation point was reached

	sample group are appropriately chosen; researcher procedures are appropriate and considered; enough time given to data collection.	with each of the stakeholder groups (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). The sample group for Phase One were purposively chosen – schools had to have at least one autism class. As the survey asked about autism classes any other group would not be relevant. The procedures were given extensive though and consideration as has been detailed extensively in this chapter. The data was collected over a period of months (January – June) to allow for school timetable variability and sufficient time for transcriptions to be accurately reported.
Sincerity	Sincerity relates to the reflexivity; honesty; transparency and data auditing practices of the researcher. In order to have a high quality of research, it must be demonstrated that the researchers are honest and sincere not only about aspects of the research that were successful but also about its shortcomings and indeed the failures of the researcher themselves.	NVIVO™ 15 software was used to store and organise the qualitative data. The data auditing can clearly be tracked from the initial recording, through transcription, initial coding, theme generation and the multiple iterations of these coding's and theme generations and refinements that occurred. This process was cyclical and took months to complete. A research journal also allowed for reflective and reflexive practice.
Credibility	This mixed method research from a pragmatist perspective lent itself to the criteria of credibility as it was designed from multiple contestations and constructions depending on the knowledge and experiences of both the	Learners, parents, teachers and principals were included in the interviews in order to ensure credibility. There was a range of experience in the teaching staff from newly qualified teachers to teachers with more

	participants and those involved in dissection of the data. Furthermore the Lundy Framework underpinning this particular research provided the space and choice around influence and audience to heighten and ensure research credibility.	than fifteen years of experience. Similarly principals had different levels of experience both personally and professionally. Some parents had more than one autistic child, and some had other children. The learners themselves ranged in age and with their communicative preferences.
Resonance	While resonance is often attributed solely to qualitative research and report writing, it can equally – with consideration – be applied to the reporting of quantitative data within a mixed method framework. Tracy (2010) defines resonance as research practice which has aesthetic merit and also transferability. To clarify, the text should be written in a way that is appealing to read and its content should be evocative and significant – what could be described as moving the heart, tummy and head (Bochner, 2000).	It was important when writing up this research that it happened in a way that was not academically dense. It is difficult to follow the story of an educational piece of research if the language is overly technical or cannot be linked back to practice that any individual is familiar with. Educational research will be implemented by teachers for the benefits of their learners if it is accessible, practical and not onerous. The hope is that teachers will appreciate the sense of the suggested PAIR framework (Chapter Six) and understand that it will improve the educational experience of their learners while ensuring their pedagogy is rights-based.
Significant Contribution	All research – regardless of methodology – aims to make a significant contribution either by extending; deepening or introducing knowledge that was previously unknown. This research aims to make a significant contribution by	As will be detailed in length and the discussion chapter, there were many significant contributions to knowledge from this research. Learners are not meaningfully included in decision-making around autism class placement. Furthermore, learners voices are rarely

	addressing the lacuna of research containing autistic voice in decision-making around class placement.	elicited when deciding on educational experience. There are clear gaps between policy and policy enactment, and in the rights of learners and their opportunities to exercise those rights.
Ethics	Ethical considerations have previously been discussed. When working with any stakeholder groups, but particularly children ethical considerations must be to the fore. Children are vulnerable by virtue of both age, stage and power imbalance (Abrar and Sidik, 2019; BERA, 2024).	The ethical considerations for this piece of research were lengthy. There is a huge responsibility when working with children to ensure that no harm is done and that the experience should either be neutral or positive. While the materials were co-created with an autistic child, they were also piloted with a larger group of children and with adults who had extensive experience working with autistic learners. Throughout the research it was prudent to err on the side of caution. (See Ethical Considerations section). Materials were based on research best practice.
Meaningful Coherence	While Tracy (2010, 2017) makes the argument for qualitative data showing meaningful coherence, the argument could equally be made that all research should be meaningfully coherent. Research must set out a clear pathway, follow that path and discuss honestly the positive and negatives of that approach and the results gained. The tapestry of a research project shows respect to participants by spending time and reflection on all types of	While the production of the Phase One results took a number of weeks due to releasing the survey; reminder emails and setting a closing date, the cyclical nature of the qualitative data coding, theming, refining both codes and themes repeatedly took months. As mentioned previously, the writing and re-writing of the Findings Chapter allowed for weaving detail into the tapestry of the data story, before reflection and then

	data gained. The telling of the data story in a meaningfully coherent way could be argued encapsulates all of these criteria for producing quality mixed method research.	further detail woven in. Even moving between different formats of the transcriptions – audio, printed on paper and digital/on-screen – brought about increased reflection and reflexivity.

(Tracy, 2010; Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018)

Appendix G: Plain Language Statement for Questionnaires

Dublin City University

Plain Language Statement for Participation in Questionnaire

A Mixed Methods Study of Inclusive Practices in Schools With Autism Special Classes Using the Voice of Stakeholders

Principal Investigator: Dr Aoife Brennan: aoife.brennan@dcu.ie 01-700906

Investigators: Dr Paula Lehane: paula.lehane@dcu.ie Christina O'Keeffe christina.okeeffe@dcu.ie Yvonne Hodgins yvonne.hodgins4@mail.dcu.ie

Dear Participant,

I am a Doctor of Education (EdD) third year student at Dublin City University (DCU). I am researching inclusive practices in autism classes in primary schools in Ireland specifically around special class placement. I am seeking to explore placement practices across primary schools in Ireland firstly by asking school staff of their experiences. The next phase of the research will be to interview school staff; parents/carers of learners in autism classes and learners themselves about their autism class placement and how schools develop inclusive practices.

Details of what involvement in the questionnaire will require:

Every school has been issued with a questionnaire which asks about their autism class(es). The questionnaire can be completed on a laptop, tablet or phone and asks a number of questions about how the learners from the autism classes mix with their mainstream peers; how this time is decided and the barriers and benefits to including learners from the special classes in mainstream. The questionnaire should only take around 10 minutes to complete.

The link has been sent by email, but is included below for ease of access:

https://dcusurveys.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cBVlkkW9MAAAKj4



At the end of the questionnaire, you will be asked if your school would like to participate in the second phase of the research. The second phase comprises of the researcher (Yvonne Hodgins) speaking with learners from the autism classes. There is also an option for school staff and/or parents to be interviewed. These interviews will be on the topic of autism class placement and inclusive practices. The adult interviews may last up to an hour; interviews with the students should last less than 30 minutes.

Expressions of interest about the second phase of the study does not commit you to participate.

Potential risks to participants from involvement in the Research Study

The stated level of risk is minimal as the risk to participants will not normally exceed those normally experienced by individuals participating in interviews.

Benefits (direct or indirect) to participants from involvement in the Research Study

Participation in this research may benefit participants directly by offering them an opportunity to have experiences around inclusive practice and special class placement heard.

Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.

The DCU research team will access the data for the purpose of undertaking the research. All data collected will be kept confidential. Participant data will be stored in a password protected Google Drive folder. Only the DCU researchers will have access to the school names of the participants in this questionnaire, and only if the school has requested information about the second phase of the research. The data supplied is subject to the established legal limitations on confidentiality.

The outcomes of this research may be disseminated at national conference presentations and may appear in research publications. All data will be anonymized by the research team before disseminating this research at presentations and in publications.

Advice as to whether or not data is to be destroyed after a minimum period.

All data collected will be anonymised and subsequently stored for two years by the Principal Investigator. The data will then be destroyed and permanently deleted by the Principal Investigator.

Statement that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary.

If participants choose not to take part in this questionnaire, there will be no consequences. Participants do not need to provide any reason for choosing not to take part. They can withdraw at any stage if they feel in any way uncomfortable about their participation and any data that has been provided will not be used in this research study. Participants do not need to provide any reason for withdrawing from this study and there will be no consequences for withdrawing.

Research Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this research study has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

If you require more information, please feel free to contact me at the e-mail address or phone number below.

Yours sincerely,

Yvonne Hodgins
yvonne.hodgins4@mail.dcu.ie
087-2707095

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

The Secretary, Dublin City University Ethics Committee, C/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Telephone 01-7008000

Appendix H: Sample Adult Participant Information Sheet

Dublin City University

Participant Information Sheet for School Staff

A Mixed Methods Study of Inclusive Practices in Schools With Autism Special Classes Using the Voice of Stakeholders

Principal Investigators: Dr Aoife Brennan: aoife.brennan@dcu.ie 01-700906; Dr Paula Lehane: paula.lehane@dcu.ie Christina O'Keeffe christina.okeeffe@dcu.ie

Researcher: Yvonne Hodgins yvonne.hodgins4@mail.dcu.ie

Dear Principal,

I am a Doctor of Education (EdD) third year student at Dublin City University (DCU). I am researching inclusive practices in autism classes in primary schools in Ireland specifically around special class placement. I am seeking to explore placement practices across primary schools in Ireland firstly by asking school staff of their experiences. The next phase of the research will be to interview school staff; parents/carers of learners in autism classes and learners themselves about their autism class placement and how schools develop inclusive practices.

Details of what involvement in the Research Study will require:

Following completion of the school questionnaire, your school has volunteered to participate in this Research Study. The second phase comprises of the researcher (Yvonne Hodgins) speaking with learners from the autism classes. There is also an option for school staff and/or parents to be interviewed. These interviews will be on the topic of autism class placement and inclusive practices. The adult interviews may last up to an hour; interviews with the students should last less than 30 minutes. The researcher will spend some time in the classroom so that the children are familiar with her. When the children are comfortable, and with a member of staff present at all times, we will individually be asked a number of questions about their school experience. The purpose of the interview, should the participants agreed to do it, is to collect more detailed information on the experience of moving between the special class and their mainstream class(es). If parents choose to participate they will be asked about their decision to enrol their child(ren) in an autism class and how they feel about that placement. School staff if they agree to be interviewed, will be asked about the movement of children between autism classes and mainstream classes, inclusive practices in the school, and the annual review process of autism class placement.

Potential risks to participants from involvement in the Research Study

The stated level of risk is minimal as the risk to participants will not normally exceed those normally experienced by individuals participating in interviews. Written consent will be sought at the outset of the study.

The interviews will take place in the school at a time that is convenient for participants. If, at any stage, during the study, participant no longer want to participate, the interview will be stopped immediately and the data gathering process will be terminated. Participants do not need to provide any reason for withdrawing and there will be no consequences for withdrawing. A copy of the interview schedule will be available, in advance, for participants on request.

Benefits (direct or indirect) to participants from involvement in the Research Study

Participation in this research may benefit participants directly by offering them an opportunity to have experiences around inclusive practice and special class placement heard.

Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.

The DCU research team will access the data for the purpose of undertaking the research. All data collected will be kept confidential. Participant data will be stored in a password protected Google Drive folder. Only the DCU researchers will have access to the school names of the participants in this Research Study and only if the school has requested information about the second phase of the research. The data supplied is subject to the established legal limitations on confidentiality. All data stored electronically, reported in research meetings, talks or publications will use codes and false names so that individual participants cannot be identified.

The outcomes of this research may be disseminated at national conference presentations and may appear in research publications. All data will be anonymized by the research team before disseminating this research at presentations and in publications.

Advice as to whether or not data is to be destroyed after a minimum period.

All data collected will be anonymised and subsequently stored for three years by the Researcher. The data will then be destroyed and permanently deleted by the Researcher.

Statement that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary.

If participants choose not to take part in this Research Study there will be no consequences. Participants do not need to provide any reason for choosing not to take part. They can withdraw at any stage if they feel in any way uncomfortable about their participation and any data that has been provided will not be used in this research study. Participants do not need to provide any reason for withdrawing from this study and there will be no consequences for withdrawing.

Research Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this research study has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

If you require more information, please feel free to contact me at the e-mail address or phone number below.

Yours sincerely,

Yvonne Hodgins

Yvonne Hodgins
yvonne.hodgins4@mail.dcu.ie
087-2707095

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

The Secretary, Dublin City University Ethics Committee, C/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Telephone 01-7008000

Appendix I: Information Sheet/Plain Language Statement

Dublin City University

Participant Information Sheet for Board of Management

A Mixed Methods Study of Inclusive Practices in Schools With Autism Special Classes Using the Voice of Stakeholders

Principal Investigators: Dr Aoife Brennan: aoife.brennan@dcu.ie 01-700906; Dr Paula Lehane: paula.lehane@dcu.ie Christina O'Keeffe christina.okeeffe@dcu.ie

Researcher: Yvonne Hodgins yvonne.hodgins4@mail.dcu.ie

Dear Chairperson,

I am a Doctor of Education (EdD) third year student at Dublin City University (DCU). I am researching inclusive practices in autism classes in primary schools in Ireland specifically around special class placement. I am seeking to explore placement practices across primary schools in Ireland firstly by asking school staff of their experiences. The next phase of the research will be to interview school staff; parents/carers of learners in autism classes and learners themselves about their autism class placement and how schools develop inclusive practices.

Details of what involvement in the Research Study will require:

Following completion of the school questionnaire, your school has volunteered to participate in this Research Study. The second phase comprises of the researcher (Yvonne Hodgins) speaking with learners from the autism classes. There is also an option for school staff and/or parents to be interviewed. These interviews will be on the topic of autism class placement and inclusive practices. The adult interviews may last up to an hour; interviews with the students should last less than 30 minutes. The researcher will spend some time in the classroom so that the children are familiar with her. When the children are comfortable, and with a member of staff present at all times, students will individually be asked a number of questions about their school experience. The purpose of the interview, should the participants agreed to do it, is to collect more detailed information on the experience of moving between the special class and their mainstream class(es). If parents choose to participate they will be asked about their decision to enrol their child(ren) in an autism class and how they feel about that placement. School staff if they agree to be interviewed, will be asked about the movement of children between autism classes and mainstream classes, inclusive practices in the school, and the annual review process of autism class placement.

Potential risks to participants from involvement in the Research Study

The stated level of risk is minimal as the risk to participants will not normally exceed those normally experienced by individuals participating in interviews. Written consent will be sought at the outset of the study.

The interviews will take place in the school at a time that is convenient for participants. If, at any stage, during the study, participant no longer want to participate, the interview will be stopped immediately and the data gathering process will be terminated. Participants do not need to provide any reason for withdrawing and there will be no consequences for withdrawing. A copy of the interview schedule will be available, in advance, for participants on request.

Benefits (direct or indirect) to participants from involvement in the Research Study

Participation in this research may benefit participants directly by offering them an opportunity to have experiences around inclusive practice and special class placement heard.

Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.

The DCU research team will access the data for the purpose of undertaking the research. All data collected will be kept confidential. Participant data will be stored in a password protected Google Drive folder. Only the DCU researchers will have access to the school names of the participants in this Research Study and only if the school has requested information about the second phase of the research. The data supplied is subject to the established legal limitations on confidentiality. Audio recordings of interviews will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. All data stored electronically, reported in research meetings, talks or publications will use codes and false names so that individual participants cannot be identified.

The outcomes of this research may be disseminated at national conference presentations and may appear in research publications. All data will be anonymized by the research team before disseminating this research at presentations and in publications.

Advice as to whether or not data is to be destroyed after a minimum period.

All data collected will be anonymised and subsequently stored for three years by the Researcher. The data will then be destroyed and permanently deleted by the Researcher.

Statement that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary.

If participants choose not to take part in this Research Study there will be no consequences. Participants do not need to provide any reason for choosing not to take part. They can withdraw at any stage if they feel in any way uncomfortable about their participation and any data that has been provided will not be used in this research study. Participants do not need to provide any reason for withdrawing from this study and there will be no consequences for withdrawing.

Research Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this research study has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

If you require more information, please feel free to contact me at the e-mail address or phone number below.

Yours sincerely,

Yvonne Hodgins

yvonne.hodgins4@mail.dcu.ie

087-2707095

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

The Secretary, Dublin City University Ethics Committee, C/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Telephone 01-7008000

Appendix J: Adult Participant Questions

Interview Schedule: Teaching Staff

Perspectives on Special Class Placements

- How often, if ever, do you write School Support Plans (SSP) or Individualised Education Plans (IEP) for your students?
- Are your targets usually around the curriculum or other things?
- Who decides what the targets are? Who attends the SSP/IEP meetings?
- Does your school review placements? Do you have a standard format for the reviews?
- How often does a student from the autism class fully transition to a mainstream placement?
- Do you know that in general very few students move from an autism class to a mainstream class in the education system, do you have any thoughts on why that is the case?
- Who should make the decision about which children are in autism classes?
- Are the students in the autism class ever consulted about how and where they spend their day in school?

Perspectives on Inclusive Practices in Schools

- What do you think an inclusive school is?
- How do you think your students should experience inclusion?
- Who decides when a child from the autism class is included in the mainstream class?
- What factors do you think about when including a child into mainstream?
- Are you given time to discuss inclusion with the class teacher?
- What, in your opinion, would make it easier to include students from the autism class into the mainstream?
- Do any of your mainstream students spend time in the autism class regardless of whether they have a special class recommendation or not?
- Do you think that all children should be able to access the autism classes if they need to?

Interview Schedule: Parents

Perspectives on Special Class Placements

- Tell me about your experience of enrolling XXXX in school?
- Why did you decide to enrol your child in an autism class?
- How often, if ever, are you consulted about School Support Plans (SSP) or Individualised Education Plans (IEP) for your child?
- Are the targets usually around the curriculum or other things?
- Who decides what the targets are? Who attends the SSP/IEP meetings?
- According to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) autism class placements should be reviewed annually, is that something that has been communicated to you or were you aware of that?
- Are you invited to participate in a review of your child's placement? Do you think it is important?
- Who should make the decision about which children are in autism classes?
- Is your child ever consulted about how and where they spend their day in school?

Perspectives on Inclusive Practices in Schools

- What do you think an inclusive school is?
- How do you think your child should experience inclusion?
- What do you feel about the amount of time your child spends in the autism class, and in the mainstream class?
- Who decides when your child is included in the mainstream class?
- What factors do you think are important when including your child into mainstream?
- Are you given time to discuss inclusion with the class teacher?
- What, in your opinion, would make it easier to include your child into the mainstream class?
- Would you agree with students from the mainstream classes spending time in the autism class regardless of whether they have a special class recommendation or not?
- Do you think that all children should be able to access the autism classes if they need to?

Appendix K: Information Leaflet for Participating Teachers

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

If you agree to participate in this research you will be sent consent forms to sign. You can withdraw your consent at any stage. (Please scan QR code below for further information).

You can be interviewed individually or as part of a staff team. You do not need to take part in an interview even if your school is participating.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Would you be happy to participate?

Please let me know if you are happy to participate. I can speak to you in school or via Zoom or Teams.

CONTACT DETAILS

yvonne.hodgins4@mail.dcu.ie
087-2707095

STUDENT PARTICIPATION RESEARCH

Information Leaflet for Participating Teachers

CONTACT DETAILS

yvonne.hodgins4@mail.dcu.ie
087-2707095



ABOUT ME

My name is Yvonne Hodgins and I am doing research looking at student voice around autism class placement as part of my Doctor of Education at DCU. I taught in an autism class for many years. I am currently seconded from my teaching job as an autism advisor.

This project aims to look at how we can include the voice of autistic learners in decision making about their class placement. **It will not change their current placement.**

If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me.

CONTACT DETAILS

yvonne.hodgins4@mail.dcu.ie
087-2707095

WHAT WILL I DO IF I CHOOSE TO TAKE PART?

STEP 1

Your school has agreed to participate in this research project. I would also like to speak to the autism class teachers and/or staff who make decisions about class placements (Principal, SENCO etc) to ask about their experiences.

STEP 2

I can talk to school staff individually, as part of a team or not at all if you would prefer not to participate. Please scan the QR code for a list of possible questions.

STEP 3

The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. You can ask to see the transcription.

STEP 4

A summary of the de-identified responses will be provided in the research, and will be provided to all schools. It is hoped that the schools will be able to implement some of the children's suggestions.

WHAT ARE THE RESEARCH STEPS?

- **School volunteers to join the research**

  Your school has already completed a questionnaire about autism classes and volunteered for Phase 2 of the research.

- **BOM consent**

  Full details of the research (including ethical clearance) has been approved by the school's Board of Management.

- **Information sent to participants**

  This leaflet gives a brief overview of the research including questions you may be asked. (Please scan QR codes).

- **Take part!**

  I will come to the school and have a chat with you, or with the teaching team who make decisions about autism class placements. This can be done in-person or online.

Appendix L: Information Leaflet for Parents

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

If you agree to your child participating in this research you will be sent consent forms to sign. You can withdraw your consent at any stage. (Please scan QR code below for further information).

While I require your consent for your child to participate, your child will need to agree to talk with me. If you consent but they do not want to that is ok - they do not need to talk to me. If you do not consent, I will not talk to them.

Your child will have a familiar adult with them at all times. They can take a break or stop the interview at any stage.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Would you be happy for your child to participate?

Please let your child's school know you are happy for me to talk to your child or contact me directly

CONTACT DETAILS

yvonne.hodgins4@mail.dcu.ie
087-2707095

STUDENT PARTICIPATION RESEARCH

Parent Information Leaflet for Participating Students

CONTACT DETAILS

yvonne.hodgins4@mail.dcu.ie
087-2707095



ABOUT ME

My name is Yvonne Hodgins and I am doing research looking at student voice around autism class placement as part of my Doctor of Education at DCU. I taught in an autism class for many years. I am currently seconded from my teaching job as an autism advisor.

This project aims to look at how we can include the voice of autistic learners in decision making about their class placement. **It will not change their current placement.**

If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me.

CONTACT DETAILS

yvonne.hodgins4@mail.dcu.ie
087-2707095

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE FOR MY CHILD?

STEP 1

I will check in with your child's teacher to make sure communication preferences are taken into account; preferred visual supports are used and a familiar adult will stay with us.

STEP 2

I will talk with your child about their class.
Please scan the QR code for the types of questions I can ask.

STEP 3

The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. You and/or your child can ask to see the transcription.

STEP 4

A summary of all the children's de-identified responses will be provided in the research, and will be provided to all schools. It is hoped that the schools will be able to implement some of the children's suggestions.

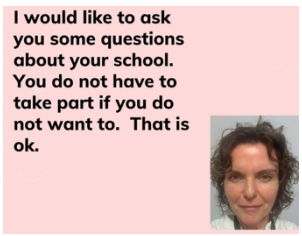
WHAT ARE THE STEPS?

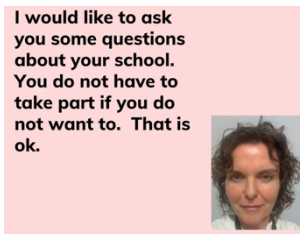
- **School volunteers to join the research**
  Your child's school has already completed a questionnaire about autism classes and volunteered for Phase 2 of the research.
- **BOM consent**
  Full details of the research (including ethical clearance) has been approved by the school's Board of Management.
- **Information sent to parents**
  This leaflet gives a brief overview of the research including questions your child may be asked. (Please scan QR codes).
- **Menu of communication preferences**
  I will contact the school to make sure the visual supports and familiar adult are tailored to your child's preferences.
- **Students take part**
  I will come to the school and have a chat with your child. They can stop at any stage.

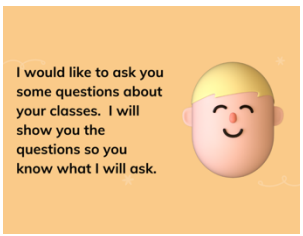
Appendix M: A Visitor to my School (Visual and Audio Presentation)

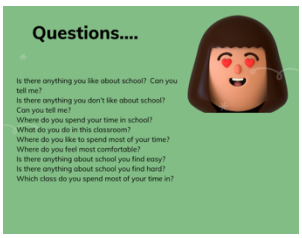




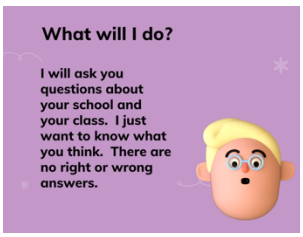


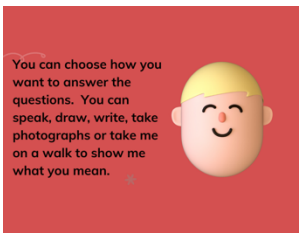






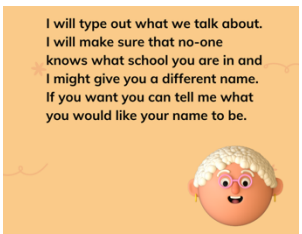


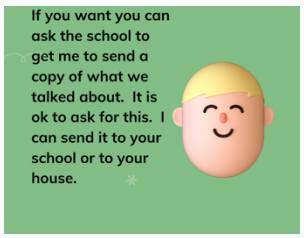




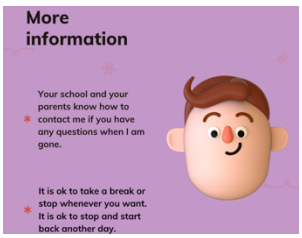


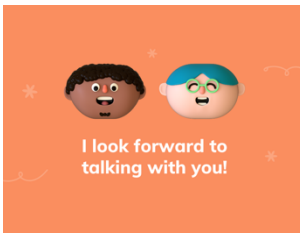




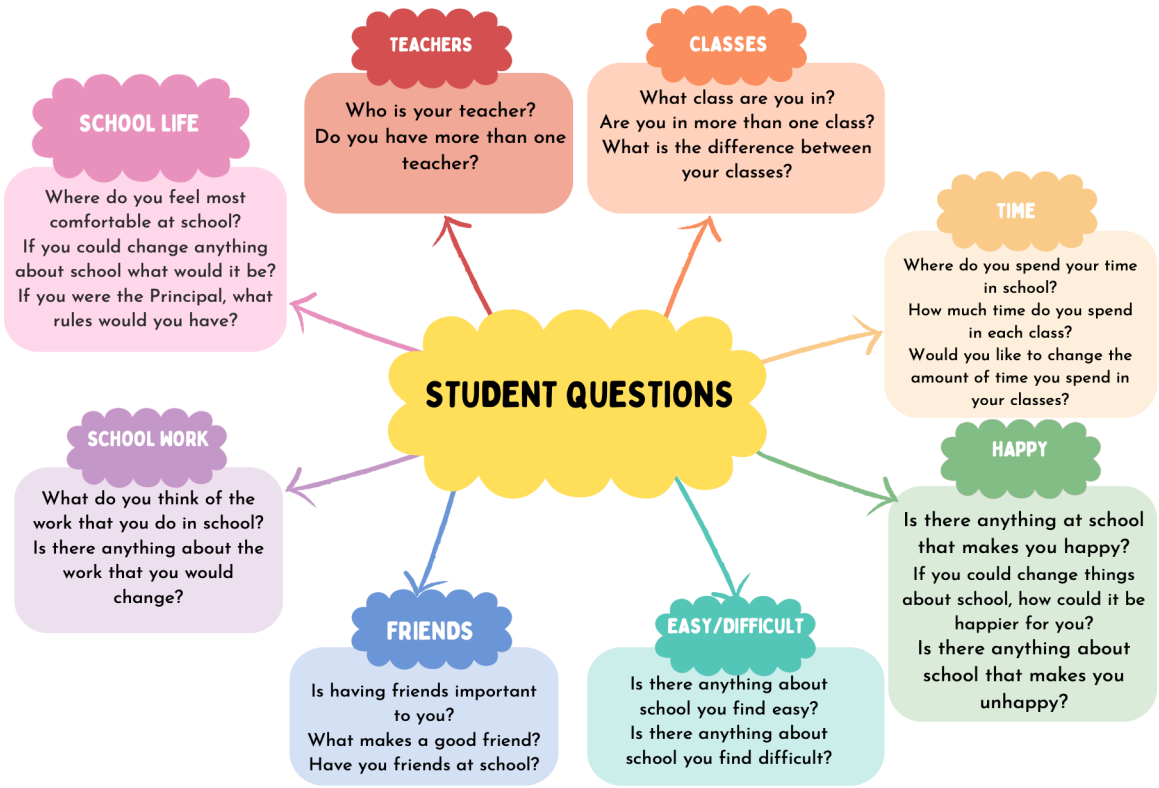




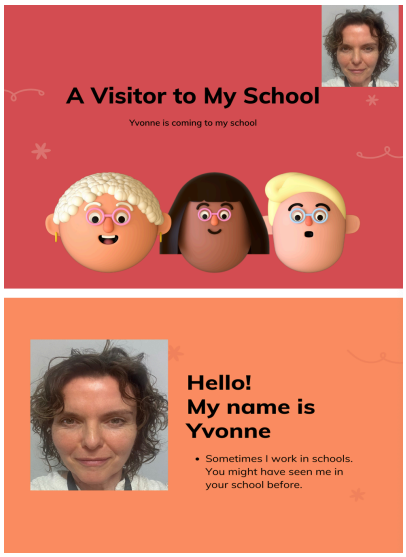


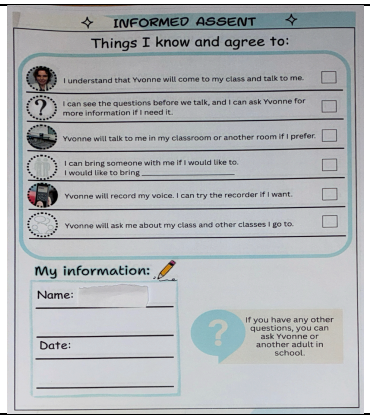


Appendix N: Student Questions

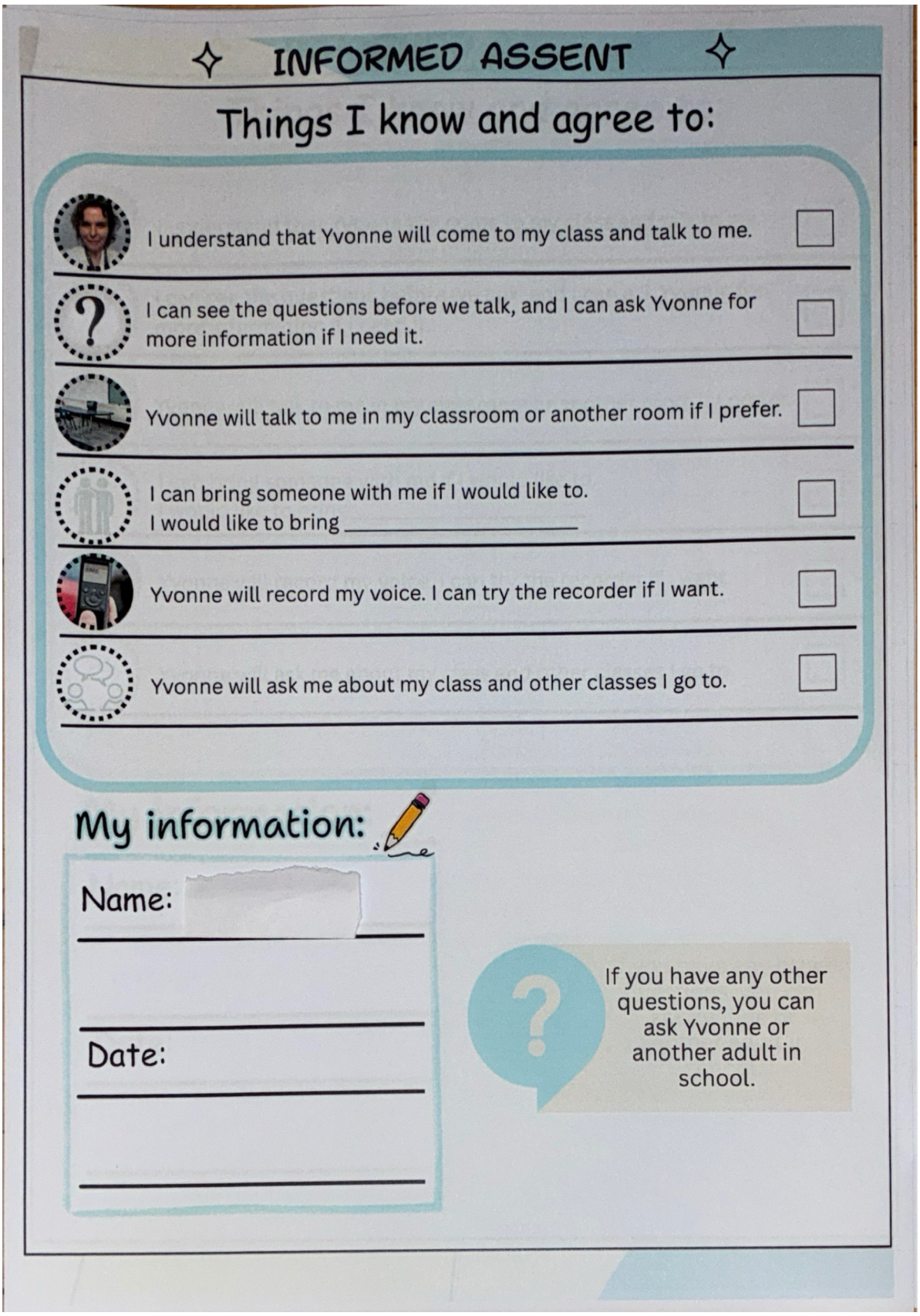


Appendix O:Considerations Given to the Well-Being of the Learners

What needed to be considered?	What steps were taken?	What was provided? What resources were needed?
As parents need to consent for their child(ren) essential information has to be provided for both, in an easily accessible way.	Information leaflets disseminated to all adults involved with the children to explain the aims of the research	Appendix J 
The learners (and their parents) may want to see and hear me ahead of the interviews. The research should be explained to the children in an accessible format. If the children disclose anything concerning, they should be informed that I may need to tell someone else.	A video presentation was sent to all parents of participating learners (via the class teachers) which could be accessed as a PowerPoint or through WhatsApp. Disclosure procedures were briefly explained.	Appendix L 
The researcher may be familiar to the children but will not be well-known. In addition, the interviews may not be taking place in the learners classroom.	A trusted adult, chosen by the children, could accompanied the children to the interview. Schools were asked ahead of time to make a member of staff available.	All schools provided a familiar room and adult for the children for the duration of the interviews. All children had a choice of adults and brought either a teacher or SNA if they wished.
It is imperative that the children are happy to participate and understand the purposes of the research – independent of whether parents have consented or not.	In addition to parental consent, all children were asked to assent to their participation. The assent form was filled at the start of each interview and prior to recording starting.	Appendix O

		
Children may assent but then change their mind; feel uncomfortable or just become tired or fed-up.	Children were assured they could remove their assent at any time.	Appendices 11 and 12 Children were provided with break cards; play and pause symbols. Trusted adults were also asked to intervene if they believed the child was ready to stop. The children were positioned nearest the door so they could leave.
Children may not remember what they talked about or their parents may want to know what was discussed.	All children, their teacher and their parents were offered transcripts of the interviews.	All learners, and their trusted adults, were given another copy of the information leaflet (as detailed above) with researcher contact details for transcripts.

Appendix P: Student Assent Form



INFORMED ASSENT

Things I know and agree to:

I understand that Yvonne will come to my class and talk to me. ☐

I can see the questions before we talk, and I can ask Yvonne for more information if I need it. ☐

Yvonne will talk to me in my classroom or another room if I prefer. ☐

I can bring someone with me if I would like to.
I would like to bring _____ ☐

Yvonne will record my voice. I can try the recorder if I want. ☐

Yvonne will ask me about my class and other classes I go to. ☐

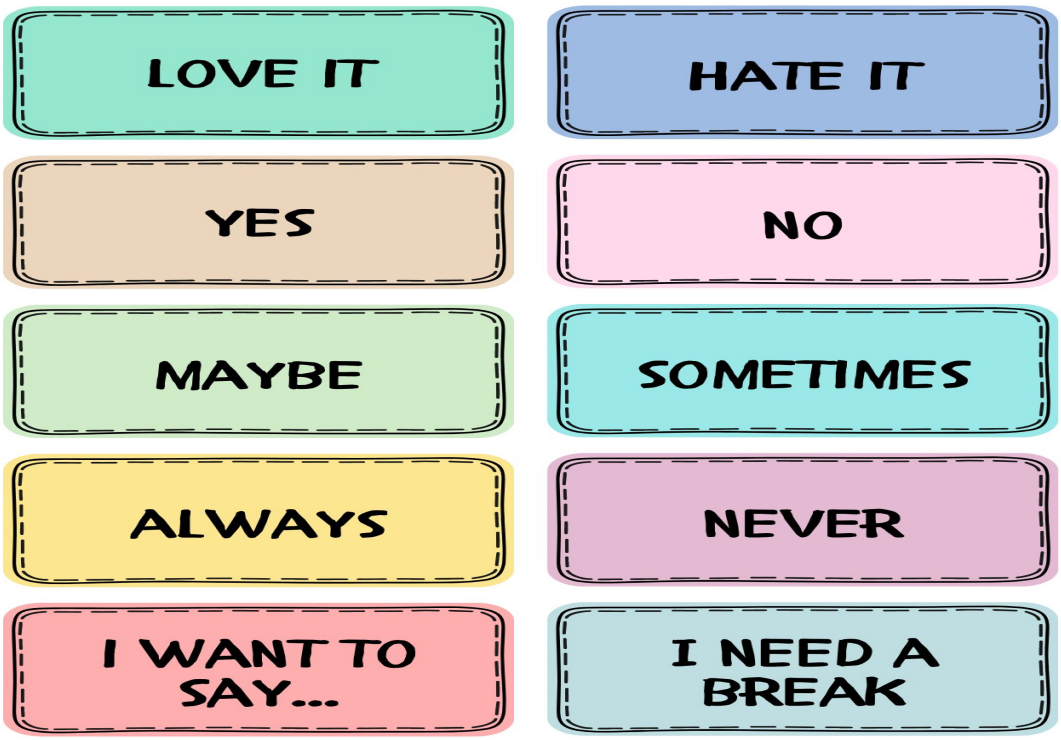
My information:

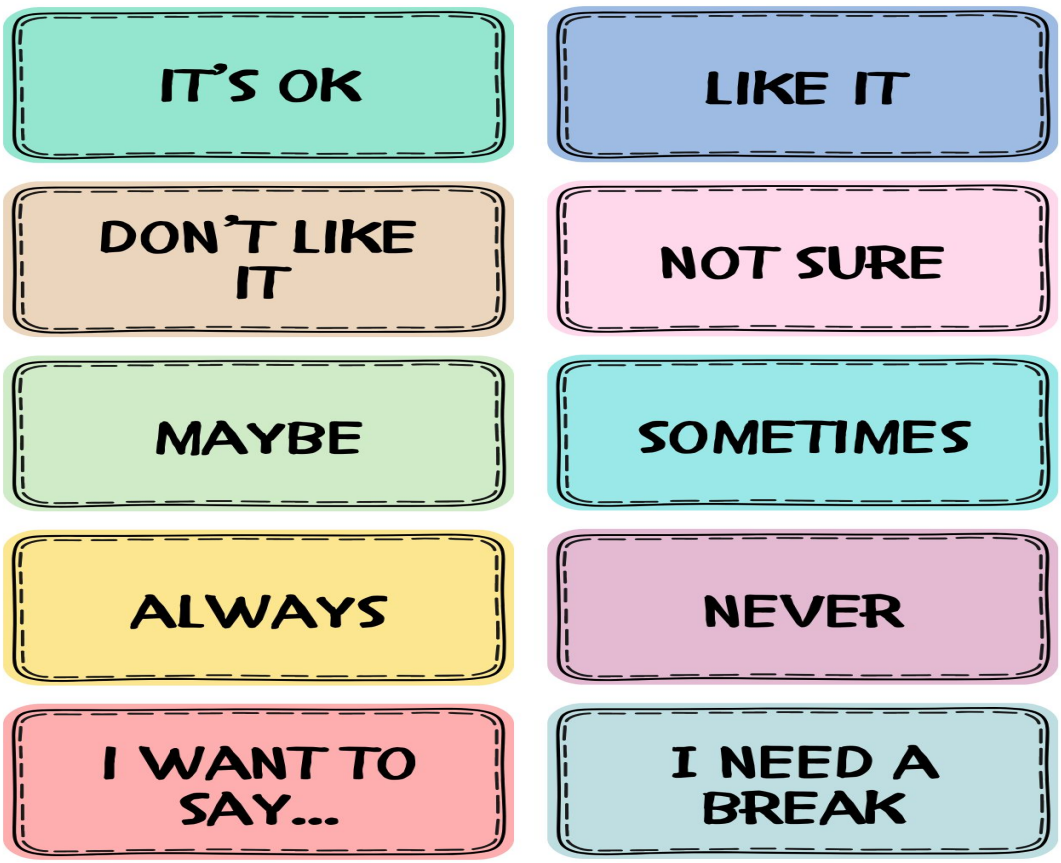
Name: [redacted]

Date:

If you have any other questions, you can ask Yvonne or another adult in school.

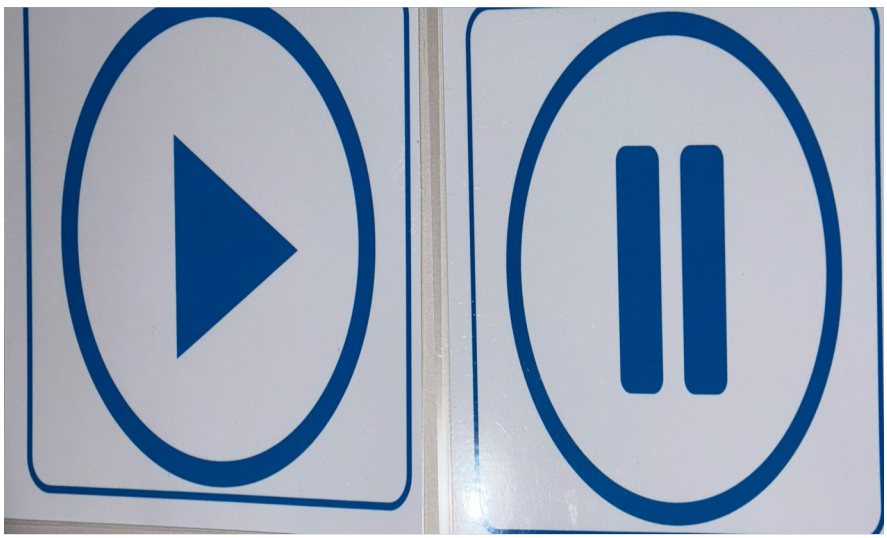
Appendix Q: Opinion Labels



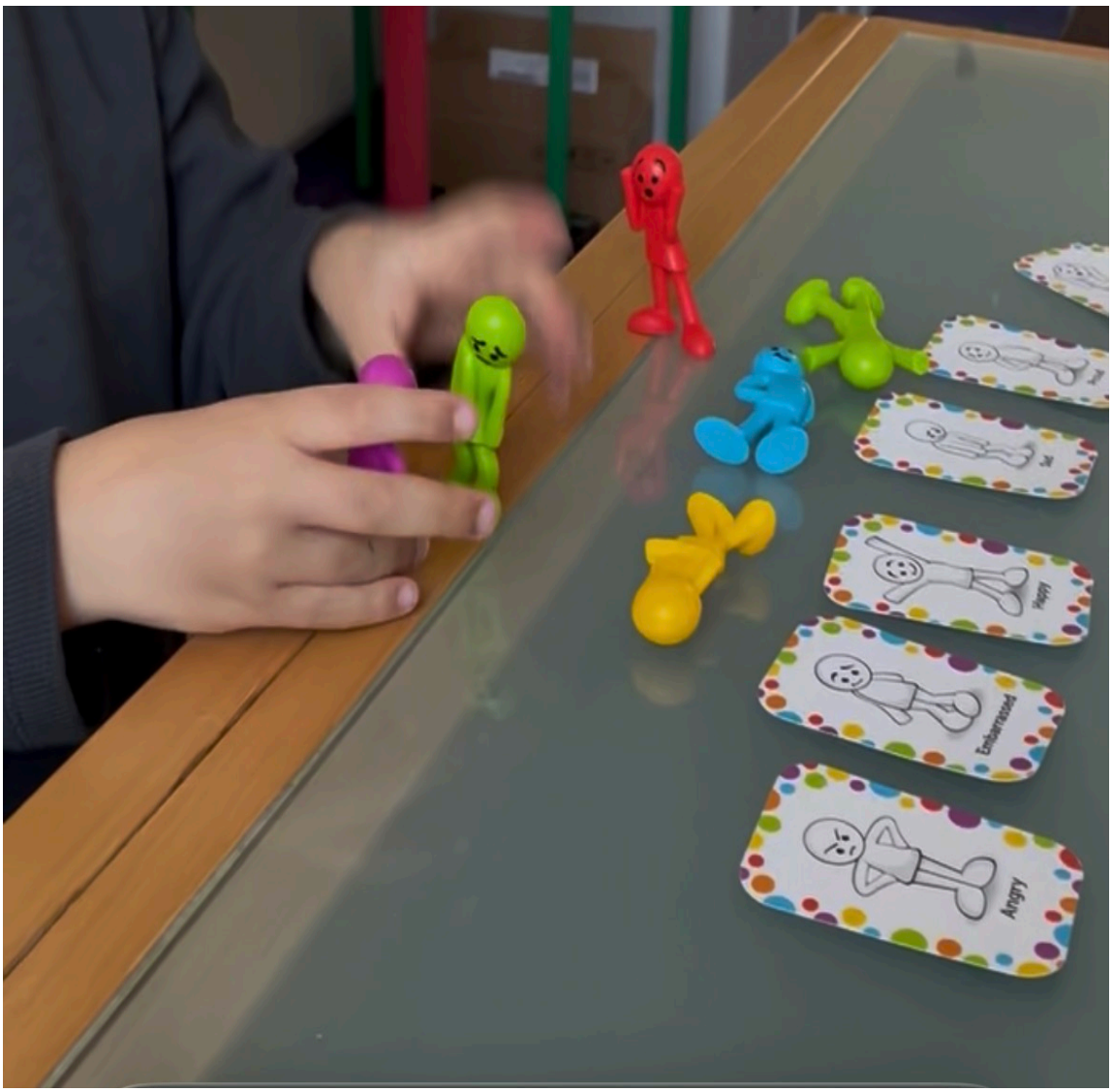


Appendix R: Answer Scaffolds

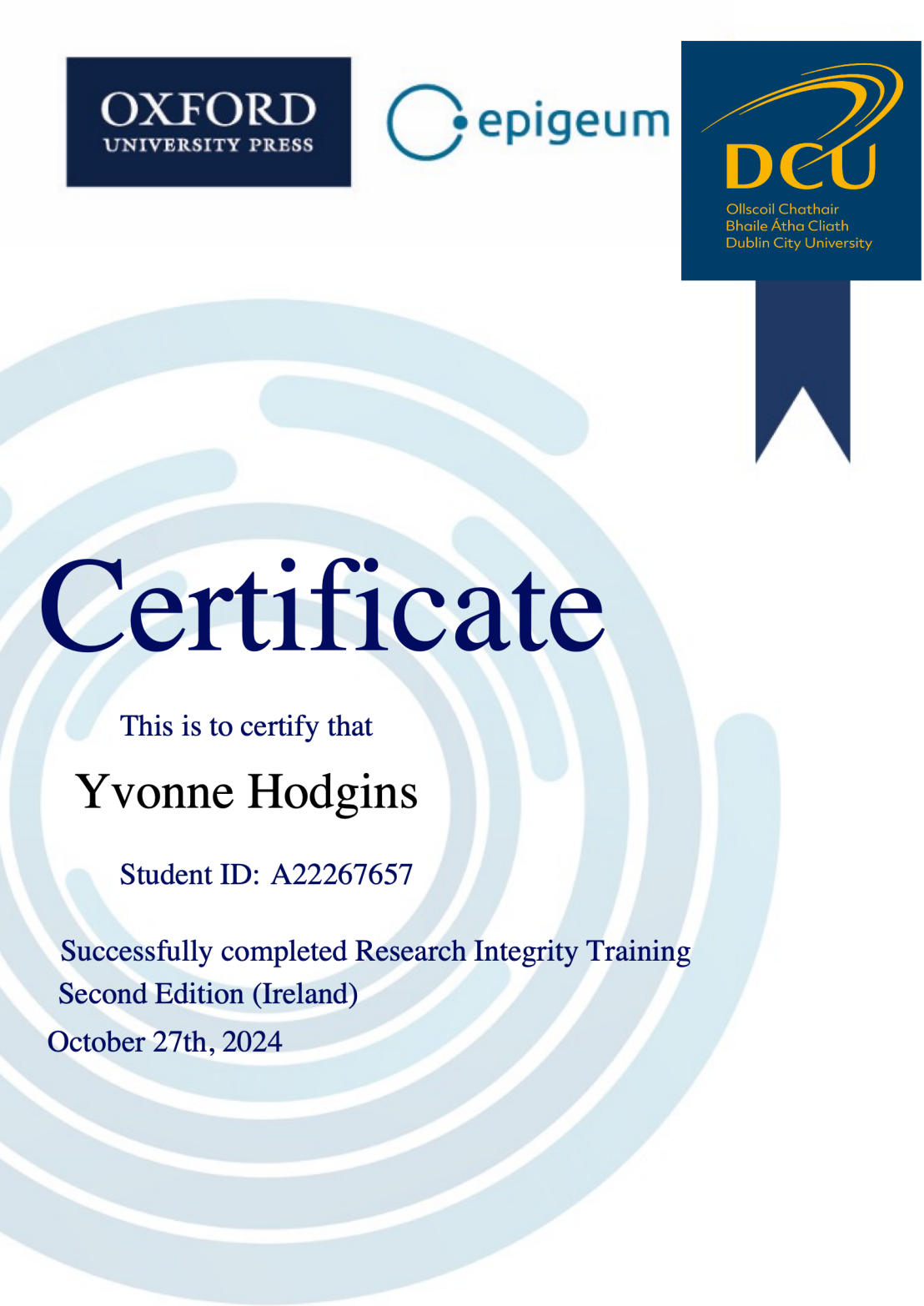




Appendix S: Emotions Figurines



Appendix T: Research Integrity Training Certificate



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Appendix U: DCU Research Ethics Approval

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

DCU

Aoife Brennan
School of Inclusive and Special Education

20th January 2025

REC Reference: **DCUREC/2024/224 (Expedited Review)**

Proposal Title: **A Mixed Methods Study of Inclusive Practices in Schools With Autism Special Classes Using the Voice of Stakeholders**

Applicant(s): Aoife Brennan, Paula Lehane, Christina O'Keeffe, Yvonne Hodgins

Dear Colleague(s),

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to its review by the committee and resting on the assumption of information accuracy and completeness, DCU REC is pleased to issue ethical approval for this research project. Please include reference to this approval in all materials used to recruit research participants.

Researchers are responsible for ensuring that the research project to which this ethical approval refers is carried out as specifically described in the application form. Should modifications to the research project be required at a later stage, researchers must submit a research amendment application form to REC for approval, prior to the implementation of modifications.

Please note that it is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that any other DCU compliance requirements relevant to the research project, such as those related to data protection, insurance, health and safety, or legal issues, are fully met in advance of initiating the project.

As part of DCU REC's ongoing monitoring process, a research progress report may be required. DCU REC will request this report from the PI as appropriate.

DCU REC wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

DCU
Research & Innovation

Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
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Dr Melrona Kirrane
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

Note: Please retain this approval letter for future publication purposes. Research students should include this letter as a thesis appendix.

Appendix V: Methods of Qualitative Enquiry

Approach	Description	Strengths	Suitable for this research?
Ethnography	This describes a cultural group how they work, their beliefs and the influences of power and behaviours on this group.	The researcher inhabits the environment of the participants and value is placed on the 'lived' experience.	No. Arguably, the learners could be viewed as a marginalised group, however, as is evidenced from discussions on the power dynamics the adult stakeholders could not.
Grounded theory	The intent of a grounded theory study is to move beyond description and to generate a theory.	This would allow the researcher to gather data and generate theory central to decision-making processes and inclusive educational experiences.	No. Data has already been gathered from Phase One of the research to inform this part (Phase Two) and generate questions and topics for discussion.
Narrative	A narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of a single individual describing an event or series of events chronologically connected.	Stakeholders could tell their stories of their own decision-making around autism classes, and in doing so have their voices heard.	No. This research wanted to examine the reasons for decision-making and inclusive practices, so the data pertinent to this research would not have been generated.
Phenomenology	Phenomenology describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived	By collecting multiple experiences of the one phenomena or concept. The data collected would all speak to issues	No, the description of the experience, while important, is not the focus of the research. The

	experiences of a concept or phenomenon.	around decision-making from multiple perspectives.	research focusses on the why and how, nit the what.
Case study	Case studies examine phenomenon in their real-life context. They can be single or multi-site; with varying numbers of participants. Case studies focus on processes and outcome rather than shared experiences or chronological narratives.	In this research it allowed for multiple stakeholders to be interviewed. This enabled the researcher to interrogate various participants views on decision-making for autistic learners, and how voices were elicited and facilitated. They are heuristic in that they facilitate learning and problem-solving around complex or multi-faceted situations.	Yes. While the findings may not be generalisable across the educational system, the depth and richness of the generated data across the four-stakeholder group will bridge the gap in knowledge that currently exists around how much input autistic learners are included in decision-making around their special class placements, and what their wider educational experience is.

(adapted from Creswell 2007, 2013)

Appendix W: Alternatives to Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Description	Rationale
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) – focuses on individual experiences and a deep analysis of them.	No. The stakeholder groups were chosen purposively to give a broad picture of the educational experiences of autistic learners.
Discourse Analysis – looks at how language constructs reality.	No. Many of the learners were not using language but were using photographs; drawings or gesture.
Qualitative Content Analysis – more akin to quantitative methods of data analysis in that the number of times content occurs is counted or categorized. Removes interpretation of gesture and non-verbal elements of communication.	No. Much of the data collected through the stakeholder interviews was gestural or communicated in a non-verbal manner.
Coding Reliability Thematic Analysis – requires inter-coder participation and looks for high reliability to reduce subjective biases.	No. Only the researcher was coding the interviews. The subjective knowledge that the researcher brought to the interpretation of the data was also valuable.
Codebook Thematic Analysis – codebook is defined ahead of the research in order to balance structure and flexibility.	No. Given the number of interviews and the different perspectives of the stakeholders coding was generated from the data obtained.
Template Analysis – this method uses both a mix of the hierarchical coding of codebook thematic analysis, but with increased flexibility.	No. No codes were predetermined, and the reflexive nature of RTA was a better fit due to the amount of data generated throughout the interviews – both spoken and not.

Appendix X: Example of Thematic Codebook Using NVIVO™ Software and RTA

Codes//Phases 2 and 3 – Coding and Generating Initial Themes

Name	Description	Sources	References
Annual Review of Placement	It is recommended by the Department of Education (DE) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) that an annual review of placement is undertaken for each student in an autism class. Between agreeing to be interviewed and the interview taking place a circular was issued by the DE (0023/2025) which formalised this procedure.	2	8
Attitudes to Autism or Neurodiversity	Not necessarily the autistic student's attitude to their own autism but any stated attitude by another participant in the research.	2	7
Breaks	Some of the students talk a lot about taking breaks, both where they like to go and what they like to do.	4	11
Child's Feelings About School - Parents Perception	Parents were asked how their children felt about coming to school and if they came to school easily.	4	10
Differences Noted in Child - Parents Perceptions	This code is about what the adults have noticed in the children that they perceive as differences or behaviours that other children do not like, and how they as parents have dealt with them.	5	18

Name	Description	Sources	References
Difficulties for Parents Navigating the System	This is any difficulty noted by the principal for any of the parents in terms of accessing services or trying to navigate their way through the system.	2	3
Difficulties That the Students Experienced	Any difficulty that the student talked about either within or out with school.	4	7
Emotional and Physical Health of Teachers	A few of the teachers spoke of the emotional and sometimes physical challenges of the job. A few reported feeling completely burned out and had asked for a transfer away from the autism class.	3	11
Feelings - Students Opinions	There were feelings Figures for the students to use if they preferred this mode of communication.	6	15
Focus of Targets	Teachers were asked what the priority learning areas were for their students in terms of setting targets - were they academic or more focused on social, emotional and communication goals (for example).	4	17
Friendships	This encompasses any mention of friendship - whether it is easy or difficult; whether the child has friends or not.	9	32
Frustration With the System	Both the financial implications of having an autistic child and the waiting lists to access services. The nature of the process is also spoken about as being complicated and hard to navigate.	5	16

Name	Description	Sources	References
Gut Feeling vs Professional Judgement	This is around the suitability of the autism class placement for some of the students from the viewpoint of school staff. Once a child has a recommendation and they are placed in the school, then they have their place.	2	3
Importance of Alternative Forms of Communication	These are comments about different types of communication or where a child may have been finding it difficult to communicate, and how other forms of communication have proved important.	3	3
Importance of Getting Things Wrong	This speaks to the wider issue of resilience in staff and the need for mistakes to be accepted as part of the process. It is not about things being right or wrong, but the school's ability to be able to adapt and change with the children.	2	4
Importance of Space	This is to do with the school environment - is there enough space? Is the space adequately or well-resourced?	2	4
Inclusion in the Mainstream Class - timing	This code is about how much time is spent in mainstream and the timetabling of that. Looks at the buildup of inclusion time just in terms of minutes.	11	35
Inclusion Kickback	Teachers whose class the autistic children are being included within can sometimes not fully accept this 'addition' to their class.	3	4

Name	Description	Sources	References
Initial Thoughts on Special Classes	Discussion around whether the choice to enrol in a autism class was a ‘simple’ choice or whether other considerations were considered.	4	8
Innovations Shown by Principals	There were a number of instances of Principals thinking differently about how to access services or additional help, or ways around the system which they have used to make things easier.	5	20
Lack of School Places	People talking about a lack of places for their children to go to school, and the amount of schools that they made applications to.	5	14
Links With Other Settings	The need for collaboration between autism class teachers and other school settings.	2	7
Loss of School Placement	Talk around moving children out of the autism class into mainstream full time - letting go of the autism class placement permanently.	6	8
Movement INTO Autism Classes	Some of the schools move children from the mainstream class into the autism class if the recommendation is there and the student is not thriving in the mainstream setting.	2	4
Moving Out of Autism Class	The question is asked ‘would you move your child into mainstream permanently and let go of the autism class placement?’. It was to gauge if the parents had thought or spoken about it - if it was something they hoped for.	9	23

Name	Description	Sources	References
Parental Opinion on School Choice	This was to assess their feelings and opinions about the school that their child(ren) were enrolled in. This is important as the child may not be in the local school OR it may have been the only school with an autism class place available.	3	5
Parental Worries	This was if parents expressed specific worries about their child, the future or general anxiety about how things were going presently or may work in the future.	5	6
Parents Target Priorities vs Teachers Priorities	Sometimes in the SSP meetings there was a difference between the staff and the parents as to what target priorities should be set.	4	20
Parents Thoughts on Autism	These comments may not be related to the diagnostic criteria for autism (or they may be) but include those that compare their own child with how they are compared to other autistic children.	8	18
Placement in Autism Class	Discussion on the reasons that a parent(should) may have chosen an autism class placement in a mainstream school rather than a mainstream place or a special school place.	5	12
Principal's Frustrations	Some of the Principals expressed different levels of frustration with different aspects of ‘managing’ their autism classes.	3	15

Research - EdD Thesis

Codes\\Phase 4 - Developing and Reviewing Themes

Name	Description	Sources	References
Autism		14	122
Emotional and Physical Health of Teachers	A few of the teachers spoke of the emotional and sometimes physical challenges of the job. A few reported feeling completely burned out and had asked for a transfer away from the autism class.	3	11
Health	This touches on the emotional and physical health of the teachers in the autism class. One teacher who had experienced an amount of physical attacks preferred not to be interviewed about it. Some of the other teachers had been assaulted but did not speak of it during the interview.	3	12
Initial Thoughts on Autism Classes	Discussion around whether the choice to enrol in a autism class was a ‘simple’ choice or whether other considerations were considered.	4	8
Preconceived Thoughts on Autism Classes	Expressed opinions of knowledge of autism classes before their child was enrolled.	3	5
Parental Worries	This was if parents expressed specific worries about their child, the future or general anxiety about how things were going presently or may work in the future.	5	6
Parental Worries and Anxieties	These are around a range of topics but highlight the on-going issues of future development too.	4	11
Parents Thoughts on Autism	These comments may not be related to the diagnostic criteria for autism (or they may be) but include those that compare their own child	8	18

Name	Description	Sources	References
	with how they are compared to other autistic children.		
Parents Thoughts on Autism	This may be thoughts about the class; how their child is or about their (the parents) understanding of autism.	6	21
Students Thoughts on Their Autism	Only one student spoke openly about being autistic. One other student spoke about his sister who is in the same autism class but didn't speak about their own autism.	2	11
Students Thoughts on Their Own Autism	Only one of the students spoke about his autism, while one other spoke about his sister's autism as they are in the same class.	2	15
Teacher's Thoughts on Autism Classes	This can be the teacher's own reflections on staying in or returning to the autism class after a break away.	1	9
Teacher Thoughts on Autism Classes	This is what the teacher thinks or feels about working in an autism class.	1	9
Teacher's Thoughts on Resilience	This is to do with pushing back a little on the students to help with their resilience and to cope with situations that are within their grasp but they may need a bit of 'scaffolding' to manage.	3	12
Student Resilience	None of the students mentioned resilience in respect of themselves. The adult stakeholders spoke of the importance of the students becoming resilient, and the length of time it takes to teach both resilience but also ways of managing stress and anxiety.	3	9
Teacher or Adult Stakeholder Resilience		1	3
Thoughts About Autism	This is a 'look back' or reflection on the decision to enrol a child in an	5	16

Name	Description	Sources	References
Classes After Enrolment	autism class after the child has been in school for a period of time.		
Autism Class After Enrolment	Benefits or barriers or students being in autism classes.	4	12
Time in the Autism Class - Parents Perception	This reflects what parents think that their children do in the autism class, or what the purpose of the autism class is.	6	18
How Long Will Student Be in Autism Class	Number of years, or duration of school placement.	2	3
What Happens in Autism Class	This is how different stakeholders perceive that time is spent in the autism class and - at a different level - points to attitudes towards autism and students' ability to manage in classes and social situations.	6	11
Variety of Students Within Autism Classes	Staff spoke about the difference and diversity of need within their classrooms and how difficult this could be to manage emotionally, physically, sensorily and in terms of resources.	8	13
Age Range	Actual age range in chronological years, but also in developmental terms.	2	2
Range of Needs	Variety of needs and individual profiles of the students in the autism classes.	7	11
Inclusion		12	116
Attitudes to Autism or Neurodiversity	Not necessarily the autistic students attitude to their own autism but any stated attitude by another participant in the research.	2	7
Neurodiversity and Autism	Not necessarily the autistic students attitude to their own autism but any stated attitude by another participant in the research.	2	9
Inclusion in the Mainstream	This code is about how much time is spent in mainstream and the	11	35

Name	Description	Sources	References
Class - timing	timetabling of that. Looks at the build-up of inclusion time just in terms of minutes.		
Parents Views	This code is about how much time is spent in mainstream and the timetabling of that. Looks at the build-up of inclusion time just in terms of minutes but also the purpose of mainstream.	4	11
School Staff Views	This code is about how much time is spent in mainstream and the timetabling of that. Looks at the build-up of inclusion time just in terms of minutes.	7	21
Inclusion Kickback	Teachers whose class the autistic children are being included within can sometimes not fully accept this ‘addition’ to their class.	3	4
Staff Difficulties	There were different views amongst the staff as to the value of inclusion; the amount of support they received from mainstream colleagues or a confusion about the purpose of inclusion.	3	7
Links With Other Settings	The need for collaboration between autism class teachers and other school settings.	2	7
Special Schools	Some staff felt that children would benefit from a different placement - either in a special school or how they would manage in mainstream classes. Autism class staff were aware that they did not always fully understand what happened in alternative settings.	2	10
Parents Target Priorities vs Teachers Priorities	Sometimes in the SSP meetings there was a difference between the staff and the parents as to what target priorities should be set.	4	20
Target Priorities	Students should be asked what their target priorities are - one teacher spoke about asking their students but in an open question about target	4	12

Name	Description	Sources	References
	setting it was always reported to be a conversation between the parents and the teachers.		
Reverse Inclusion	This is either to benefit children from the mainstream who benefit from the smaller numbers in the autism class OR to give the children in the autism class a wider social experience but in the comfort of their own familiar surroundings.	3	6
Children From Mainstream Who Need Time in Autism Class	Most schools allow children from the mainstream to spend time in the autism classes as and when is needed - this is one form of reverse inclusion.	2	3
Reverse Inclusion for Social Mixing	Students from the autism classes are often the ones who have to make all the changes and adaptations. Sometimes it is easier for the students to have inclusion in their own classes instead of having to adapt to a mainstream class.	3	3
School View on Parents Views of Inclusion	The school and parents are often at odds about how much time the student should spend in the mainstream setting. This code is the schools view on that.	5	9
Inclusion - Parents vs School	There is sometimes a difference in how and why inclusion happens.	4	10
Teacher Best Practice	Some of the procedures that the teachers talked about would have been quite innovative or do not happen frequently across a number of schools in my experience.	5	16
Innovations	This speaks to practises that school staff have adopted or adapted in order to best meet the needs of their students.	3	11
Value of Autism Class	Directly and explicitly expressed value of autism class setting.	2	5

Name	Description	Sources	References
Autism Class Positives	Any view expressed of the value of an autism class whether it be to the individual students; to the resourcing of the school or to the wider school community.	1	3
Value of Inclusion	Inclusion in mainstream is sometimes thought of as the ultimate goal, but some of the teachers spoke about the value of this and reflecting on their own practices of sending children to mainstream settings.	3	7
Inclusion vs Integration	Inclusion in mainstream is sometimes thought of as the ultimate goal, but some of the teachers spoke about the value of this and reflecting on their own practices of sending children to mainstream settings.	3	7
Key Stakeholders		17	163
Differences Noted in Child - Parents Perceptions	This code is about what the adults have noticed in the children that they perceive as differences or behaviours that other children do not like, and how they as parents have dealt with them.	5	18
Differences	This is any example of an adult noting a difference in the autistic child when comparing them to other students or siblings.	3	13
Difficulties That the Students Experienced	Any difficulty that the student talked about either within or out with school.	4	7
Student Voice on Difficulties	Some of the students stated some aspects of school was difficult for them - some avoided answering questions which would give a negative response.	4	10
Importance of Getting Things Wrong	This speaks to the wider issue of resilience in staff and the need for mistakes to be accepted as part of the process. It is not about things being right or wrong, but the school’s ability to be able to adapt and	2	4

Name	Description	Sources	References
	change with the children.		
Trial, Error and Resilience	With no compulsory training before you open an autism class or teach in one, some staff highlighted the need to be permitted to get things wrong.	2	7
Principal's Frustrations	Some of the principals expressed different levels of frustration with different aspects of ‘managing’ their autism classes.	3	15
Principals Views	Anything that the principals expressed frustration about relating to the autism classes and the system in which they operate.	3	15
Relationship with SNAs	The dynamic in the classroom can be heavily influenced by the adult relationships in the room. Occasionally the SNAs can have a negative impact on the teacher or may fail to take direction. The SNAs were not interviewed as part of this research.	2	13
Teacher Relationships with SNAs	This relationship puts the teacher in a leadership role even though it wasn’t one they applied for and may be the most inexperienced in the setting.	2	16
School Relationships with Parents Whose Children Are in the Autism Class	Relationships were mentioned between staff and parents specifically in relation to the autism class setting.	8	41
Crucial Home School Communication	A unique relationship is required between home and school if transition between both settings is to be as smooth as possible.	8	38
Student Choice Around Activities	If there is any mention about a child being asked their opinion on any aspect of their learning or on which class they want to be in, it goes in this category.	9	19

Name	Description	Sources	References
Student Voice on Choice	There was a big discrepancy between approaches on whether or not the student was asked about their preferences for time in mainstream or participating in other activities.	4	4
Teacher Teacher Relationships	There were lots of issues around children being included in mainstream classes - they weren't necessarily positive or negative but just additional considerations that had to be made.	2	16
Autism Class vs Mainstream Teachers	There is a dynamic between these two groups of teachers - there is no guidance from the Dept of Education on how to manage timetabling etc. Also no formal time is allocated to these planning meetings (unlike SET).	2	17
Trust in Teacher's Judgement	This is a description of communication between school and home and how the parents feel about their and their children's relationship and trust (or lack thereof) of the autism class teacher and to a lesser extent the mainstream teacher.	8	30
Parent Teacher School Relationship	This is a critical relationship to ensure that any out of school events are communicated effectively but also targets and priorities are supported and agreed on at home.	6	25
Participation		23	139
Child's Feelings About School - Parents Perception	Parents were asked how their children felt about coming to school and if they came to school easily.	5	11
Parent and Child and School	Some of the parents volunteered information about how their child felt about school.	3	7
Importance of Alternative	These are comments about different types of communication or where	3	3

Name	Description	Sources	References
Forms of Communication	a child may have been finding it difficult to communicate, and how other forms of communication have proved important.		
Communication	Any form of communication other than speech that was mentioned or used - including avoiding answering questions.	3	3
School Ethos	The ethos of the school was mentioned by the staff occasionally but the staff that spoke about it felt that it was central to the whole school approach.	6	24
Ethos	There was one DEIS1 girls school; one city centre mixed school and one Educate Together School.	6	25
Student Preferences	Student stated preferences whether they are met or not.	8	25
Preferences	This is both if the student expressed a preference or if a discussion arose with the staff about whether or not the students were asked about their preferences.	8	19
Student Strengths	Triumphs that the student has experience.	4	12
Strengths	Self-identified or identified by another person.	2	12
Student Voice - School's View	Are the students asked their opinion on their placement or anything to do with their classes or their SSP targets?	5	9
Student Voice Rights	School were asked how much student voice they elicited.	5	8
Students Opinions on Autism Class	Any opinions the students gave on their autism class. They may not call it an autism class so the codes reflect this. Some children were unaware that it was an autism class.	5	11
Autism Class	The children had various names for their autism classes - only one	5	7

Name	Description	Sources	References
	student seemed to be aware of his autism.		
Students Opinions on Mainstream Class	Any opinion or thought that the child had about their mainstream class. They offer called them by different names so the codes may reflect those differences.	11	27
Mainstream Classes	Like the autism class, these classes weren't named by me as mainstream - the students were asked about different classes they attended and then I mirrored their language.	6	10
Two Classes - Does the Child Know Why	There was a discussion around whether or not the students knew they were autistic as it related to them being in more than one class.	6	17
Class Identification	The students were asked about how many classes they were in and asked to talk a bit about them.	6	12
Placement Issues		13	79
Difficulties for Parents Navigating the System	This is any difficulty noted by the principal for any of the parents in terms of accessing services or trying to navigate their way through the system.	2	3
Frustration With the System	Both the financial implications of having an autistic child and the waiting lists to access services. The nature of the process is also spoken about as being complicated and hard to navigate.	6	20
Multi Factor Issues	These were mentioned by a number of different groups of participants.	1	2
Importance of Space	This is to do with the school environment - is there enough space? Is the space adequately or well-resourced?	2	4
Physical Space and	This was both the physical space but also the use of space as a	2	6

Name	Description	Sources	References
Environment	necessity for regulation.		
Lack of School Places	People talking about a lack of places for their children to go to school, and the amount of schools that they made applications to.	5	14
Ease of Accessing Place	Were there options?	4	11
Loss of School Placement	Talk around moving children out of the autism class into mainstream full time - letting go of the autism class placement permanently.	6	8
Involuntary Giving Up of Place	Parents seemed unaware of the process of moving out of autism classes or about ‘losing’ the place.	5	5
Movement INTO Autism Classes	Some of the schools move children from the mainstream class into the autism class if the recommendation is there and the student is not thriving in the mainstream setting.	2	4
Mainstream into Autism Class	A number of schools operate policies of moving children from their mainstream classes into their autism classes when a new class is sanctioned.	2	4
Moving Out of Autism Class	The question is asked ‘would you move your child into mainstream permanently and let go of the autism class placement?’. It was to gauge if the parents had thought or spoken about it - if it was something they hoped for.	9	23
Placement Review	Has there been a discussion about moving out of the autism class?	5	13
Parental Opinion on School Choice	This was to assess their feelings and opinions about the school that their child(ren) were enrolled in. This is important as the child may not be in the local school OR it may have been the only school with an	3	5

Name	Description	Sources	References
	autism class place available.		
School Choice	Was there any choice? What factors influenced choice?	3	6
School Choice (2)	Discussion around the choice of autism classes and schools. It may have been to do with initial school choice and how many schools were applied for, or the lack of choice around which school was available within a geographical area.	4	21
Placement in Autism Class	Discussion on the reasons that a parent(should) may have chosen an autism class placement in a mainstream school rather than a mainstream place or a special school place.	5	12
Autism Class Choice	Was it an easy decision? Are they comfortable with the decision? What are their feelings around autism classes?	2	5
Thoughts About After Primary School	Some of the parents discussed what would happen to their children when they left primary school - they were already thinking of secondary places years in advance.	2	6
Secondary School	This is important due to the length of time in advance parents are thinking ahead to secondary school - some of the children are only in second class and already the parents are worried about post primary school.	2	6
School Bureaucracy		10	100
Annual Review of Placement	It is recommended by the Department of Education (DE) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) that an annual review of placement is undertaken for each student in an autism class. Between agreeing to be interviewed and the interview taking place a	2	8

Name	Description	Sources	References
	circular was issued by the DE (0023/2025) which formalised this procedure.		
Does It Happen	The results from the questionnaire would suggest no - the new circular came out the week I was due to speak to the Principals so they were asked in light of that.	2	6
Focus of Targets	Teachers were asked what the priority learning areas were for their students in terms of setting targets - were they academic or more focussed on social, emotional and communication goals (for example).	4	17
Academic		2	4
Non-Academic		3	9
Gut Feeling vs Professional Judgement	This is around the suitability of the autism class placement for some of the students from the viewpoint of school staff. Once a child has a recommendation and they are placed in the school, then they have their place.	2	3
What Should Be Done vs What Is		2	5
Innovations Shown by Principals	There were a number of instances of principals thinking differently about how to access services or additional help, or ways around the system which they have used to make things easier.	5	20
Anything Unusual	All of the principals were adopting practises to enhance their school or the situation for their students. There is a bias in schools who volunteer for this kind of research and the good practises of these schools should be celebrated.	5	16

Name	Description	Sources	References
School Management View of Autism Classes	This code relates to the principals views of the autism classes, and the role they feel they as managers play in the class.	3	7
SSP Meetings	It is best practice to hold multi-disciplinary School Support Plan meetings at regular intervals. Generally these are attended only by school staff and parents.	6	15
SSP's	Are they done? Who attends? How often?	6	13
Teacher Frustrations	These are related to anything that the teacher has expressly stated they are frustrated about - usually paperwork or lack of clarity from the DE.	2	13
Teacher Student Dynamics	Some of the teachers commented on specific dynamics between students and teachers that were either barriers or facilitators to inclusion.	5	17
Breaks	Some of the students talk a lot about taking breaks, both where they like to go and what they like to do.	4	11
Feelings - Students Opinions	There were feelings figures for the students to use if they preferred this mode of communication.	6	15
Friendships	This encompasses any mention of friendship - whether it is easy or difficult; whether the child has friends or not.	9	32
Questions That Students Were Asked	The students were all asked the same questions, although the language around them was amended to best suit their age and stage. They were given the questions in advance both in written and oral form, they were also given a copy of them during the interview.	0	0

Name	Description	Sources	References
Classes	What class are you in? Are you in more than one class? What is the difference between your classes? Again, to see if there is an awareness of class difference.	12	36
Awareness		11	26
Easy or Difficult	Is there anything about school that you find easy? Is there anything about school that you find difficult?	12	32
Friends	Is having friends important to you? What makes a good friend? Have you friends at school?	12	43
Negative or Uncomfortable	Some students spoke in a way that sounded like their friends weren't 'good' friends.	4	5
Happy	Is there anything at school that makes you happy? If you could change things about school, how could it be happier for you? Is there anything about school that makes you unhappy?	12	35
School Life and Rules You Would Make	Where do you feel most comfortable at school? If you could change anything about school what would it be? If you were the Principal, what rules would you have?	12	68
School Work	What do you think of the work that you do in school? Is there anything about the work that you would change?	8	22
Teachers	Who is your teacher? Do you have more than one teacher? This was to check if the student had an awareness that they had more than one teachers and knew that they had two classes.	13	17
Time	Where do you spend your time in school? How much time do you	12	29

Name	Description	Sources	References
	spend in each class? Would you like to change the amount of time you spend in your classes?		
Were They Clear	Did the children understand that times in mainstream were scheduled and did they have control over that.	10	13
Students Need For Routine	This can refer to inside or outside of school. Some of the parents reference the need for the children to be very aware all the time of what is happening.	3	8
Students Needs	Many of the teachers mentioned new or continuing needs that the children had that were not being addressed by the curriculum but were in many ways preventing the children from fully experiencing mainstream.	6	37
Things that Children Know	This is more than what the children have been taught but also what they know that has never been taught to them, or skills that they have which would be unexpected because of age or diagnosis of learning difficulties.	7	9
Things That the Students Say	These are just random things of interest which are spoken by the child or are tole by the parent or teacher. It may just be a communication or may indicate closeness of a relationship etc	9	17
Yard	Time on the yard is spoken different from break time. In this context time on yard refers to scheduled time when all the school is out.	2	3

Codes\\Phase 5 - Refining, Defining and Naming Themes
Codes\\Phase 5 - Refining, Defining and Naming Themes\\Questions to Ask Before Reviewing Themes
1. Are the participants saying more than their words?

2. Is what is being said/unsaid relevant to the research? If answer yes to both then Theme and Code; if the answer yes and no:
3. Is the code relevant to the research at all?

Name	Description	Sources	References
Different But Not Always	This theme explores issues of sameness and difference between autism and mainstream classes.	18	93
Being neurodivergent labels, language and identity	Stakeholder views on autism.	17	82
What do you expect, I'm just a kid	Learners' views on school life; likes and dislikes and what needs to change.	19	153
Different Priorities, Different Perceptions, Different Experiences	This theme refers to the influence of stakeholders' positionality on their priorities as well as their perceptions and experiences of autism class placement.	12	57
Everyone has the same rights	Adult perspectives on inclusion and what is important for learners.	14	111
Theres only one person screaming in this room	Learner perspectives and priorities about their autism class.	16	83
Interdependence Not Independence	This theme refers to the interdependence between stakeholders. This theme emphasises the importance of relationships and interconnectedness.	12	56
Friendships, feelings and fairness	This refers to social interactions and how these shape school experiences.	8	49
United we stand	The importance of connectedness between stakeholder groups.	11	92

Name	Description	Sources	References
Voices Heard and Unheard	This theme refers to what stakeholders were both prepared to talk about and avoided talking about in relation to inclusion and placement.	13	55
Joining in or physically present	How inclusion is conceptualised and enacted.	11	82
Surviving or thriving	Explores the emotional and relational dimensions of the experience of inclusion.	11	71
Who decides and for how long	Interrogates the power dynamics underpinning placement considering whose voices ultimately shape these educational journeys.	23	157

Codes\\Phase 5 - Refining, Defining and Naming Themes\\Questions to Ask Before Reviewing Themes
1. Are the participants saying more than their words? 2. Is what is being said/unsaid relevant to the research? If answer yes to both then Theme and Code; if the answer yes and no: 3. Is the code relevant to the research at all?

Appendix Y: PAIR Framework

PAIR Framework for Enhancing Learner Participation



Framework for Enhancing Learner Participation

Introduction

The PAIR Framework has been created to support staff when communicating with autistic learners about their placement in the special class. It incorporates elements linked intrinsically to the education of autistic students: participation, autism, inclusion and rights-based education. The framework is an adaptation of Lundy's Framework building on requirements set out in the 'Review of Enrolment in Special Class' circular (D. of E. DE, 2025) and using learner voice research from this study and the AsIAm, RCSI and DCU Autism Friendly Schools project (McNally, Sweeney, Keenan, Lynam, Radhakrishnan, *et al.*, 2025).

The aim of the review of placement is to ensure that all learners are in the most appropriate educational setting to meet their current needs. It is important that the placement is reviewed regularly and should happen at least once a year. It may be that the review happens as part of the School Support Plan meeting, or just prior to it. All learners have a right to have a say in their education and for those views to be given due weight and attention (UNCRC, 1989). Furthermore, autistic learners in special class placements have additional rights to be educated in the most inclusive setting possible and for adaptations to be made in order to facilitate this (UNCRPD/C/GC/4, 2016).

It may be that the learners give voice to their opinions informally on many different occasions or that the review is held informally or over a period of time. It is important that the students understand that staff are noting their participation and how that information may be used. It is also important to remember that while many students use spoken voice this may not be their preferred method of communication – they may wish to write, draw or record their answers. They may wish to use a mixture of methods of communication – never assume that one method will be sufficient.

Before Participation Session:

Before beginning communication with the learner about their placement, check staff members know the following:

Does the learner know they are autistic?

Does the learner understand that they are enrolled in an autism class?

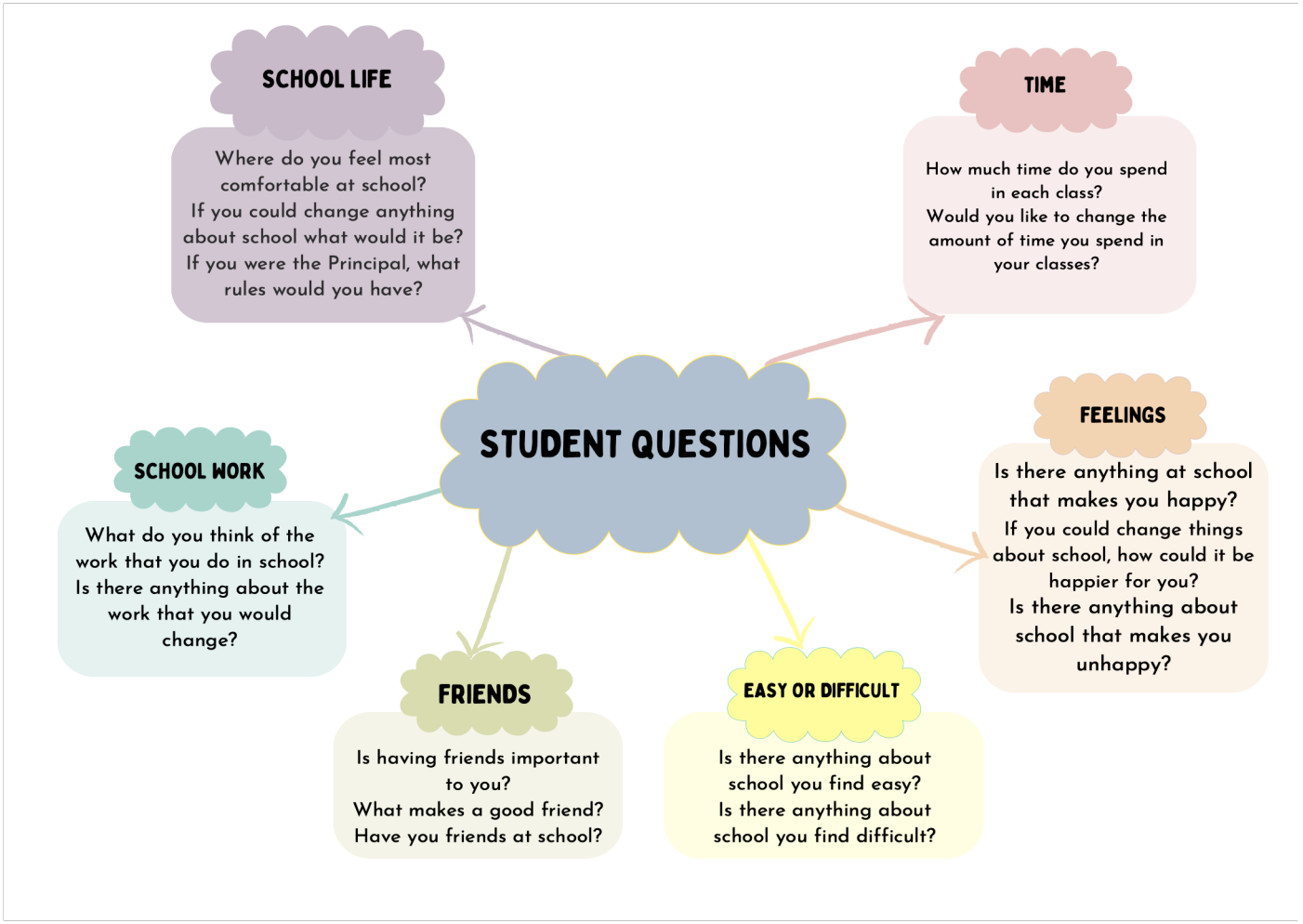
Has the learner been made aware of why you are asking them questions?

Has the learner assented to participation?

Has it been explained to the learner that they can stop at any time?

Have the communication preferences of the learner been considered? It is best practice to provide a range of options as they may verbally express some opinions but prefer, for example, to write or draw others.

Possible Questions for Learners


STUDENT QUESTIONS
SCHOOL LIFE
Where do you feel most comfortable at school?
If you could change anything about school what would it be?
If you were the Principal, what rules would you have?
TIME
How much time do you spend in each class?
Would you like to change the amount of time you spend in your classes?
SCHOOL WORK
What do you think of the work that you do in school?
Is there anything about the work that you would change?
FEELINGS
Is there anything at school that makes you happy?
If you could change things about school, how could it be happier for you?
Is there anything about school that makes you unhappy?
FRIENDS
Is having friends important to you?
What makes a good friend?
Have you friends at school?
EASY OR DIFFICULT
Is there anything about school you find easy?
Is there anything about school you find difficult?

Partnership Through Participation - consider both autism and mainstream classes					
	What are we doing?	How could we do better?	What supports are needed?	What have the students said?	Evidence of participation?
Are multiple methods of collecting voice available? (Remember: the learner may speak but that may not be their preferred communication method)					
What information do we want to know from the learners? What is the specific issue?					
Are we collecting voice formally or informally? Is the purpose of the lesson to collect voice on an isssue, or will it be collected at various times?					
Do the learners know they are being given an opportunity to make decisions or influence their school day?					

Autistic Identity, Inclusion and Shared Understanding - consider both autism and mainstream classes					
	What are we doing?	How could we do better?	What supports are needed?	What have the students said?	Evidence of participation?
How is the environment set up for autistic students? (consider sensory preferences; visual supports; physical layout)					
Where can autistic students go if they need a break? (in-class; out-of-class; outside space)					
How and when can autistic students take a break? (supervised; unsupervised; how is the break requested?)					

Influence and Power - consider both autism and mainstream classes					
	What are we already doing? What do we know currently?	How could we do better?	What supports are needed?	What have the students said?	Evidence of participation?
How will the information that the learners have shared with us be used?					
Do changes need to be made in light of what has been learned?					
Who is the person that can make the changes?					
If changes cannot be made, why not? How is this going to be communicated back to the learner?					
If changes are to be made, is there a need for further support? Who can provided that support?					
If adapted changes are going to be made, who is communicating that to the learner? How is it to be communicated?					

Rights-Based Education - consider both autism and mainstream classes					
	What are we already doing? What do we know currently?	How could we do better?	What supports are needed?	What have the students said?	Evidence of participation?
Who is the preferred adult for the learner to communicate with? Have different methods of communication been provided?					
Have the learners assented to participate? Do they need to in this instance?					
How will the information be communicated to the person that can make changes?					
Does the learner know that the information is going to be passed on to other people? Have you explicitly told them?					

Template for Learner Responses

	What participation method(s) were used?	What did the learner communicate?	What did the adult learn?	What needs to happen now?
School Life				
Where do you feel most comfortable at school?				
If you could change anything about school, what would it be?				
If you were the Principal, what rules would you have?				
Time				
How much time do you spend in each class?				
Would you like to change the amount of time you spend in your classes?				
Feelings				
Is there anything at school that makes you happy?				
If you could change things about school, how could it be happier for you?				
Is there anything about school that makes you unhappy?				

Easy or Difficult?				
Is there anything about school you find easy?				
Is there anything about school you find difficult?				
Friends				
Is having friends important to you?				
What makes a good friend?				
Have you friends at school?				
School Work				
What do you think of the work that you do in school?				
Is there anything about the work you would change?				
How do you feel about homework?				
Anything else you want to tell me about?				

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