The perceptions and experiences of teachers on the provision of additional support to SLD students in a mainstream Irish secondary school

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Abstract

In recent decades, international mainstream education systems have undergone exponential change in terms of diversity following the drafting and implementation of inclusive education policies. The Irish education system has subscribed to this movement, and there has been significant development in terms of policy and legislation focused on special education in recent years (Drudy and Kinsella, 2009). This has resulted in the subsequent need for the allocation of additional support resources for the ever-growing population of students with special educational needs (SEN) who are now availing of mainstream educational opportunities. Specific learning disabilities (SLD) are the main area of focus of the present study. The NCSE (2014) note that there is limited understanding of special class and additional support provision in Irish schools and that the need to assess their effectiveness remains. Exploring the views and experiences of professionals working within schools provides valuable insight and is an effective way of authentically assessing how inclusion and additional support within mainstream schools are currently perceived.

This qualitative exploratory case study set out to investigate the perceptions and experiences of teachers with regard to the additional support available to SLD students in their school. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight subject teachers in an all boys secondary school in South Dublin, Ireland. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data and produce the eventual findings of the study.

Five main themes emerged following data analysis. These themes were identified as follows: ‘Confidence levels of students’, ‘Change over time’, ‘Differentiation’, ‘Importance of label/diagnosis’, and ‘Barriers and areas for improvement’. Following the generation of these themes, it was necessary to filter the data further into subthemes. This helped to categorise the data within the main themes. The findings that emerged suggest that the teachers perceived the provision of additional support in this school as positive. It was expressed that students’ self-esteem, organisational abilities and subject proficiency benefited from the additional support that they received. It was also found that teachers saw the peer perceptions and teacher perceptions of the SLD students within the school community as mainly (but not
entirely) positive, and that this has changed over time. Teachers also discussed certain issues that were perceived with the current system of additional support allocation. According to the participants, there is an emphasis on a psycho-medical model of impairment, and diagnosis is central to the receipt of support on an official basis. Further, participants felt that the support structures within the school would benefit from further staff training around SEN, smaller class sizes and additional resources.

Findings are discussed in terms of their significance and contribution to the area of special educational needs research. The limitations of the study are acknowledged and discussed as well as potential future directions for research of a similar nature.
Declaration

I declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

I agree to deposit this dissertation in the University’s open access institutional repository or allow the Library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgment.

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List of abbreviations

SLD – Specific Learning Disability  
SEN – Special Educational Needs  
NCSE – National Council for Special Education  
DES – Department of Education and Science
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Chapter 1. Introduction

Introduction to the problem

The famous American philosopher, John Dewey once wrote that “education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” Harpur (2012) asserts that traditionally, people with disabilities have been subjected to inferior and segregated educational and employment opportunities and have often been treated as second-class citizens in these domains. The importance of equal access to education, regardless of race, culture, religion, gender or disability has been widely recognised in recent decades as previously marginalised populations have sought to create a society of equal opportunity by gaining empowerment through knowledge. Pavlidis (2015) argues that education and teaching are necessary components in achieving social emancipation. Education can introduce students to fields of knowledge that lie distantly beyond their everyday experiences, and through pedagogical interaction with teachers, the cognitive abilities of students can be developed and cultivated (Pavlidis, 2015). With this in mind, it is eminently clear that education is not only a useful resource for negotiating everyday modern life in all of its’ obscurities, it is also a necessary tool that enhances quality of life by developing cognitive mechanisms, providing individuals with the opportunity of fulfilling their intellectual potential. Based on this assertion, all necessary measures should be taken to provide every human being with the most appropriate form of this truly fundamental right.

The inclusion of students with SEN into regular school settings has become a central topic in the contemporary educational discourse (Bossaert et al., 2013). Since at least the 1970s, inclusive schooling has been advocated for students with disabilities. Support for inclusion is based on two foundations: that children have a right to inclusion within mainstream schools and that it is more beneficial and effective both socially and academically than special schooling (Lindsay, 2007). Significant policy shifts in recent decades have seen the Republic of Ireland move from a two-track system of special and mainstream schooling to being very much focused on inclusive education for all (Shevlin, Winter and Flynn, 2013). Influential international policy documents have now ensured that every child has the right to a fair and equitable education regardless of the severity of their disability (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; UNCRPD, 2006). This has resulted in more students
with SEN availing of mainstream schooling opportunities in Ireland than ever before, and catering for the needs of these students is an ongoing challenge for teachers and policy makers alike (McCoy et al., 2014). Due to the wide range of SEN groups that are currently discernible within Irish schools, it would not be a realistic undertaking to attempt to explore each of these SEN groups comprehensively and this is beyond the scope of the present research project. The specific focus of this study is SLD, and the additional support structures available to SLD students in an Irish secondary school. The most common forms of SLD found in Irish schools are dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia (NCSE, 2014).

A widely used definition of SLD is that it is a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, spell or do mathematical calculations (Sotelo-Dynega, Flanagan and Alfonso, 2011). It is presumed to be a neurological abnormality, intrinsic to the individual and can occur across the lifespan (Woodcock, 2013). Students with a diagnosis of SLD can face a variety of challenges within a mainstream secondary school setting. Generally speaking, they have issues with reading comprehension, spoken language, reasoning ability, mathematical computation and application and traits like inattention and hyperactivity are also frequently associated with students who have been diagnosed with SLD (Lewis and Doorlag, 2003). Many of the aforementioned difficulties and challenges that this student population must negotiate can be addressed with the appropriate provision of support structures and accommodations within the school setting.

**Background to the study**

In the Irish research base surrounding this topic, there has been an intense debate focused around the most appropriate and beneficial manner in which SEN students should be supported and educated in the mainstream schooling system (Travers, 2009; McCoy et al., 2014; Ware et al., 2009). SLD is the most common form of SEN in Irish post-primary schools (McCoy et al., 2014). In the 2011/12 academic year at post-primary level for example, 30,052 students were recorded as having some form of SEN, of which 10,266 had a diagnosis of SLD (McCoy et al., 2014). It is fundamentally important to gain an understanding of the provision of additional
support measures to this student population as SLD covers more than one third of SEN cases in Irish secondary schools. Gaining insights from teachers who work in a school environment and encounter these students on a daily basis is an effective method of achieving this. In the present study, this will be done by investigating the perceptions and experiences of secondary school teachers with regard to the additional support received by SLD students in their school.

Many commentators have argued that teachers’ beliefs and attitudes are essential components if the full and successful implementation of inclusive policy is to be achieved (Hastings and Logan, 2013). However, there is a paucity of research seeking to understand and interpret the perceptions and experiences of teachers with regard to the additional support received by SLD students in school. Analysing the experiences of teachers is an effective and comprehensive way of gaining insight into the additional support measures afforded to SLD students in a school. The primary method that a researcher can adopt in investigating an educational organisation, or indeed a process within such an organisation, is through evaluating the experiences of the individual people who make up the organisation and carry out these processes (Seidman, 2006). There has been a myriad of research conducted concerned with educational experiences, yet so little of it is based upon the perspective of teachers through qualitative methodology (Seidman, 2006). The experiences of teachers and students, after all, are what constitute schooling (Seidman, 2006).

The present study
This research study looks to explore the perceptions and experiences of secondary school teachers on the additional support that SLD students receive in their school. As the researcher was employed as a Special Needs Assistant in the school under investigation for the previous three years prior to the commencement of the research process, this study will use the method of insider research to facilitate an exploration the present topic. Insider research refers to a research process in which one studies a group or society with which they share certain characteristics (Loxley and Seerey, 2008). According to Greene (2014), the amount of insider research being conducted in recent years has increased, with much of this research happening in the domain of education. There are benefits and drawbacks associated with insider research, as with
any form of research methodology (Greene, 2014). Some of the benefits discussed in the literature include having an established knowledge of the research environment, having a pre-existing rapport built up with participants, and ease of access to the institution of enquiry (Chavez, 2008; Bell, 2005; Greene, 2014). Drawbacks that have been highlighted include the danger of insider bias and coercion, difficulty in maintaining objectivity and an over familiarity with participants (Chavez, 2008; Merriam et al., 2001; Greene, 2014).

Constant reflection by the researcher on their position within the research process as it develops, and on the potential biases or preconceived ideologies that they may hold is key during insider research. These biases or ideologies may not be consciously accessible to the researcher without deep reflection, and it is therefore paramount that the researcher gets inside their own head when conducting insider research (Greene, 2014). Chavez (2008) argues that outsider researchers need to start their research process by gaining familiarity with the field, but with insider researchers, the research process begins by recognising the ways in which they are similar to and different from their participants. Insider researchers can then attempt to gain an awareness of which of these social identities may enhance or complicate the research process. This viewpoint was acknowledged and taken into account during the present research process. Measures were also taken in an attempt to minimise the impact of coercion on participants and in order to maintain objectivity throughout the study and are discussed in the methodology section. These are listed as two of the major challenges for the insider researcher and were therefore considered and reflected upon throughout the research process.

Currently, Ireland’s approach to the allocation of additional support for students with SLD and other forms of SEN has an undeniable emphasis on a dominant psycho-medical model of impairment (McDonnell, 2003). Psychological assessment and diagnosis are paramount for a student to officially qualify for any form of additional support in school. Shevlin and Rose (2015) note that some countries, for example the USA or Canada, have undergone gradual change as they have built on existing policy and legislation over time, while Ireland has experienced rapid change in terms of special educational policy and legislation.
McCoy et al. (2014) note that there is limited understanding of special class and additional support provision in Irish schools and that the need to assess their effectiveness remains. Ireland has no established system for collecting data on the academic and social outcomes of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools. It is clear that the views and experiences of professionals working within schools is an effective method of authentically assessing how inclusion and additional support within mainstream schools are currently perceived. Gathering data on this topic through research projects of this nature is a necessary undertaking that will provide valuable insight and information.

Primary data was collected through the use of semi-structured face-to-face qualitative interviewing in the present study. The research was conducted in an all boys secondary school in South Dublin, and can therefore be considered a case study of this educational institution. Consent was sought to conduct the research project on the school premises using members of the school teaching staff as participants. This was achieved by sending a formal letter (see Appendix 6) and a gatekeeper consent form (see Appendix 5) to the school. Upon the receipt of approval, a purposive sampling strategy was utilised to select eight teacher participants for the interview process of the research project. These participants were then given information about the nature of the proposed study, and consent forms with the option of non-participation. The interviews were guided by a pre-designed interview schedule (see Appendix 3) that covered a wide variety of topics relating to the teachers’ perceptions and experiences of the additional support that SLD students receive in the school. Interviews were conducted on the school premises and were recorded with an electronic Dictaphone with consent from the participants. The raw data gathered in the form of transcribed interviews was then explored and analysed using thematic analysis.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

Introduction

This review seeks to explore the literature on inclusive education and the provision of additional support to students diagnosed with SEN in a mainstream Irish secondary school. SLD is the main area of focus, but findings from other SEN and disability groups are also highly relevant to the present review and will be considered. The background and history of the policy development around inclusive education and within school additional support will first of all be discussed. The importance of school professionals’ attitudes toward students with SLD and other forms of SEN will then be considered as well as the potential difficulties that the use of labels can produce for students with SLD in a mainstream school environment. Finally, the opportunities that teachers have for continuous professional development with regard to SEN will be explored along with the long established barriers that have stifled and delayed the full implementation of inclusive practices within mainstream school settings.

A systematic and thorough search was conducted in order to identify a breadth of suitable and high quality references that were relevant to this literature review. First of all, an online search was conducted through the electronic resources available through ‘Stella Search’ provided by the Trinity College Dublin library site. Following some broad searches, the most relevant databases for this literature review were identified. Searches were conducted through the following databases: EndNote (PubMed), ERIC, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, SAGE journals, Taylor and Francis, JSTOR. A variety of terms were used in search of relevant articles, preferably from peer-reviewed journals. Filters applied to these searches included years of publication (1985-2016) and language (English). Reference list examinations, broad Internet searches, and library book searches broadened the available literature for conducting the present review.

It is first of all necessary to consider some facts with regard to SLD and the support mechanisms currently available in Irish schools in order to establish a platform from which the rest of this review can be informatively interpreted. Kavale, Spaulding and
Beam (2009) offer a comprehensive and carefully constructed overview of SLD and the impact that this disorder can have in terms of school performance. This is a useful framework from which to view and understand SLD. Under this definition, SLD is viewed as a “disorder that significantly impedes normal academic progression in terms of expectation for chronological ages” (Kavale, Spaulding and Beam, 2009 p.45). Another definition propounded by Woodcock (2013), describes SLD as a disability defined as a neurological disorder that manifests itself by a lack of academic progress in terms of the basic acquisition and use of writing, speaking, reading, reasoning, and the development of mathematical skills.

It is a disorder that is not related to the overall IQ levels of a student, and therefore an ability-achievement discrepancy is synonymous with SLD (Kavale, Spaulding and Beam, 2009). Common SLDs in Irish schools include Dyslexia, which is a difficulty in learning to read and write, Dyscalculia which is a difficulty with numbers and arithmetic, and Dysgraphia which is a problem with writing legibly and spelling (NCSE, 2014). Students diagnosed with SLD form the largest group of SEN students within the mainstream classroom (Woodcock, 2013). As previously mentioned, SLD made up more than one-third of SEN groups in Irish post-primary schools in the 2011/12 academic year (McCoy et al., 2014).

In recent decades, international mainstream education systems have undergone exponential change in terms of diversity following the drafting and implementation of inclusive education policies. Ireland is no exception to this movement and it can be seen that including students diagnosed with SEN in mainstream schools has been an important policy aim for successive Irish governments since at least the end of the twentieth century (Kerins, 2014). Lindsay (2007) asserts that support for inclusion is based on two foundations: that children have a right to inclusion within mainstream schools and that it is more beneficial and effective both socially and academically than special schooling. Inclusive education refers to an educational system that includes a wide diversity of students, and which differentiates education to cater for this diversity accordingly (Pijl et al., 1997). Many social and academic benefits have been propounded with regard to inclusion for both students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. For example, Thomas and Vaughan (2005) argue that continued segregation in schooling can only develop and substantiate stereotypes, while
inclusion could eliminate stereotyping and allow students to appreciate the uniqueness of their peers from a young age, regardless of disability.

According to the Department of Education and Science (DES) (2007), an inclusive school implies that the diverse needs and learning differences of all students are accommodated for and that appropriate structures and arrangements are adopted to enable each student to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her education. The movement toward inclusive education has resulted in the subsequent need for within school additional support for students with SLD and other disabilities who are now availing of mainstream educational opportunities (Ainscow et al., 2006). The NCSE (2014) note that the Irish education system supports students with SLD in the following ways:

1. By having the classroom teacher adapt lessons or tasks to suit the individual needs of a student.
2. By providing learning support teachers who can give additional teaching support outside of the mainstream class.
3. By providing additional technological support (e.g. laptops/tape recorders for completing written tasks.)

The Department of Education and Science (DES) first developed a staged approach to support in schools in Circular 24/03 (DES, 2003). These stages were built upon in Circular 02/05 (DES, 2005) and developed further in 2008 (DES, 2008). Under this framework, initial support should be provided to students within the mainstream classroom under the guidance of the classroom teacher. This can be linked to the first support system above. The second stage involves an intervention from the learning support teacher in the school and often leads to withdrawal from the mainstream class at certain times to receive extra support in a special class setting. The third stage involves external professionals (educational psychologists, for example) having an involvement with the child’s educational progression (DES, 2008). The terminology in these circular reports vary from ‘classroom support’ to ‘school support’ and ‘school support plus’ when referring to the support measures available in schools. For the purpose of the present study, these support measures will be referred to under the umbrella term of ‘additional support’. For effective additional support to be delivered
to students with SLD and other forms of SEN, it is abundantly clear that the inclusive practices and attitudes of a school are critical.

**Policy background and Current Situation**

Historically, Ireland may have been perceived as lagging behind its’ international counterparts in terms of inclusive practices. Nevertheless, we have now arrived at a juncture where there is legislative commitment to inclusive education (e.g. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) act 2004; cited in McConkey et al., 2015). The establishment of support structures (e.g. the National Council for Special Education) and the significant investment in resources to support children with SEN in mainstream schools is testament to Ireland’s commitment to this movement (Hastings and Logan, 2013). Rose et al., (2010) note that special educational provision in Ireland has sought to create a more equitable education system by recognising and embracing diversity and considering the wishes and needs of previously marginalised student populations. This undeniably progressive outlook has taken time to grow and develop from rather humble beginnings.

**International Perspective**

The development of inclusive policy and the global movement toward inclusive education will first of all be considered from an international perspective and then within an Irish context. The right to education for every individual was enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) and this set the wheels in motion on the long road toward a distant destination that even today has not yet been reached. In 1990, the World Conference on Education for All took place (UNESCO, 1990), where the right to education for all children regardless of any individual differences was reiterated and in 1993 the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities was published (UNESCO, 1993). The Salamanca conference of 1994 (UNESCO, 1994) is widely referenced as a pivotal landmark with regard to the development of special needs education policy and provision internationally. Following this conference, it was proclaimed that “schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other condition” and that “schools have to find ways of successfully educating all children, including those who
have serious disadvantages and disabilities” (UNESCO, 1994) (p.6). From these excerpts, the intention of the Salamanca statement to foster and develop inclusive education is undeniably clear and in many ways this statement has shaped all inclusive education policy documents that have followed its publication. Few international policy documents have been as effective as the UNCRPD (UN, 2006) in terms of championing the rights and entitlements of people with disabilities from a human rights perspective. Article 24 of this policy instrument asserts that states parties should ensure that persons with disabilities should not be excluded from the general education system and that reasonable accommodations and appropriate support measures should facilitate the effective education of persons with disabilities (UN, 2006).

**Irish Perspective**

Swan (2000) has broken the progression of special needs education in Ireland into three stages, these are: the era of denial and neglect, the special school era and the current era of inclusion and integration. We have moved from a culture of utter neglect and denial to a progressive culture of inclusion and entitlement where the implementation of policy is seen as essential in informing practice, all in a relatively short space of time (Swan, 2000). International lobbying during the 1980s began to influence Irish educational policy and the first classes for children with special needs were established in mainstream schools (Flood, 2013). A comprehensive review of all SEN provision in Irish schools was commissioned by the government in 1991, and by 1993, there were 2,000 children availing of special classes within mainstream schools in Ireland and special education had become part of the state run teacher training programmes (Flood, 2013).

From an Irish point of view, there are notable landmarks with regard to the development and implementation of inclusive educational policies. Shortcomings in the Special Education system were uncovered by the work of the landmark Special Education Review Committee in 1993. This report identified that teacher training was insufficient with regard to SEN and it also recommended that a continuum of educational provision be established to facilitate the full-time placement of SEN students in mainstream schools with the allocation of additional support (Flood, 2013). This report inspired action in the form of challenges to existing educational
policy and legislation. Notable examples include the O’Donoghue (Supreme Court of Ireland, 2001) and Sinnott (Supreme Court of Ireland, 2001) cases that played a major role in substantiating that people with intellectual disabilities were entitled to an appropriate education in Ireland (Whyte, 2002).

The construction of legislation ensuring curricular access for students with SEN has duly followed. The Education Act, 1998 ensures the right of all children to an equal education (Ireland, 1998). Under section 21 of this act, schools are required to develop a school plan which is supposed to include a section on “equality of access to and participation in the school by students with disabilities or who have other special educational needs.” (Ireland, 1998). The National disability strategy was developed in 2004, and it looked to tie law and policy together in the area of disability (Inclusion Ireland, 2014). The enactment of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN) and the Disability Act 2005 were part of this strategy. The EPSEN act makes provision for the education of people with SEN within an inclusive environment, wherever possible, with students who do not have SEN (Inclusion Ireland, 2014). The act saw the foundation of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) which is responsible for assisting schools to plan and deliver support services for students with SEN (ASTI, 2005). Another duty of the NCSE is to work directly with schools through the appointment of Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) (ASTI, 2005). The development of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students with SEN is also outlined in this act. These plans would include input from parents, teachers, psychologists and other relevant personnel (Inclusion Ireland, 2014). The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2014) assert that only certain sections of the EPSEN act have been implemented, and this piece of legislation has been criticised because of this.

The Disability Act (2005) is a slightly broader piece of legislation that encompasses more than just education (Oireachtas, 2005). It is a law that was introduced by the Department of Justice and Equality, and one of its key purposes is to enable the provision of assessments of education and health for persons with disabilities. It also looks to assist government ministers in making provision for services to meet any arising needs, to provide appeals in the event of services not being provided and to promote equality and social inclusion (European Agency for Special Needs and
Inclusive Education, 2014). Under section 2 of this act, any person that may have a
disability is entitled to submit an application for an independent assessment of need.
Reports are provided following these assessments in which the nature and extent of
any diagnosed disability are outlined. These reports are crucial with regard to the
receipt of additional support in schools for any student who has been diagnosed with a
disability, as the development of special educational provision in the Irish education
system has an undeniable emphasis on a dominant psycho-medical model of
impairment (McDonnell, 2003). This will be discussed in greater detail later in this
review.

Currently, Shevlin, Winter and Flynn (2013) assess the Irish education system as
being in a phase of transition with regard to full inclusion. This is due to the fact that
legislation outlining the facilitation of inclusive learning environments has not yet
been fully adopted and implemented by all schools. Nonetheless, according to
McCoonkey et al. (2015) over the past decade in Ireland, the amount of pupils with
mild to moderate learning disabilities (e.g. SLD) attending mainstream schools has
grown substantially. This assertion is supported by the findings of Banks and McCoy
(2011) who found that a wider definition of SEN in the EPSEN act (2004) has
resulted in a greater number of students being diagnosed with SEN. This along with
inclusive policies has resulted in a larger prevalence of SEN students in mainstream
schools. Many challenges have subsequently arisen in terms of the development of
inclusive practices and the implementation of appropriate support structures for SEN
students in schools.

According to Riddell, Tisdall and Kane (2006), Ireland is among the countries that
utilise a multi-track system in terms of inclusive education provision. This means that
there is a mixture of mainstream classes and special classes available to SEN students
in mainstream educational settings. This differs slightly from other approaches like
the one-track system adopted in countries like Cyprus or Spain where almost all
students attend mainstream classes or the two-track system in Belgium where special
and mainstream education are independent of one another and do not follow the same
curriculum (Riddell, Tisdall and Kane, 2006). Parsons et al. (2009) assert that no
model of SEN education and additional support can be conclusively considered as
superior or more effective than any other model. This certainly seems to be reflected
in the literature as divergent findings consistently arise. For example, the research of Mitchell (2008) and Banks et al. (2010) suggests that being placed in a lower ability class is a hindrance to SEN students. Contrastingly, Ofsted (2006) found that the availability of a resource room offered certain benefits to SEN students and Oakes (2005) found that placing students of similar ability together was positive and helpful in terms of fostering educational development. Such inconclusiveness seems to suggest the need for further research and inquest in this area, and gaining teacher perspectives is an undeniably important undertaking to this end.

School Professionals’ attitudes
For the success and longevity of inclusion to be a reality, teachers and other professionals working directly within educational environments have a central role to play. As the movement for inclusive education has gone from strength to strength, it has become more and more crucial to assess and understand how teachers perceive the academic outcome of students with SEN (Hemmings and Woodcock, 2011). The attitudes held by teachers can have a strong influence on the support structures available to SEN students, as well as the overall school experiences of SEN students from both social and academic perspectives (Hastings and Logan, 2013). It is crucial that mainstream teachers take responsibility for the learning needs of SEN pupils and consider this as a central aspect of their role rather than viewing it as a chore or extra work that they are required to do. Often, if teachers do not take responsibility for facilitating the most appropriate learning environment possible for these students, the learning support teacher is left solely responsible and this can create segregation among staff and students in a school (Pijl et al., 1997). Research has shown that teachers often lack confidence in their capacity to promote inclusion with the resources available to them and therefore show resistance to this concept (Thomas and Vaughan, 2004). Interestingly, Forlin and Chambers (2011) found teachers’ concerns regarding their professional competence increased, rather than diminished, with age and experience. However, Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) found that teachers’ attitudes toward the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream school environments actually improved over time. This was attributed to the skill and confidence of the teachers in dealing with SEN students growing with experience, suggesting that on-the-job experience is a key component in developing inclusive practices. Similarly, Lambe and Bones (2006) found that the more experience and
exposure that teachers had to students with disabilities, the more positive their attitudes towards them became.

When surveyed, teachers typically respond in favour of inclusion. Within an Irish context, Hastings and Logan (2013) found that some 80 per cent of teachers agreed that students with SEN benefit from being included in general education. While this finding is promising, it does not appear to convey the entire picture. The type of SEN and the nature and severity of disability have a definite impact on teacher attitudes toward inclusion. This would suggest that teachers are susceptible to the influence of labels. Olney and Brockelman (2003) found that a hierarchy of accepted disabilities existed among the participants in their study, and such a hierarchy is widely reflected within educational environments in the literature surrounding this topic. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) found that teachers were more positively disposed to the inclusion of students with sensory difficulties or mild learning disabilities rather than severe learning disabilities or emotional/behavioural difficulties. Meegan and McPhail (2006) surveyed teachers of physical education in 745 secondary schools in Ireland and came to the conclusion that teachers were undecided rather than opposed to or in favour of the inclusion of pupils with SLD. Again in this study, it was observed that teachers attitudes with regard to inclusion were influenced by the severity of disabilities. For example general learning disabilities (GLD) were viewed less favourably than SLDs. In another Irish study, Hastings and Logan (2013) asked teachers to rank the learning disabilities that they found easiest to include in their teaching strategies. Dyslexia, the most common form of SLD in Irish schools, was ranked in first place while GLD was ranked in second place.

The difficulty with labels
Thomas and Loxley (2007) argue that special educational provision can be a catalyst in the facilitation and promotion of ‘difference’ in mainstream schools. This is due to the assignment of a “dominant identifying label” (Beart, Hardy and Buchan, 2005, p.49) through psychological assessment that will stay with that individual for the rest of their lives. Kerins (2014) acknowledges that difference can sometimes be seen as a positive way of promoting individuality, but that it is far more likely to be perceived as a negative phenomenon in mainstream schools. For example, the perception of having a lower value or status can lead to unequal treatment of SLD students and
indeed SEN students in general (Kerins, 2014). Woodcock (2013) asserts that low expectations by teachers can result in a reduction of learning opportunities for SLD students in the mainstream class. This can lead to a negative self-perception which impacts upon self-expectations and self-belief, which can lead to a deficit cycle if maintained over a period of time (Westwood, 1995). On the other hand, positive attitudes can provide more learning opportunities for SLD students in the mainstream class, can improve their performance and in turn should enhance self-perceptions (Woodcock, 2013). It can be drawn from this that positive teacher attitudes toward SLD students and indeed SEN students in general are essential for inclusion to be successfully implemented (Winter, 2006).

Griffin and Shevlin (2007) raise the point that labels can lead to assumptions about the capabilities of children to learn, and operate from the notion of a child’s weaknesses as opposed to their strengths. This leads to the defining of children by their label rather than their individual characteristics. There is no doubt that the strategies adopted by schools in terms of additional support delivery can also compound any perceptions of difference. Travers (2009) argues that special classes can be a necessary ‘crutch’ for SLD students in mainstream schools as it is a source of support and in many cases a safe haven from the stresses that students must attempt to navigate on a daily basis. Although this is not completely in line with the ideals of full inclusion where every student should be supported in the mainstream class, Travers (2009) has argued that the entire school can be viewed as the unit of inclusion and not simply mainstream classrooms.

According to McDonnell (2003), the development of special educational provision in Ireland has an undeniable emphasis on a dominant psycho-medical model of impairment, as mentioned earlier in this review. It can be seen that this remains the case today (NCSE, 2014). Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley (2008) note that this model reflects the current resource allocation strategy in operation that uses a 14-category system of SEN to allocate additional support to schools and pupils diagnosed with SEN. It can be drawn from this that assessment and diagnosis is central to the allocation of additional support received by SLD students in mainstream schools. A contradiction of sorts seems to arise here. Assessing students and recognizing difference is a necessary undertaking in gauging and meeting the educational needs of
SLD students, yet a plethora of research has pointed to the finding that labeling students brings about negative outcomes including diminished self-esteem and self-determination as well as social exclusion (e.g. Frostad and Pijl, 2007; Mand, 2007; Matheson, Olsen and Weisner, 2007).

**Continuous professional development**

Drudy and Kinsella (2009) found that there is a definite need for an increased expertise on SEN among mainstream school professionals. Based on their findings, they argue that there should be opportunities for continuous professional development focused around effective educational strategies for teaching and supporting SEN students in mainstream schools for teachers. Currently in Ireland, teachers are not required to gain any form of professional qualification with regard to SEN, nor are they obliged to undertake any additional courses in SEN (Travers et al., 2010). This is slightly worrying in terms of the competency of subject teachers in Irish secondary schools that have students with SLD or other forms of SEN in their classroom. Farrell and O’Neill (2011) interviewed learning support teachers in Irish mainstream secondary schools in their study, and found that all of the participants expressed concerns regarding the ability of subject teachers to cater for the needs of SEN students in terms of the differentiation of materials, resources and general lessons. There is a need for mandatory training to improve competency levels among subject teachers when dealing with SEN students. It also implicates a lack of focus on SEN in initial teacher training programmes, and similarly this would appear to be an issue that needs to be addressed. Winter (2006) surveyed 203 trainee teachers in Northern Ireland with regard to the effectiveness of their professional training in preparing them to deal with SEN in an inclusive classroom setting. Results of this study showed that 89 per cent of respondents did not feel that their professional training had adequately prepared them for this.

Research has shown that often teachers’ negative attitudes toward students with SEN are born out of a lack of training and professional development opportunities. Further, teachers who have received more training and information about students with SEN display more positive attitudes towards these students, and even have enhanced emotional reactions towards them (Mungai and Thornburg, 2002; Carroll, Forlin and
Jobling, 2003). This finding suggests that there is a definite need for continuous professional development opportunities for subject teachers with regard to SEN understanding and teaching strategies.

**Barriers**

Unfortunately, many schools operate under controlling conditions in the pursuit of structure, discipline and adherence to the general teaching curriculum. Travers et al. (2010) note that there is also an over-emphasis on academic results in mainstream Irish secondary schools. This can be seen as a hindrance to inclusion and additional support structure development as schools prioritise attaining high ratings in league tables based on transfer to third level education figures (Drudy and Kinsella, 2009). Students diagnosed with SLD often struggle with the technical aspects of learning, for example spelling and arithmetic, meaning that they can be easily left behind by teachers who rush through classwork in order to complete the prescribed syllabus. Hastings and Logan (2013) found that teachers identified pressure to achieve high grades in state assessments, for example the Leaving Certificate, as well as a lack of resources as a major challenge as far as including students with SLD and other forms of SEN in the mainstream classroom was concerned. In their survey, 52 per cent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they had insufficient time for teaching students with SEN. Clough and Lindsay (1991) observed that for teachers whose prime focus is on course work and achieving high grades, students with difficulties or disabilities in their classroom were viewed as problematic in terms of classroom management. According to Konrad et al. (2007), such a focus can be a catalyst in the construction of negative classroom outcomes like anxiety, boredom and social alienation for SEN students who are easily left behind.

A major barrier that has been identified in the literature in terms of SLD students’ success in mainstream schools is the fact that there is a strong misconception of students with SLD among subject teachers (Woodcock, 2013). Tait and Purdie (2000) note that research into teachers’ general attitudes toward students with SLD suggests that they do not always respond positively to SLD students’ presence in the mainstream classroom. For example, DeSimone and Parmar (2006) looked at mathematics teachers’ beliefs with regard to SLD students across 19 states in America, and found that the majority of respondents saw no distinction between the
SLD students in their classes and the low-performing students that they taught. This meant that these educators were under the assumption that the support structures that they provided in terms of modifications to materials for low-performing students were adequate for SLD students. This, of course, was not the case as SLD refers to a difficulty with technical aspects of learning, for example spelling and arithmetic, and does not impact the general IQ level of students (Sotelo-Dynega, Flanagan and Alfonso 2011). This seemed to portray a lack of understanding among the teachers surveyed with regard to SLD. Indeed, Siperstein and Goding (1985) found that teachers’ attitudes and responses to SLD students were based more on the label that came with the student rather than any observed classroom difficulty or behaviour. It is acknowledged that this study is perhaps not the most contemporary, but judging by recent findings in the research literature surrounding teacher conceptions of SLD, its findings appear to remain apt and relevant.

**Conclusion**

This literature review has explored just some of the main contemporary issues with regard to inclusive education and additional support for SEN students in Irish schools. The research surrounding this topic suggests that there has been significant development in the Irish Education system in terms of policy and legislation in the quest to fully include students with SLD and indeed all forms of SEN in the Irish mainstream educational system (Drudy and Kinsella, 2009). However, based on the preceding review of the literature, it is clear that there are still hurdles that must be negotiated on the road to the full implementation of inclusive policy and legislation. It is clear that gaining the insights, views and experiences of professionals working within schools is an effective way of authentically assessing how inclusion and additional support within mainstream schools are currently perceived in schools. The NCSE (2014) note that there is limited understanding of special class and additional support provision and that the need to assess their effectiveness remains. Furthermore, according to the NCSE (2015), Ireland has no established system for collecting data on the academic and social outcomes of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools. This further implicates the importance of carrying out research of this nature.
Inclusion is a developmental process that is still very much ongoing from an Irish and an international perspective (McConkey et al., 2015). This is reflected in the words of Booth and Ainscow (2002) who wrote: “Inclusion involves change, it is an unending process of increasing learning and participation for all students. It is an idea to which schools aspire but which is never fully reached.” With this in mind, it is clear that the additional support structures within the Irish education system are also in a continuous phase of development. Ireland must continue to aspire to these inclusive ideals in order to fully promote and protect the education of persons with SEN.
Chapter 3. Research Methodology

Research Aims

1. The primary aim of the present research project was to gain the views and insights of teaching professionals working in a secondary school environment with regard to the additional support received by students with SLD who attended their school. The views of the teachers were sought in two particular domains:
   - The teachers’ experiences of the additional support received by SLD students in their school and
   - The teachers’ perceptions of the additional support received by SLD students in their school.

2. Following the data collection phase of the research project, the next aim was to explore and analyse the views and insights that the teachers expressed during their interviews with regard to their perceptions and experiences of the additional support that SLD students receive in their school. This was done by using thematic analysis which will be discussed in further detail later in the research methodology chapter.

3. The final aim of this study was to fill a gap in the Irish literature with regard to our understanding of additional support provision for SLD students in secondary schools, and to inform future research and policy in this domain.

Research Questions:
The research questions in the present study were as follows:
   - What are teachers’ experiences of the additional support received by SLD students in a secondary school environment?
   - What are teachers’ perceptions of the additional support received by SLD students in a secondary school environment?
   - What are the emerging themes based on these perceptions and experiences?
Research Design
This is a qualitative study guided by a thematic analytic approach to explore and understand the perceptions and experiences of Irish secondary school teachers of the additional support received by students diagnosed with SLD in their school.

Primary data was gathered through the use of face-to-face semi structured interviews with eight secondary school teachers in which pre-selected topics were explored and discussed (see ‘Data collection methods’ section for full list of topics). The data was then studied and analysed in pursuit of emerging themes. Therefore, thematic analysis was employed as the method of analysis in the present study.

Sampling Method
Purposive sampling was selected as the most appropriate sampling method for this research project, and this was utilised to select a total of 8 participants. According to Maxwell (1997), purposive sampling is a type of sampling method that allows the researcher to select particular persons or settings for the important information that they can provide and other sampling methods don’t allow this. In the present study, the important information that these teachers had to offer was to do with their perceptions and experiences of the additional support received by SLD students in their school.

Recruitment Procedure
Following the receipt of ethical approval from Trinity College Dublin’s Research Ethics Approval Committee, it was first of all necessary to gain access to the school in question to begin the research process. A formal letter (see Appendix 6) and a gatekeeper information sheet (see Appendix 4) explaining the purpose of the study and requesting permission to conduct the study in the school were sent to the school’s board of management. A similar letter was also sent to the school’s principal (see Appendix 7). The fact that the researcher was an employee in the school at the time of contact was undoubtedly advantageous in terms of the accessibility of the school and their openness to allowing research to be conducted in the school. This assertion is supported by Rouney (2005) who lists the openness of an institution to facilitating a research project as a major advantage of conducting insider research. Once permission was formally granted to conduct the research, a meeting was scheduled
with the school principal in which the school’s protocol and codes of practice with regard to external research projects being carried out in the school were outlined and discussed. It was important to respect and adhere to these measures throughout the research process.

The next phase of the recruitment procedure involved making contact with prospective teacher candidates to participate in the present study. There were certain criteria that prospective teachers had to meet in order to be eligible to participate in this study. First of all, it was of course necessary that these teachers had experience of teaching students who were diagnosed with SLD as the research was based upon their experiences of working with such a population. It was decided that the amount of experience of working with SLD students was not a crucial factor as opinions from vastly experienced as well as mildly experienced teachers would add a variety to the data collected and would also give a more holistic account of overall teacher perceptions and experiences with regard to the additional support that SLD students receive in school. Furthermore, the views of teachers with varying levels of experience could be compared with one another. This assertion is supported by the work of Wiesman (2016), whose study was based on a comparison between the perceptions of novice and experienced teachers with regard to their perceptions of motivational constructs.

From the outset of the research process, it was undeniably important to be aware of the potential hazards that can arise from conducting insider research. One such issue that had to be accounted for was the appropriateness of interviewing work colleagues. Among the issues here is whether the participants could remain objective during the interview process. This in turn could influence the authenticity of any data generated during the interview. In order to alleviate this potential hazard, it was decided that teachers approached to take part in this research project would not be teachers with whom the researcher works directly. While the researcher did know the participants, the fact that they were staff members with whom the researcher did not have ongoing professional contact was seen as a necessary step in order to ensure the objectivity of the data collected. This measure is supported by the methodology of Unluer (2012), who found it to be beneficial to carry out insider research with members of staff who he did not have ongoing professional contact with.
The researcher then discussed the most suitable candidates who met the necessary criteria with the school principal in terms of their availability and contactability at the proposed time of data collection. A list of candidates was drafted, and eight randomly selected candidates from this list were approached one-by-one by the principal to ascertain whether they were interested in participating in the research project. The principal was told to emphasize to prospective participants that participation in the project was completely voluntary. The researcher then provided those who wished to partake in the research with the information sheet (see Appendix 1) and the contact details of the researcher. If any prospective participant refused to partake, another would be randomly selected from the list of participants who met the criteria. Fortunately in the present study, this was not necessary as all approached prospective participants agreed to take part.

It was also necessary to take measures to attempt to limit coercion in the present study as the prospective research participants were colleagues of the researcher. In order to ensure that prospective teacher participants did not feel obliged to partake in the research project, a 3rd party was asked to assist the researcher to circulate and collect the consent forms (see Appendix 2). In the case of the present study, this 3rd party was again the school principal.

Participants
Eight subject teachers working in an all boys secondary school in South Dublin participated in the present study. The research sample consisted of six male teachers and two female teachers. For ease of identification, these participants have been assigned with randomly selected common Irish first names. This measure also helps in protecting the identity of the research participants. The level of experience of the teachers varied from 1 year of teaching to 36 years of teaching. The average teaching length of the 8 participants was 12.75 years.
Table 1: Participant’s Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Teaching length</th>
<th>Subject(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ciara</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>History/Irish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niall</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Geography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>History/Irish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>Irish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saoirse</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Maths/Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36 years</td>
<td>Maths/Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiachra</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Geography/Irish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cillian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Maths/PE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data collection methods

Face-to-face semi structured interviews were the method of primary data collection in the present study. This was guided by an interview schedule designed to be delivered in a flexible, conversational style. The interview schedule was broken up into two sections or halves, the first of which was concerned with the experiences of the teachers of the additional support received by SLD students in their school, while the second was concerned with the perceptions of the teachers of the additional support received by SLD students in their school (see Appendix__). The interview schedule looked to explore a range of topics based on a preceding review of the literature surrounding this area. The topics investigated in the present study were:

- Experiences of support measures available to SLD students in school.
- Teacher training and knowledge of SLD.
- Teacher strategies to assist SLD students in accessing the general curriculum effectively.
- Factors that can impact the additional support offered to SLD students.
- Teacher knowledge of individual education plan construction and implementation.
- Teacher familiarity with procedures regarding the management of the allocation of additional support for SLD students.
- The necessity of the support/The nature of the support.
- The social and academic impacts of additional support (if any).
- Teacher perceptions of SLD students in their classroom.
Teacher relationships with SLD students.

Overall feelings toward the additional support received by SLD students in school.

According to Pathak and Intratat (2012), semi-structured interviewing is an effective method of gathering data when the research is focused upon a fairly open framework and is a useful technique for interviewing teachers about school experiences. This qualitative method of data collection provides participants with the freedom and opportunity to decide what they wish to talk about, what they believe should be talked about, the level of detail they think is necessary in answering the questions and how much of an explanation to offer in their answers (Pathak and Intratat, 2012). Indeed, Drever (1995) asserts that semi-structured interviews provide a flexible framework for interviews done on a small scale, as was the case in the present study (n=8). This was selected as the method of data collection for the present research project for these reasons.

Rather than designing a stringently structured interview schedule with closed off and dominating questions, topics were selected and broad, open-ended questions were devised based on these topics. While there were 15 prepared questions in the interview schedule, these were not necessarily adhered to in every interview. This depended on the direction of the interview based on the responses and influence of the participant. This gave participants the opportunity to interpret the questions independently and allowed participants to steer the interview and discuss the opinions or issues that they saw as most relevant in answering the questions. It also allowed the researcher to explore topics and sub-topics as they emerged throughout the course of the interviews.

The present study consisted of eight semi-structured interviews with secondary school teachers in an all-boys school in South Dublin. The interviews lasted approximately 25 – 45 minutes and all interviews were recorded using a digital Dictaphone. Permission was sought for audio recording in the consent form, and participants were informed that they were not obliged to agree to be audio recorded. Alternatively, the researcher was happy to simply take notes during the interview if this was preferred, and this information was outlined to participants in the information sheet. All eight
participants agreed to be audio recorded, and were aware that under the Freedom of Information Act (2014), they were entitled to access the information that they provided during the interview at any time. The audio files were stored on the researcher’s computer under password-protected files to ensure their security. The researcher also took handwritten notes during the interviews to highlight important points and issues that arose throughout the course of the interviews and these notes were stored in a filing cabinet with a lock.

All of the interviews took place on the school premises in South Dublin. Various classrooms and meeting rooms were used to conduct the interviews, based on the preference of the interviewee. This was done to ensure that all interviewees were comfortable in their surroundings when participating in the interview. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, but the researcher made sure to inform at least one other school professional where and when the interview was taking place as a precaution in the event of an emergency situation arising during an interview.

Because the researcher was an ‘insider’ in the organization having worked in the secondary school as a special needs assistant for the previous three years, it was important to clarify with participants that they view the researcher as just that, a researcher. While it was beneficial that there was already a slight rapport built up with the participants, there was a danger of over familiarity between the interviewer and interviewee. Participants were told that this was a research exercise and that they should answer the questions as honestly as possible and to try and remain objective throughout the interview. The attitude and approach of the researcher was important to this end and it was important to maintain a professional approach to the interviews. Teachers who were approached to partake in the present research project were members of staff with whom the researcher did not work directly during his tenure in the organization. While the researcher did know the participants, they were members of staff with whom the researcher did not have ongoing professional contact and this undoubtedly helped in maintaining the objectivity of the data. The methodology of Unluer (2012) supports this measure. Similarly to the present study, this researcher was a young member of staff who did not have power or authority over the staff and again this was observed as beneficial to the data collection process.
Data analysis
This study looked to explore emerging themes based on the personal perceptions and experiences of secondary school teachers regarding the additional support received by students diagnosed with SLD who attended their schools. Audio-recorded data was transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis was chosen as the method of data analysis to interpret this data. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a useful and flexible method of content analysis for qualitative research using human subjects as the primary data source.

Theme Selection and analysis
In the present study, the transcribed interviews were the raw data that was generated. Analysis of this data began by reading and rereading each transcribed interview to become familiar with the generated data and the account given by each participant. At this stage, the entire transcription was seen as the raw data and it was necessary to begin the process of data reduction. In order to facilitate this, emerging themes were devised, and particularly important aspects of each transcript were noted. The themes were selected based upon recurring topics that were brought up and discussed by participants. To establish a theme, topics needed to be relatable to one another from what was said in the individual interviews and it was necessary to establish a theoretical connection based on this. Clusters of themes were then identified and explored.

In the present study, the researcher elected to colour coordinate themes on the physical transcripts with the use of highlighter markers. This coordination was then used to organize and regroup the data based on the emergent themes. Highlighted sections were grouped together based on the colour assigned to each emergent theme and coding categories were created. During this process, some themes were dropped. Some lacked regular representation within the transcripts and therefore did not merit discussion. Following this process, a list of superordinate themes was constructed. There were also subthemes evident within every superordinate them. This can be seen in the table below:
Table 2: Themes and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confidence levels of students</strong></td>
<td>• Self-esteem/self-belief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increase in subject proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Organisational ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Change over time</strong></td>
<td>• Peer perceptions and attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher perceptions and attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Quantity of SLD students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Differentiation</strong></td>
<td>• Tailored Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Team teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mainstream vs. Special classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issues with label/diagnosis</strong></td>
<td>• Flawed system?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Over dependence on support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Barriers and areas for improvement</strong></td>
<td>• Class sizes and time pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Resources and teacher training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rigour**

Different criteria are used in order to assess the rigour of qualitative data, the most common of which are the headings proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These headings are: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. This will be discussed here from the perspective of the present study.

**Credibility**

When discussing the credibility of a research project, one is referring to the value and authenticity of the findings produced (Polit and Tatano Beck, 2006). In order to ensure these, the research must be conducted in a believable and replicable manner, thus portraying that it is credible (Houghton et al., 2013). In the present research, a member check was used to ensure the credibility of the study. According to Houghton et al. (2013) this is an effective technique in ensuring the credibility of a study. This involved summarizing the key points raised in the interview by the participants at the end of the interview and discussing whether they felt that this gave an accurate reflection of their viewpoint and what they wished to express during the interview.
Participants were also informed that they could request to have a copy of the transcribed interview sent to them at any time, but no participant saw this as necessary in the present study.

Measures were also taken to ensure that participants in the present study were interested in participating in the research and were as honest as possible in their responses during the interview. All participants were informed that they were in no way obliged to partake in the present study, and could withdraw at any time without any explanation or consequence. They were also asked to express their honest opinions during the interview process. Participants were assured that any opinions expressed would be helpful to the research and that there were no wrong answers to the questions. It undoubtedly worked to the advantage of the researcher that there was a slight rapport built up with participants given that they had worked in the same establishment as the researcher. It was clear that participants were comfortable in expressing their views and at no stage did any participant express any reservations about participating in the study or desire to withdraw from the study.

**Dependability**

The dependability of a qualitative study refers to the stability of the data collected and can be compared to the concept of reliability in quantitative research (Rolfe, 2006). There are close ties between the dependability of a study and the credibility of a study, and often a demonstration of its’ credibility can go a long way in ensuring its’ dependability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Dependability is found in a study where the systems and processes in achieving the end goal are examined and replicable descriptions of this process are provided to the reader (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). According to Koch (1994), even if a reader does not share the same interpretation as the researcher with regard to the data collected, the means by which their conclusions have been reached should be discernable to the reader. This requires consistency and stability over the course of the research project across methods and participants (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This study aimed to be as consistent as possible during the data collection and data analysis phases of research. Maintaining consistency in terms of the methods for conducting each interview and analysing the data was central in this endeavour. The methods employed were regularly checked and reviewed to maintain consistency within the study and to facilitate replicability for the reader. The
methods and thought processes involved in arriving at particular conclusions have been described in detail, and the cohesion of the study was maintained by regularly reviewing the current literature base surrounding the topic, the emergent themes in the analysis and the research process as a whole.

**Confirmability**

The confirmability of a research project refers to the neutrality and accuracy of the data collected (Tobin and Begley, 2004). Carrying out measures to maintain the objectivity of the present study were seen as extremely important, but it must be acknowledged that all qualitative research is to some extent influenced by the researcher (Patton, 1990). In the present study, for instance, while the interviews were flexible and semi structured in nature and open to the interpretation of participants, the topics under discussion were pre-selected by the researcher. This may have lead to some degree of unintended investigator bias which must be acknowledged.

Confirmability can be defined more effectively as the qualitative researcher’s concern toward objectivity and the methods adopted in minimising this (Shenton, 2004). Justifying the methods selected as well as providing a replicable framework of inquest enhances the confirmability of a qualitative study (Miles and Huberman, 1994). A detailed methodological description was central to this end, as well as acknowledging the potential shortcomings of the study in terms of the assumptions as well as the values and biases of the researcher (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In analysing the data, it was important that the researcher attempted to quell any pre-conceived ideals or assumptions and explore the data as objectively as possible. This is important in ensuring that the findings are the result of the ideas and experiences of the participants rather than the preferences and the characteristics of the researcher (Shenton, 2004).

**Transferability**

In qualitative research, providing rich and thick descriptions of the research process is central in terms of the transferability of the data generated (Houghton et al., 2013). The reader can then make judgments regarding the transferability of the study conducted (Koch, 1994). A vigorous representation of the research findings with the inclusion of raw data in the form of quotations is also important (Graneheim and
Lundman, 2004). While in quantitative research, the external validity of a project is concerned with numerical transferability, in the case of the present study and other qualitative research of a similar nature, the transferability was dealt with in terms of the people and structures examined. Detailed and appropriate descriptions of the methods of data collection and analysis were provided in order to enhance the transferability of the findings of the present study to specific contexts, as outlined by Casey (2007) and Houghton et al. (2013). This included details of the research participants and the research setting, the purposive sampling strategy employed and the method of thematic analysis used to interpret the data. Direct quotations from participants were also included in order to enhance the transferability of the present research.

**Ethical considerations**

Conducting informative, ethically sound research was the end goal of the current project. For this to become a reality, it was abundantly important to take any potential ethical issues into consideration and to develop strategies to deal with them accordingly. The first ethical issue to be dealt with was the storage of non-anonymised data in the present study. This was important as far as maintaining the anonymity of the research participants was concerned. Any audio or electronic data that was generated during the data collection phase of the research was stored under password protected files on the computer of the researcher. Any physical non-anonymised data generated (e.g. consent forms) were stored in a personal filing cabinet with a lock to which the researcher was the only one with access. This data will be kept for the minimum retention period of two years as outlined by Trinity College’s guidelines for good research practice.

It was important that participants were fully aware that they were being audio recorded during the interview process, and this was explicitly outlined in the information sheet and consent form. This was also reiterated verbally before the commencement of the interviews. No interview was recorded without the signed consent of the participant to be recorded, and all participants were given the option of undergoing the interview without audio recording. In the present study, all participants consented to being audio recorded.
The importance of informed consent when conducting research with human subjects has been affirmed by all modern codes of ethics and ethics committees (Pedroni and Pimple, 2001). To this end, it was abundantly important to provide clear and easily digestible information sheets and consent forms to all prospective participants. The contact details of the researcher and the research supervisor were provided on the information sheets and consent forms in the event that participants may have had any queries regarding participation in the present research project. The procedure and measures taken when contacting prospective research participants are outlined in the ‘recruitment procedure’ section above. All participants were contacted a week before the intended commencement of data collection to give them a reasonable time period to consider their participation in the study. Participants were also continuously reminded that they could withdraw from the research process at any time without any negative consequences.

As previously mentioned, because the researcher was an employee of the school in which the research was being carried out, this created a potential conflict of interest and increased the risk of coercion in the present study. In an attempt to minimise this danger, participants approached to partake in the present study did not work directly with the researcher. While there wasn’t ongoing professional contact between the researcher and the participants, it should be noted that the participants did know the researcher as they were both employed in the same school. There are, of course, positives and negatives to this as discussed in the ‘recruitment procedure’ section. Strategies employed to combat coercion and to maintain the objectivity of the study are also outlined in the ‘recruitment procedure’ section of the research methodology above.
Chapter 4. Findings

Thematic analysis of the raw data generated during the interview process produced the eventual findings in the present study. Five clusters of main themes emerged and were identified on the basis of the accounts given by participants during their interviews with regard to their perceptions and experiences of additional support structures for SLD students in their school. These themes were identified as follows: ‘Confidence levels of students’, ‘Change over time’, ‘Differentiation’, ‘Issues with label/diagnosis’, and ‘Barriers and areas for improvement’. Following the generation of these themes, it was necessary to filter the data further into subthemes. This was important as it helped to categorise the data within the main themes. The main themes are presented and discussed below along with the subthemes that arose within these main themes. Quotations are included from the participants’ verbatim interview transcriptions in order to provide a comprehensive and thorough account of each theme and subtheme for the reader. Each main theme section will begin with a quote to convey a relevant summary of the findings and to highlight the importance of the theme that is about to be discussed. As previously mentioned, participants have been assigned with Irish common first names in the present study for ease of identification for the reader and also to protect the identities of the participants. A summary of participant characteristics, including subjects and teaching length, can be found in table form in the research methodology chapter.

Main Theme: Confidence Levels of Students

“It’s not just about getting the A or the B, it’s just getting them up to a level of confidence and ability I suppose, isn’t it? That gives them the influence I suppose to create their own future.” (Art).

This theme is concerned with the impact that the receipt of additional support can have on SLD students in terms of their confidence levels. The above quote provides an interesting synopsis and a viewpoint that many of the teachers seemed to share with regard to the provision and receipt of additional support in this school. From the teachers’ perspectives, the additional support was viewed as much in terms of
enhancing quality of life and self-perceptions through fostering and developing confidence as it was in terms of improving academic performance for the SLD students. It was stated by a participant of significant teaching experience that the students he had seen had “blossomed” due to the self-confidence that was allowed to develop and thrive through the receipt of ongoing additional support (Sean).

This was clearly a central theme as each participant made reference to confidence levels at some stage during their interview. Confidence was discussed on a very broad level and therefore the subthemes of ‘self esteem/self belief’, ‘Increase in subject proficiency’, and ‘organisational ability’ are being used to compartmentalise this overarching theme. These will be discussed further here.

**Subtheme: Self-esteem/self-belief**

It was observed by a number of participants that the additional support that SLD students receive can have a notable impact on the self-esteem and self-belief of these students. This was mentioned and discussed by the participants in terms of the academic and social outcomes that they could see as arising through their perceptions and experiences of the additional support received by SLD students. Many of the teachers adopted quite a holistic life-quality view of the students when they began to discuss self-esteem and self-belief rather than simply speaking from an academic or a curriculum driven viewpoint. For example, one participant said: “some students that maybe struggle with learning difficulties, tend maybe to be quiet and can struggle socially interacting with other students so I definitely think that if there’s support there it helps them build confidence and that’s almost more important than kind of helping them with exams” (Fiachra). The same participant emphasised the importance of “social intelligence” in this day and age and stressed the benefits of being able to socially interact with others outside of the enclosed school community once they graduate and leave the school.

From an academic point of view, Ciara noted that the additional support is there to: “promote their self-esteem and self-belief and hopefully promote them to study themselves independently.” This participant also discussed some potentially harmful implications that can arise with the receipt of additional support for SLD students in school: “I think the only difficulty is the perception of the student themselves. If a
student feels that they are going to the, and this is the word they’d use, the thick
classes or the support classes or whatever negative connotation or word that they
might have on it, I think that’s a disadvantage because if it hits their self-esteem its
not good.” She also noted that this is largely dependent on the: “atmosphere and the
ethos of the school”. Art also commented that “I would totally understand if a student
was a bit shy, you know, and not exactly broadcasting it” when discussing the
possible impact that receiving additional support can have on students’ confidence
levels.

In another interview, one of the participants took an interesting view as to how the
self-esteem and self-belief of SLD students is enhanced with the additional support
that they receive. He spoke of an acceptance and clarity that the support can bring to
students with regard to their diagnosis, and that this in turn can enhance their self-
perceptions and self-esteem: “You see students themselves, if they understand that
they have a difficulty it can actually help them and they can understand, ‘it’s not that
I’m stupid, it’s just that I have a learning difficulty’ and that in a way can give them
confidence” (Niall).

This assertion was supported by Art, who strongly believed that students should be
encouraged to avail of the support that is available to them: “You’ve sometimes got to
go to a student and say look, this is there for you, avail of it and as much as you can
press upon them that it’s for their own benefit and they’ll be more confident and all
the rest of it at the end of it all.” He also remarked that the additional support:
“releases a pressure, a pressure valve and that pressure is gone” when discussing
students’ acceptance of their diagnosis and their awareness of the support measures
available to them.

**Subtheme: Increase in subject Proficiency**

Many participants spoke of the confidence benefits that an increase in subject
proficiency and academic competence can cultivate for these students, and this
increase in proficiency was accredited predominantly to the additional support
received by the SLD students. It was noted that “specific programmes” are put in
place for SLD students, whether it be a: “specific reading programme, specific
spelling programme or it could be a very general programme” and the main reason behind this is to “support the student in kind of lots of curricular areas” (Ciara).

Confidence and self-esteem were also said to be enhanced due to the small class settings that generally comprised additional support in this school. One participant stated that: “I think the smaller classes that are provided just gives them a huge amount of confidence in areas that they wouldn’t necessarily, maybe get in a whole class setting. They get to ask more questions when they’re not comfortable and I think that they generally feel a lot more confident and comfortable in that one-on-one situation” (Saoirse).

This assertion was supported further by Ciara, who also commended the small class settings highly in terms of enhancing self-esteem and self-belief: “they benefit from it, they want it, it’s a chance for them to breathe. It’s a chance for them to relax. It’s a chance for them to ask questions that they’re too embarrassed to ask in front of their peers. And it’s a chance for them sometimes to catch up and sometimes to go ahead of the other students.”

Other interviews saw similar discussion and findings arise with regard to the impact of the additional support on subject proficiency. For example, one of the participants who was a relatively newly qualified teacher, spoke very highly of the additional support in terms of “directing the minds” of the SLD students that he taught and also providing them with a “much clearer knowledge” of the subject. He explained that: “their appetite for the subject itself grew immensely as they were getting more and more support as the things that had previously been blurry to them were now black and white” and that the SLD students “weren’t lost I suppose in the subject as they were at the start of the year and because of the extra support they took a far more active role in class” (Cian).

Art echoed this positivity during his interview: “I think it’s a two-pronged thing, it gives them, the students, help with the subject itself and strategies and methods to deal with the subject”. He also reported that: “when the marks start improving and when the ability and the work starts improving, that automatically creates more confidence and it also gives a student a desire to do well again, so that’s a big thing.”
**Subtheme: Organisational ability**

The final subtheme that arose with regard to confidence levels is the impact of organisational ability on the students’ confidence levels that stems from the provision of additional support. Again, this was highlighted and discussed by participants as one of the benefits of the provision of additional support in this school. It was mentioned by Cillian that: “I think for them it’s good to get a bit of structure.”

Niall expressed that: “it gives them confidence. They have their work done and they’re more organised, maybe they’re learning sort of organisational skills.”

Cian gave a specific example of a student with dyspraxia who he taught and how the additional technological support that he received helped him to organise himself and enhance his self-confidence throughout the school year. He said: “well one of the students I teach uses a laptop for all examinations and classes because of his dyspraxia, and I think that this helps him a lot as before, specifically in September/October/November he was really struggling through the class and to keep up with the pace of the class whereas now, if anything he’s ahead of the rest of the class in terms of note taking and in terms of being able to study effectively”.

**Main Theme: Change over time**

“*These are far happier students than would have been the case 25 years ago*”

(Sean).

This theme deals with the changes that have occurred with regard to the provision of additional support SLD students as well as the school experiences of this population. Again, all of the interviewees mentioned some facet of this theme and the developments that have occurred in recent years was something that the participants wished to elucidate during the interviews.

As past pupils and now teachers in the school under discussion, Fiachra and Cian could offer unique insight into the development of the support structures in the school from both perspectives. Fiachra mentioned that: “Initially, when I started off in the
school, it probably wouldn’t have been where it is today in terms of support, it definitely has improved quite vastly over the years.”

Similarly, Cian highlighted that when he was in school: “there was almost zero extra help offered to the students in my year that would have been SLD” and that “in the intervening maybe 5 or 6 years its come on leaps and bounds in terms of what the school can offer students that are special needs and have SLD.”

The main subthemes that emerged under the superordinate theme of ‘Change over time’ were ‘peer perceptions and attitudes’, ‘teacher perceptions and attitudes’ and ‘quantity of SLD students.’ These findings will be discussed and analysed here.

**Subtheme: Peer perceptions and attitudes**

It was evident across all interviews that the teachers viewed the perceptions of non-SLD peers towards SLD students as predominantly favourable, but it was also widely acknowledged that this has not always been the case. Many of the participants used their own time in school as students as a reference point when reflecting upon the treatment of SLD students in the school where they are now working as teachers. For example, Cillian said: “I don’t think they’re as stigmatised as they would have been even when I was in school. That’s not too long ago. Like you would hear children maybe making a joke of it but it’s not malicious.” He also commented that “it’s just something that’s kind of normal. There isn’t a big deal made of it.”

The label that was prescribed to a student was generally seen as a positive thing in terms of peer perceptions, as it created an awareness and an acceptance of the difficulties that this student might be facing in the wider school community: “for other students I think, if they’re aware that there are students with learning difficulties in their class, maybe that’s a good thing because you know when I was at school, you’d have kids or students in the class that were weaker and might be labeled (by their peers) as whatever it was, and that probably still happens but there might be more of an understanding” (Niall). According to Niall: “There’s an awareness in the school community that students have difficulties and I think a number of students have definitely benefited over a number of years.” On the other hand, he also commented that “there might be a stigma attached to the support they’re getting” and “you’d have
a slight fear that other students would look at that as a special needs room or whatever word they might call it.”

Art commented that: “students have their own in-built code nearly” when it comes to their peers with SLD and that: “it’s an unwritten rule sometimes, you don’t go near that, you wouldn’t slag someone off.”

Fiachra argued that the prevalence of students now receiving additional support in the school has undoubtedly had a positive impact on peer perceptions and attitudes: “there’s so many of the students that receive extra support that it’s no longer a bigger deal. Definitely I would say a couple of years ago when maybe one student left class I’d say maybe there was a perception of that child’s slow, or maybe there was a bit of slagging.”

Interestingly, Cian mentioned that there may be a disparity in acceptance across school ages, and that the maturity levels of the students played a big part in terms of peer perceptions and acceptance of SLD students: “at an immature level, the peer perception depends very much on the students’ character and his persona really.” The point being made here was that quiet or timid students with SLD may be more prone to negative stigmatisation at an immature level than outgoing and sociable students with the same label. He went on to state: “I think that as maturity comes that the older students stop viewing it as a thing that sort of separates the students from each other and more of just a part of everyday school life.”

Saoirse also acknowledged that while she would perceive the peer perceptions of students as positive, that it can be hard to know this for sure: “Now I don’t know personally how some students are, they probably still find it uncomfortable maybe but I think at large in the school that it’s very much seen as a normal kind of thing.”

Again, this participant acknowledged what she perceived as a definite change in attitudes over the years: “I think it’s changed over time. I definitely think there was a negative perception and it was kind of maybe kept on the ‘hush hush’ and it wasn’t really spoken about and now I think, I don’t know if other students even notice when it’s just, oh they’re going to an extra class or they’re whatever.”
Subtheme: Teacher perceptions and attitudes

This was a subtheme that not all participants discussed, but those who did inspired some thought provoking findings. Niall commented that: “In recent years, teachers have been made more aware of the problems some students have and try to accommodate them as much as possible in their class” but also warned that: “teachers’ level of expectation for a student can go way down when they’ve heard that a students has all of these difficulties, and I’m not sure that’s such a good thing. That can actually lead to behavioural issues because the student then sees themselves as an exception to everybody else.”

This was echoed by Cian: “it does change their opinion of that students in some ways. I don’t think that they do it on purpose but I think just, having the very label on that student might change some teachers’ perceptions.” This seemed to highlight how big a role that teachers’ perceptions can play on the school experiences of SLD students.

It was the most experienced of the participants (Sean), who expressed some compelling insights when discussing this subtheme. He began the interview by commenting: “In the 36 years I have been teaching, things have changed hugely and I’m quite sure I was teaching students with SLD in the early years and we didn’t even know because they were never even diagnosed and nothing was known about it, and as time has gone on that has become more recognised.” During this interview, it was emphasised that: “the whole area of recognition and dealing with the students has improved hugely” and that in the past, SLD students: “may not have been adequately looked after.” According to this participant, in the past, teachers did not know enough about it and didn’t embrace the SLD students and indeed other SEN students as a requisite of their job: “30 years ago when I saw this first coming in to schools and so on and teachers didn’t know enough about it, very few teachers were involved, it was normally the preserve of one teacher and what happened in that teachers’ classroom in the area of SLD was just unknown and not understood.” He mentioned that before the school had an established learning support teacher and resource room, that teachers may not have been as aware as they are now of the difficulties that certain students face in school: “before that, to be perfectly honest we didn’t give it enough priority which basically meant that the whole area of the SLD students was taken up more with form filling than with actual practical work on the ground.” A far wider
involvement among school staff with regard to the provision of additional support has developed according to this experienced educator: “I have seen teachers who, going back a number of years would not have liked to have taken these classes, would have been reluctant to take them and would really not maybe have got involved with the students as much” and it was also stressed that the resources available to the school are now being more effectively utilised and that over time, a wider staff involvement has developed: “It was always somebody else’s job who took those students out of the class, now there’s a complete all round whole school involvement.”

Ciara expressed interesting opinions with regard to teacher perceptions of and attitudes toward SLD students. She acknowledged that the school and additional support structures in general have come a long way in a relatively short space of time and is optimistic for the future: “I think we can do more and I think we will do more. I think schools especially secondary schools are learning from their mistakes and are learning each year about how to improve the department and you’ve got whole school evaluations and you’ve got parents as partnerships and you’ve got the voice of students, and I think this time 10 years we’ll be in a lot better place.” She also expressed an extremely positive attitude toward SLD students: “I think they’re colourful, I love working with them and I think the world and the class would be a lot duller, a much duller place without them.”

**Subtheme: Quantity of SLD students**

Unlike the other subthemes within the superordinate theme of ‘Change over time’, this finding is not concerned with a change in attitudes and perceptions with regard to SLD students and the support that they receive in school. Rather, it is centred upon a perceived change in the quantity of SLD students now being diagnosed and availing of additional support in school. Art expressed the view that: “there is definitely more cases of people and students in need of resources.” He could not pinpoint what this was down to, but offered some insight and some ideas: “I think it was always there but maybe it wasn’t recognised. Maybe the resources themselves weren’t there, maybe having a resource teacher who’s qualified in the specific area is huge, I don’t know if that’s in every school. And then I think it’s a societal thing maybe as well. There seems to be, and it’s hard to say this without sounding kind of old school, there seems to be a lot more and I’m not sure what the reason for that is.”
Fiachra raised an interesting point by asking: “are there more labels or are there more students with labels?” Niall was of the opinion that more students have been diagnosed with SLD than was the case in the past, and this is why the demand for additional support and the volume of SLD cases in schools has increased: “more students have been diagnosed with difficulties, right, but whether or not there are more now you know, whether there are more than there were 10 years ago I don’t know. When I started nine years ago, it’s just more of them have labels and so on now.”

Ciara also put the increase in SLD cases down to wider diagnosis and a greater recognition of SLD across all school ages with students often being diagnosed later than would have been the case in the past: “we’re beginning to realise and recognise it more. I think what we’re finding is that later diagnoses are coming to the fore.”

**Main theme: Differentiation**

“It’s not how clever or capable is the child. It’s how is this child capable. What’s this student’s ability, so how do you get the best out of the child as a teacher?” (Art).

The participants were asked whether they offered any sort of differentiation to students with SLD in order to facilitate their accessing of the general curriculum and the findings based on these responses are dealt with in this theme. Generally, teachers said that they offer differentiation in some form to students. This varied from different homework, to revised worksheets, tailored correction and even revised class activities, particularly in PE. When asked if differentiation was necessary, Saoirse provided an informative and thought provoking response: “I think if you’re going to treat everybody fairly, but at the same time take into consideration that everyone is not learning in the same way and everyone’s not receiving what you’re saying in the same way then I think it is kind of necessary.”

This point of view, for the most part, was shared by the participants in the present study. Findings in the domain of differentiation will be discussed through the subthemes of ‘tailored support’, ‘team teaching’ and ‘mainstream vs. special classes’.

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*Subtheme: Tailored support*

It was found that teachers in this school were willing to revise their lesson plans and class structures in an attempt to facilitate students with SLD accessing the prescribed teaching curriculum to the best of their ability. Having said this, it was also acknowledged by teachers that SLD students make up a small proportion of the overall student population and it can therefore be difficult to offer the sort of differentiation or tailored support that these students need to achieve their potential.

Fiachra spoke of the variety of practical difficulties that can arise for a teacher, and indicated that the option of differentiation was not always a possibility due to these: “Day to day, having eight classes, maybe seven classes or six classes in a row, if you have seven classes and 28 students and two or three of those students struggle with dyslexia in each class then that’s a lot of preparation.” This participant also went on to say that: “Now I’d say any teacher that says they do it (differentiation) for each class, I’d be very surprised if that’s the truth.” This was an honest and realistic take on differentiation. It was clear that the teachers wanted to do their best in terms of implementing differentiation, but this was obviously not as easily achieved as one may have thought. In terms of strategies adopted, Fiachra spoke of: “providing extra notes”, “trying to have as many work sheets and revision sheets as possible and try to have various levels for maybe a few of the weaker students to have appropriate homework for them.”

Niall spoke of setting different tasks in class, and being realistic about the ability of each student: “I might set them a different task in class, one that a student is able to sort of achieve, it’s a realistic goal or it’s something that they can actually do.” He also spoke of breaking the Leaving Certificate geography course down for students who had difficulties: “With the Leaving Cert cycle, I would give them some pointers on say topics to revise and exclude quite a few topics which other students would have to cover.” Cillian shared a similar view with regard to being realistic about student’s abilities: “if a child can’t do it there’s no point in forcing them to do something they’re not able to do, so just try and break things down and make it easier.”
Like many of the other participants, Niall stressed the importance of not making a special case or an example of SLD students in class and how they should be treated the same as any other student whenever possible: “I guess the other thing is sort of that, you’d be reluctant to differentiate in class you know to make a special case for a student, because they might be sensitive about it.”

Art mentioned the importance of having the requisite knowledge of the label that a student may have and what this might mean in terms of state examinations. Reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations means that many SLD students receive spelling and grammar waivers, and even extra time to complete examination questions in Ireland. According to Art, this should undoubtedly be a factor with regard to differentiation: “I would take into account whatever they would get or hope to receive a waiver or a special recognition in the exam. I would tailor that into the way I correct it. So for example, a student in my 5th year class now has huge difficulties with spelling but is very intelligent, knows the subject matter of the poem so the spelling isn’t taken into account.”

**Subtheme: Team teaching**

Three of the participants mentioned team teaching as a useful and effective form of differentiation that could be utilised to the benefit of SLD students. This is a form of teaching that involves more than one teacher in the classroom during lessons. Cillian spoke of past experience that he had with team teaching in another school where he was previously employed. He believed that team teaching was an applicable and realistic solution for catering for the diverse needs within a classroom, including the needs of SLD students and students with other forms of SEN: “it definitely helped because with so many children with SLD and then you’d have ADHD as well in there on top of that, at least with two teachers, they’re getting more attention and they’re less likely to be off task so I think it helped that way in just keeping control of the whole class together and I suppose you’re teaching everyone at the same pace.” He also went on to say that: “You’re probably teaching at a faster pace than you would be if it’s just one teacher in front of the class and then a few of the students going and getting extra help outside of the class.” Therefore, based on these findings, team
teaching could be an effective way of keeping SLD students in the mainstream class, thus limiting segregation.

Similarly, Ciara recommended team teaching as a way of differentiating work for SLD students in a mainstream class setting without singling them out as special cases. She mentioned that: “team teaching definitely works” to this end, and recommended that this should be brought to the fore in initial teacher training programmes. Cian, a newly qualified teacher, also championed the prospect of team teaching: “I think that team teaching would very much help the students with SLD as, because there’s two teachers there’s a lot more resources to go around the class and they have the chance to talk to students individually during that time period.”

**Subtheme: Mainstream vs. Special classes**

All participants in the present study believed that SLD students benefit from a mixture of special class and mainstream classes in terms of support provision. It was widely expressed that the mainstream classes were important in terms of social development and peer interaction, but the smaller classes were beneficial from the point of view of keeping up with subject matter, building confidence and maintaining organisation. Fiachra summarised this universal feeling among the participants well with his comments: “I don’t think it would be good for them to just be by themselves with teachers or SNAs for the whole entire day. Now that definitely varies in terms of some students may have a severe case of learning difficulties and that would be rare in our school, but I suppose it depends on the student. Overall, I would say that it’s important for them to be in as many mainstream classes as possible and maybe for a few subjects, a class a day or maybe two classes a day to be one-on-one I think would benefit them greatly.”

**Main theme: Issues with label/diagnosis**

“With some students I feel that they don’t require the level of support they’re receiving and then there are other students who don’t get any support, and it comes down to the diagnosis” (Niall).

This is a particularly thought provoking theme that emerged throughout the course of the interviews. It was found that the majority of teachers interviewed felt that the
psycho-medical diagnosis of impairment was paramount to the allocation of additional support. They also felt that there were students who perhaps met no criteria for diagnosis and because of this were not afforded any support structures, while often students who had been diagnosed with SLD did not necessarily need the level of support that they were receiving. This seemed to highlight a perceived flaw in the system of additional support allocation. It was also mentioned that students who receive resource from a young age can develop a dependence and reliance on the additional support, and that this was not a good thing for them going forward. The subthemes that emerged under the overarching theme of ‘importance of label/diagnosis’ were ‘flawed system?’ and ‘over dependence on support’.

**Subtheme: Flawed system?**

Five of the research participants expressed concerns at the current support allocation model that is prevalent in Irish schools. This model places an undeniable emphasis on a diagnosis of impairment in order to be allocated additional support on an official basis. Concern was expressed regarding the apparent ease with which certain students have been diagnosed in recent times, even though the diagnosis that they were given was perhaps not fully merited. Furthermore, teachers were worried about the future, and whether the school would be suitably able to deal with the volume of SLD students should this trend of diagnosis continue at the current rate. Art commented that: “I do think that people do seek exemptions when in days gone by they wouldn’t have needed it and they would have done OK” and: “90 per cent of cases are genuine I think and then I’m not saying the other cases aren’t genuine but I’m saying maybe there’s an inclination if there’s any hint I think then maybe the full whammy (of additional support) is availed of.” Pressure for high-achieving and leaving cert points was offered as an explanation for parents seeking these exemptions and it was argued that: “the help should be completely devoted to the students who most need it. That’s a slight worry I would have going to the future, looking at the amount of people who are now availing of the resources.”

Niall considered the plight of students who had not been diagnosed in any way, but remained academically weak and slipped through the net as it were: “there are students there who don’t get any support who are some of the, we’ll say, academically weaker ones in class and maybe it’s that they’re difficulties haven’t been picked up on
or that their parents haven’t pushed or looked for it.” Cillian commented that he perceived certain students as maybe “taking advantage” of their label and they may see it as a way of “getting out of certain classes.” It was stressed that this would be an overwhelming minority of cases, but that it is important to: “make sure the right children get the right resources.”

Sean mentioned that parents sometimes perhaps use the system to their child’s advantage: “I feel that sometimes, some parents feel that there is a certain advantage to be got in having their students diagnosed in certain ways and so on, be that for situations like the DARE entry to University or in terms of getting additional help within the school, and I think that’s something that has to be watched very very carefully.”

Subtheme: Over dependence on support

Another concern that was expressed with regard to additional support provision was a reliance or dependence that teachers have seen develop among SLD students who become accustomed to the support that they have been provided with in school. According to Fiachra: “on the odd occasion maybe there’s too much help in terms of they are almost spoonfed every little bit of practice in terms of the exams.” He felt that this was to the detriment of the personal development and futures of certain students in cases that he had witnessed in the past: “as soon as these students hit third level education there’s not that help there and there’s not that level of support and they struggle. I’ve heard of cases where students struggle with anxiety as soon as they reach college and then they drop out.” Niall spoke of a “helplessness” that can arise among SLD students due to them becoming dependent on the additional support that they receive. Art expressed a similar concern and believed that students should be encouraged to work to their maximum and then receive support rather than relying on the support to be there every single class or every single day: “sometimes we need to encourage students to get the absolute most, the maximum out of themselves and not to completely lie back on the special needs.”

Main theme: Barriers and areas for improvement

“In my own experience as a teacher, it seems as if every day is a busy day” (Fiachra).
This theme deals with the issues and hurdles that the participants perceived as impeding the full execution of effective additional support and the full inclusion of SLD students in their school. The teachers were extremely positive about additional support overall, but when asked about barriers and areas for improvement, the same issues seemed to arise across all interviews. These are reflected in the subthemes which in this instance are ‘class sizes and time pressure’, and ‘resources and teacher training’.

**Subtheme: Class sizes and time pressure**

It was strongly felt that class sizes created difficulties in terms of effective additional support provision due to the lack of time that was available for each student. In fact, this was seen as a general issue that was present in the school for all students and not just the SLD students. As Cillian put it: “Like 28 children, so if you’re going to divide 40 minutes by 28, it’s barely a minute and a half for each child.” The standard class size in Irish schools is 30 students and therefore, the school in question is actually below what would be the case in a large quantity of other Irish secondary schools. Niall acknowledged that: “maybe we use it (class sizes) as an excuse” but that if you have 28 students in front of you of which two or three are diagnosed with an SLD, it is extremely difficult to give those SLD students the type of attention and assistance that they may need.

Ciara was in agreement with this assertion in terms of class sizes: “I think if a teacher has 30 got students and four of those have difficulties, I think you’re giving them an impossible task.” Saoirse also mentioned: “in just one period, trying to get around to every student is nearly impossible.”

On top of the issue of class sizes, general workload and time pressure were highlighted as barriers to the quality of support that can be offered to SLD students. According to Art: “the days and the weeks go very quickly with the work on the subject itself and other things outside the classroom.” Fiachra spoke of how: “there’s always something going on” in the school on a day to day basis and that allocating the appropriate time within class or indeed outside of the classroom for the preparation
and delivery of additional support is a major challenge because of the time pressure and the busy schedule of school events.

Niall acknowledged that communication between subject teachers and the learning support teacher as well as SLD students has suffered due to the time constraints and pressures that the teachers have to deal with: “time is the big thing, time to sort of liaise with the resource teacher or students outside of the class time, again, that’s something we probably need to do more of. More communication between staff members and students with special needs.” Sean acknowledged that teachers have a hectic schedule throughout the school year, and that completing the prescribed curriculum can be a major challenge, let alone implementing strategies and making time for additional support: “teachers are very busy people and they’re trying to keep up with their own curricular development and their own curricular needs.” Saoirse provided an apt summation of this finding by simply stating that: “time is probably the biggest issue and barrier” to effective support provision.

**Subtheme: Resources and teacher training**

It was found that issues with regard to resource management and teacher training were the final barriers identified in terms of the development and sustainment of appropriate additional support for SLD students. Fiachra highlighted the fact that there is only a certain amount of teaching staff allocated to each school and that one absent teacher can have a serious knock-on effect in terms of the availability of teachers to fulfil their additional support commitments: “I definitely think it’s a lack of resources. Obviously there’s a limit to the amount of teaching staff that each school can have which can be very challenging at times, if maybe a teacher is sick or whatever there’s another teacher asked to take their class and that teacher might have been taking an extra class with a student struggling in that period, for example.”

Further, Sean spoke of a disparity in secondary schools that can exist in terms of subject teachers. This means that certain subjects have a lack of teachers and due to this, it can be hard to timetable teachers appropriately to provide the necessary support for SLD students as they simply may have too many classes in the first place: “sometimes in certain subject areas where students might need a little bit more help you might have a shortage of teachers in that area where you may have more of an
availability of teachers in other areas.” Sean also remarked that in an ideal scenario, more resources and more support would be available to all SLD students but that at the same time, there is a need to be realistic and to make the most of the available resources: “I’m sure we would all say that we want more hours to devote to it and equally, we would be looking for more hours for the normal teaching of normal subjects in normal classrooms but you can only have a certain amount, there is a limited amount of resource there and you have to use it to the best of your ability.”

It was found that the teachers in the present study generally felt as though more training in the area of SLD and SEN in general would be of benefit to them and to their colleagues. This was discussed in terms of initial teacher training and also the opportunity for continuous professional development. Ciara mentioned that there needs to be more emphasis on special needs education in the initial teacher training programmes which should incorporate: “differentiation, diversity and disability in the classroom.” Niall mentioned that during his time training as a teacher, there was not enough of the course dedicated to dealing with disability in the classroom: “when I did my own training there was no special needs course, there may have been a fraction of a course about special needs but not a whole lot.” Saoirse expressed concerns about the competence of teachers in terms of the delivery of additional support to SLD students: “Are the people giving the support sufficiently, I suppose, comfortable and confident with what they’re delivering or is it just a timetable filler?” She also noted that the subject teachers should learn from the teachers who specialise in teaching small groups and who are experienced in facilitating additional support for SLD students: “I think we’re so used to teaching big classes that you don’t really fully understand the viewpoint of those that are in full time positions of helping students so I think, whether it’s getting training from within the school or training outside the school I think it would be hugely beneficial.”

Cillian mentioned that hands-on experience was the most effective way of learning in his opinion and that his teaching practice placements were of huge benefit with regard to his understanding of SEN: “It’s when you’re out on teaching practice that you learn most things, you see straight away the wide range of abilities in the class and try to cater for all the abilities.” Similarly, Art viewed his professional development in terms of SEN as a dynamic process of constant learning or a “learning curve”. He
compared teacher’s grasp of SEN with the basic knowledge that they have of first aid:
“it’s nearly like first aid in one way. We have a very basic grasp of it, most teachers,
but how many teachers can actually go and, say if someone did need a defibrillator,
we’ve done the course but we always need refreshing.”
Chapter 5. Discussion

This study was an investigation of teachers’ perceptions and experiences of the additional support available to SLD students in a mainstream Irish secondary school. Data was collected through semi-structured interviewing and the raw data generated was analysed thematically. This thematic analysis revealed five main overarching themes with subthemes, as outlined in the ‘Findings’ chapter of this research project. These five themes were: ‘Confidence levels of students’, ‘Change over time’, ‘Differentiation’, ‘Importance of label/diagnosis’, and ‘Barriers and areas for improvement’. This section will provide an analysis and discussion of the findings in the present study, as well as a reflection on the limitations of the current project and an exploration into potential avenues for future research with regard to additional support structures for SLD students in Irish schools.

Confidence levels of students

In the school under investigation, SLD students are given extra classes during certain periods of the day away from the mainstream classroom in small learning groups with other students of similar abilities. It was found in the present study that participants saw the provision of additional support of this nature to SLD students as a major positive in terms of fostering and developing confidence. This was discussed in terms of a perceived benefit to self-esteem and self-belief, an increase in subject proficiency and in organisational ability.

The participants in the present study saw the special classes that the SLD students attended as an important component of their school enjoyment and educational success. This finding is reflected in the work of Travers (2009) who found that having the option of being placed in a special class setting on a part time basis can be a necessary ‘crutch’ for students with SEN in mainstream schools and in this way is important in facilitating inclusion for these students. Numerous participants in the present study also noted that the small class settings provided SLD students with the opportunity to ask questions that they might be too nervous or afraid to ask in front of their peers within a mainstream class, and one of the participants noted that these classes gave SLD students a chance to “breathe” and “relax”. From this point of view, small group settings should not be viewed as a form of segregation, but rather as a
safe environment away from the social and academic turbulences that SEN students are inevitably faced with on a daily basis. Vlachou et al. (2006) looked at this question from students’ perspectives in their study, and it was found that the majority of students with learning difficulties preferred the resource room to their mainstream classroom. A plethora of research has shown that providing the option of segregated, small class settings to students with learning difficulties can bestow certain advantages upon this student population. These advantages include enhanced self-esteem (Jenkinson, 1997) and fostering educational development (Oakes, 2005). Kauffman and Hallahan (2005) found that teaching students with SEN is positively influenced by having a special unit with trained expert teachers who place emphasis on functional skills while providing tailored lessons and instruction to these students.

As previously mentioned, Parsons et al. (2009) note that no model of special education support provision can be conclusively considered as more effective than another, and this in itself provides sufficient grounds for conducting research studies of this nature. There is a lack of concrete understanding of the best way to support SEN students in mainstream schools, and this undoubtedly merits inquest. The findings of the present study suggest that in terms of fostering confidence and self-belief, and enhancing organisational ability and academic attainment, small group settings are pivotal for SLD students. This lends weight to the notion that small class settings within mainstream schools have a valid and important function and to a certain extent goes against current policy which emphasises mainstream class placement for all SEN students, wherever possible. The present research supports the assertion of Travers (2009) who argues that the entire school should be viewed as the main unit of inclusion, rather than simply mainstream classes. The DES (2007) make provisions for this as they outline that students should be taught separately in special classes when this is in their interests, or when they will not benefit or cannot participate in lessons in the mainstream class. Similarly, Ware et al. (2009) assert that special classes should continue as part of a continuum of provision. These findings highlight the merit and importance of having special classes in mainstream schools, yet it remains the case that the NCSE do not enforce the establishment of special classes and schools are not required to provide them. This is undoubtedly a contemporary issue that needs to be addressed, and finding a suitable solution may involve remodeling what it is that inclusion truly means in Irish schools.
Change over time

With the level of policy construction and development around the area of educating students with SEN in mainstream Irish schools in recent decades, it was unsurprising to find that the participants in the present study had perceived notable changes over time with regard to additional support provision. For the most part, these changes were discussed in a positive vein but there were some changes that teachers expressed concern and uncertainty about going forward. Change over time was discussed in terms of ‘peer perceptions and attitudes’, ‘teacher perceptions and attitudes’ and ‘quantity of SLD students.’

Overall, teacher participants believed that peer perceptions and attitudes were overwhelmingly positive towards students with SLD, but acknowledged that there is always a danger that the students’ label may bring about social difficulties. It was also widely expressed that this positive attitude has not always been evident in the past, and that a tolerance and acceptance has developed in recent years as special educational provision has become more prevalent in the school and a part of everyday life. One of the participants noted that the SLD students in the school are far happier now than would have been the case 25 years ago. This finding goes against quite an extensive body of literature that has discussed the social difficulties that can arise for SLD students and SEN students generally in mainstream schools. Research indicates that these students are particularly vulnerable of being isolated in mainstream schools due to their dominant identifying label (Mand, 2007). According to Cooney et al. (2006), ‘typically developing’ students make downward social comparisons with their disabled peers. Frostad and Pijl (2007) demonstrated that pupils with disabilities are less popular, have fewer friends and participate less often as members of a subgroup than their non-disabled peers. Alarmingly, the findings of this study showed that 25 per cent of students with special needs were not socially included in their peer group.

It would appear that there are two ways to interpret the findings of the present study with regard to peer perceptions. On the one hand, it could be that this is an extremely progressive and accepting school in which SEN students are viewed as no different to any other students and are seen as valued members of the school community. On the other hand, these findings may be somewhat idealistic and should be interpreted with a certain degree of caution due to the fact that they are from the perspective of
teachers rather than students themselves, and therefore may not fully reflect the reality of the situation. The importance of students’ voices in research of this nature will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

In terms of teacher perceptions changing over time, a detailed account was provided by the most experienced of the participants who had seen a major shift in teacher attitudes toward SLD students over the years. This is an undeniably progressive and positive finding, as teacher attitudes are central to the overall school experiences of SEN students from both social and academic points of view (Hastings and Logan, 2013). According to the participants, the school had come a long way in a relatively short space of time since establishing a learning support centre just a few years prior to the present research project taking place. It was acknowledged that in the past, perhaps the school was not doing enough for students who were eligible for the receipt of additional support, but that now the school uses the resources that are allocated to the students and to the best of the ability of the staff, a whole school approach is taken to handling SEN. This finding is reflected in the literature surrounding this topic, which suggests that in recent times, there has been a shift towards positive attitudes for SEN students in mainstream schools (Woodcock, 2013). It was also mentioned that the future looked bright and that the school will be in a far better place 10 years down the line. Having said this, it was highlighted by some participants that the presence of a label can alter some teachers’ perceptions of and attitudes toward SLD students in terms of expectation levels, and this can create behavioural problems for students. It has been shown that labels can lead to assumptions about the capabilities of children to learn and operate from the notion of a child’s weaknesses as opposed to their strengths (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). This leads to the defining of children by their label rather than their individual characteristics and is a major issue as it goes against the most basic principles of inclusion. Furthermore, it has been shown that correlations exist between negative attitudes and ineffective teaching strategies (Palmer, 2006).

It was noted by teachers that the quantity of students with labels who are now availing of additional support in school has increased significantly in recent times. A conclusive explanation for this trend evaded the teacher participants in the present study, although it was speculated that this was perhaps a “societal” trend by one of the
participants. It would appear that this surge in students availing of additional support can be attributed to a wider definition of SEN in the EPSEN (2004) act, which has led to higher proportions of students with disabilities availing of mainstream schooling opportunities. According to McConkey et al. (2015) over the past decade in Ireland, the amount of pupils with mild to moderate disabilities (e.g. SLD) attending mainstream schools has grown substantially. Teachers in the present study expressed concern about this trend looking forward to the future. They questioned whether the school would have the resources and facilities to adequately cater for the rising number of SEN students. A seemingly basic and inconsequential issue was discussed here, and this was the issue of physical space in school environments. With all of the complex policy and educational issues that one associates with the provision of additional support, practical stumbling blocks like physical space may not always be taken into account. In the present study, it was expressed by teachers that there was only one resource room in the school that was already extremely busy, and that the allocation of appropriate physical space in the planning of additional support provision for the future is something that undeniably needs to be taken into account. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) mention that the availability of physical space and adequate resources can have a strong effect on teacher attitudes to inclusion.

Differentiation
In general, the teachers in the present study showed an openness and willingness to incorporate differentiation into their general teaching curriculum, and all of the participants expressed that they do try and implement differentiation wherever possible in order to assist SLD students in accessing the curriculum. Again, this was an extremely progressive and positive finding that showed an active interest in the promotion of inclusion within this school. Having said this, participants expressed concerns regarding their professional competence with regard to effective differentiation and providing a suitable education for SEN students. This finding is reflected in the work of Thomas and Vaughan (2004) who noted that teachers have a lack of confidence with regard to the promotion of inclusion with the resources available to them.

While the teachers conveyed that they made efforts to incorporate differentiation, it was also acknowledged that this was not always possible due to the busy and frantic
nature of secondary school teaching. One participant iterated that there was “always something going on” in school and that differentiation was important but did take a lot of planning and preparation, which was not always possible or practical. Again, this is a finding that is reflected in the literature. Ernst and Rogers (2009) found that time for differentiation is more limited at secondary school level simply because of the fact that teachers work with numerous groups of pupils on a day-to-day basis. From an Irish perspective, Shevlin et al. (2009) noted that differentiation and inclusion is more complex at secondary school level because of “curricular complexity, timetabling, examination demands and possible adolescent resistance to support at this level” (p. 5).

Interestingly, one of the participants expressed how important it was to have the appropriate knowledge of the different labels that sit before a teacher in any given classroom. Some participants gave examples of times when students who had diagnoses were in their classes and they were not aware of this until it became explicitly obvious through the child’s academic performance or behaviour. For differentiation to be implemented, it is of course extremely important for teachers to be aware of the SEN students in their classroom. Furthermore, reasonable accommodations in examinations should also be made explicitly clear to teachers in order to ensure that they provide students with similar accommodations throughout the school year, and correct the work of these students appropriately.

Team teaching was propounded as an effective way of catering for the diverse needs within a classroom and for providing individual students with more one-on-one time with subject teachers within a mainstream class. According to some participants, this technique meant that teachers could differentiate work for SLD students without having to single them out as special cases. This is reflected in the findings of Murdock, Finneran and Theve (2016) who found that team teaching offered the opportunity to incorporate a level of differentiation into the learning environment that would simply not be possible within single teacher lessons.
Issues with label/diagnosis

The teacher participants in the present study acknowledged how important it is for students to be diagnosed with a label in order to be allocated any form of additional support on an official basis. From the perspective and experiences of the teachers, this brought about notable challenges and issues and seemed to highlight shortcomings in the system of additional support allocation in Ireland. It was felt that certain students had been allocated additional support who perhaps were not the most needing of support within the school community. This was seen as an issue on two levels. First of all, this meant that certain students were availing of support who perhaps did not need the help and who in years gone by would have done fine without any additional support. Secondly, weaker students whose parents perhaps did not put them forward for assessment or who did not meet any criteria for additional support when assessed were left to fend for themselves academically. This seems to come back to the issue highlighted earlier in this research project with regard to the undeniable emphasis that the Irish education system has on a psycho-medical model of impairment when allocating support measures for students (McDonnell, 2003). In fact, the NCSE recently drew attention to what were perceived to be significant flaws in the allocation of additional teaching resources to mainstream schools and recommended the development of a new model of resource allocation (McCoy et al., 2014). This is an issue that is easy to scrutinise, but equally one which is by no means straightforward and easily solved. The assessment of students in recognition of their difficulties is key in distinguishing students who are in need of additional support from those who aren’t, and this method of resource allocation will most likely not change in the foreseeable future simply because no other clear and comprehensive method exists.

Certain participants also expressed concern regarding a perceived over dependence that can arise with the receipt of additional support for SLD students. One participant in particular felt strongly that students should achieve the maximum that they are capable of achieving themselves and then to be given support on top of this to help them in any necessary manner. This was seen as a way of avoiding a perceived “helplessness” that teachers had seen arising with certain students in the past. This idea is supported by work that has been done on the concept of self-determination. For pupils with a disability in mainstream education, self-determination is effective in two ways. Firstly, it is a tool for civil rights, empowerment and self-advocacy that
focuses on the rights of pupils with disabilities to be in control of their own lives. It is also a catalyst for educational success that emphasises a means of improving the educational outcomes of pupils with disabilities (Sagen and Ytterhus, 2014). It is abundantly clear, therefore, that fostering self-determination is important in secondary schools for SEN students who receive additional support. It would appear that this is what the participants in the present study were making reference to when arguing that SLD students should be afforded autonomy until they reach a threshold of sorts, at which point the provision of additional support becomes necessary. Concern was expressed with regard to the post-school outcomes of students who have received extensive support in second level schooling because these levels of support may not be available at third level and certainly will not be available in the world of employment. Interestingly, Konrad et al. (2007) assert that students with SLD have an unacceptably poor level of positive post-school outcomes. They highlight the fact that nearly 20 per cent of youth with SLD are not engaged in work or education shortly after leaving mainstream secondary level schools. This suggests that a high proportion of students with disabilities are not attaining acceptable levels of self-determination while attending secondary level mainstream schools. With this in mind, the views of the participants in the present study would appear to be quite relevant and merited.

**Barriers and areas for improvement**

Participants identified certain barriers that can hamper the additional support that is made available to SEN students in school from both practical and academic points of view. Class sizes, time pressure, a lack of resources and issues surrounding teacher training were all seen as stumbling blocks with regard to the full implementation of inclusion and the effective provision of additional support to SLD students. The main issue with class sizes was that with 28 students to cater for, the time that can be allocated to SLD students or indeed any particular student is quite minimal. As one participant in the present study pointed out, if a class is 40 minutes long and a teacher has 28 students in the class, that’s barely a minute and a half for each student. As previously mentioned, team teaching or co-teaching as it is sometimes known could be a practical and realistic solution to this contemporary issue. This would provide teachers with more of an opportunity to liaise with SLD students during mainstream classes while a colleague is present to focus on the needs of the rest of the class. Having said this, team teaching is only effective if there is a meaningful collaboration
between teachers who are willing to work together for the betterment of the class in question (Murdock, Finneran and Theve, 2016).

Hastings and Logan (2013) acknowledge that exam pressure is at the heart of secondary education in Ireland, and it is therefore unsurprising that the participants in the present study listed time constraints as a major issue with regard to effective additional support provision for SLD students. Secondary level teachers are under pressure to concentrate their efforts on obtaining maximum points for their students in order to ensure their progression to a desired third level course (Byrne, 2007). This means that the entire prescribed teaching curriculum must be completed in preparation for the demanding state examinations. Hastings and Logan (2013) observed that 52 per cent of the participants in their research were of the opinion that they had insufficient time for teaching SEN students. This finding was reflected across a wide variance of teaching experience, and it was widely recognised that time pressure impeded the ability of teachers to include all learners in their lessons (Hastings and Logan, 2013). Perhaps for a more equitable education system to become a reality in Ireland, there needs to be less of an emphasis on examination results and league tables based on transition to third level education. Evans and Lunt (2002) see this as a marketplace influenced educational philosophy that has been the norm in Ireland for quite some time. The rise of special education provision in Ireland has changed how we view education (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). Perhaps it is time to alter and improve the education system to reflect this new viewpoint.

Based on the findings of the present study, it would appear that there is a need for mandatory training to improve perceived competency levels among subject teachers when dealing with SEN students. Participants in this research project expressed uncertainty regarding their professional capacity as regards catering for the educational needs of SLD students, and most participants agreed that they would benefit from some sort of training or in-service in this area. This mirrors the findings of Winter (2006) who found that teachers felt inadequately trained when dealing with SEN students in an inclusive classroom setting. Furthermore, Farrell and O’Neill (2011) also found that learning support teachers often lacked confidence in subject teachers’ capacity to effectively facilitate SEN students within their classroom in terms of differentiation and general lessons. There is currently no obligation upon
subject teachers to undertake any sort of training with regard to SEN or to attend any courses to improve understanding of SEN (Travers et al., 2010). Going forward, perhaps this should be revisited in terms of mandatory continuous professional development.

**Limitations**

While the findings of the present study offer a valid and contemporary contribution to the ever-expanding research base surrounding the provision of special needs education, there are certain limitations to the study that should be acknowledged and considered upon the interpretation of these findings. First of all, this study was conducted using a relatively small sample size. Eight participants partook in this research project. This means that the views that were expressed by this small population of secondary school teachers may not necessarily be generalisable and representative of the wider teaching population in Irish secondary schools. Further, there was a gender imbalance in the present study with 75 per cent of participants being male. This was due to the fact that there was a majority of male teachers in the school under investigation, and it was predominantly males who were available to partake in this research project at the time of data collection. Although Avramidis and Norwich (2002) and Hastings and Logan (2013) found that teacher variables (including gender) were not significant with regard to attitudes toward SEN and inclusion, balancing for gender may have yielded quite different results than those produced in the present study. The inexperience of the researcher should also be taken into account. While the study yielded some significant findings that were reflected in the research literature, it was found that early interviews did not produce data as rich as the interviews conducted towards the end of the data collection period. This can be attributed to the confidence and comfortableness of the researcher in terms of interviewing participants increasing with experience. While this could not have been accounted for at the outset of the research process, it is undoubtedly a shortcoming that is worth noting.

The fact that insider research was the method of inquest in the present study can be viewed in terms of positives and negatives, as discussed earlier in this project. It is possible that the researcher had certain unconscious biases due to the fact that the research was being conducted in the place of employment of the researcher and the
nature of the research topic was closely related to the professional occupation of the researcher. While accounting for biases and maintaining objectivity were seen as central to the success of this research project, it remains a possibility that certain biases may have influenced the data and findings generated.

**Directions for future research**

There are many interesting avenues that could be explored to build upon the framework presented in the present study and to add to the findings generated. The participants in the present study were all teachers, and the eventual findings represented the viewpoint of this population alone in a particular school. Future research should incorporate the viewpoints of different stakeholders with regard to the provision of additional support in secondary schools. For example, a triangulation of teachers’, parents’, and students’ views would provide a more holistic picture of the support structures in this school and would therefore produce more authentic and reliable data. This was beyond the scope of the present study, but would be an interesting extension to the present research findings. Sampling these populations in numerous secondary schools would further enhance the usefulness and applicability of any generated data.

Conducting research of a similar nature in schools with different demographics would also provide valuable findings. The present research project was conducted in an all boys secondary school in an urban middle class setting in South Dublin. The approach adopted in the present study could be used to investigate the additional support structures in rural schools, schools in working class areas, in all girl schools and indeed in mixed schools. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) found that the ethos and beliefs of a school are central to the interpretation of inclusion and approaches to additional support provision. Therefore, gaining insight into different demographics would undoubtedly be of value to this field of research.

According to Tangen et al. (2009) certain populations of children have been consistently denied a meaningful voice in research, including students with SEN. Whyte (2006) asserts that the voice of children with disabilities has been largely absent from research until recent times in Ireland. Thomas, Walker and Webb (1998) have argued that young people having an opinion on how their education proceeds is
central to the principles and ideals of inclusion. Unfortunately, the reality is that many students diagnosed with learning disabilities or any other form of SEN are often considered to be objects of charity and concern whose voices or opinions are disregarded or even not sought to begin with (O’Keeffe, 2011). This goes against the ideals of the Education Act (1998), the National Children’s Strategy (2000) and the EPSEN act (2004) as all of these documents call for the consultation of children and students on matters that are important in their lives. O’Keeffe (2011) found that often in research concerning learning disabilities, students views are omitted in favour of parents’ views and opinions. The process of supporting the participation of children with disabilities in Irish research is now considered a challenging but necessary undertaking (Whyte, 2006). This needs to be taken into consideration for research of this nature going forward.

**Learning Process**

Conducting qualitative research of this nature is an undeniably rewarding task. It challenges the researcher to reflect profoundly upon the question and task at hand in order to produce the most effective and comprehensive method for tackling the issue under investigation. It was necessary to dig deep into the research base surrounding this topic in order to develop a clear knowledge and understanding of what was being studied before the commencement of data collection could even be considered.

The data collection phase is a definite learning curve in which the research skills of the researcher are put to the test and forced to develop hastily. With more experience, confidence and competence began to develop and facilitating interviews became an enjoyable and rewarding task rather than a difficult and anxious experience. Data analysis and interpretation was possibly the most rewarding step of this research process as it became clear that the research topic would make a valuable contribution to the literature surrounding this topic. Overall, the learning process of this research project was a steep yet satisfying one for the researcher.
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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Teacher Information sheet

Participant Information Sheet (Teachers)

TITLE OF THE STUDY: A study on the perceptions and experiences of SLD students and their teachers of additional support received in a mainstream Irish secondary school.

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Feel free to ask any questions if anything you read is not clear or you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

WHO I AM AND WHAT IS THE STUDY ABOUT?

My name is Ronan Cunningham and I am a postgraduate student at Trinity College, Dublin. I am conducting this research in order to complete a dissertation as part of the requirements for the M.Sc. in Disability Studies.

This study is designed to investigate the perceptions and experiences of students diagnosed with a specific learning disability and teachers of students with specific learning disabilities on the additional support received in a secondary level mainstream school.

WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?

Participating in a semi-structured interview. In the interview, I will ask some questions with regard to the possible advantages and disadvantages of receiving additional support for SLD students based on your perceptions and experiences. Some of the topics that will be covered are peer perceptions of SLD students, teacher perceptions of SLD students, differentiation in the classroom and issues with additional support in secondary schools.

The interview will take place in school and will last for 30-45 minutes approximately. If you opt to partake in the interview, please note that you will be audio recorded.
This is done to assist me later in the dissertation writing process as I will be able to listen back to interviews. Any recordings will be stored securely and only the research team will have access to the recordings. If you have strong opposition to being recorded, there is no issue at all with this. You can still take part in the study and the researcher can simply take notes during the interview.

**WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?**

You have been invited to take part in this research project as you are a teacher of students with SLD. Therefore, you have valuable experiences in dealing with these students and have witnessed the additional support that they have received in school. Any information that you can share on this topic is considered helpful and the insight that can be gained from the views of teachers is invaluable in a project of this nature.

**DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?**

Participation in this project is completely voluntary. You have the right to refuse participation. At any time, if you decide that you no longer wish to participate, you can withdraw from the study without any consequences. You can also withdraw your data from the study up to three weeks after taking part in the interview.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS AND RISKS OF TAKING PART?**

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be providing the researcher with valuable knowledge and insights about your experiences of students with SLD receiving additional support in mainstream education. Inclusion in mainstream school has been seen as an important goal in the education of students with learning disabilities since the early 1990s. Thus far, however, minimal research has been conducted regarding views on additional support that these students receive in mainstream Irish schools. Gaining the perspectives of teachers will add to the value and authenticity of any collected data. There are no wrong answers – any information provided will be considered valuable and useful to the study. Please note that there will be no monetary reward of any kind for participating in this study.
There are no obvious risks associated with participation in this study. If you decide that you no longer wish to participate, you can withdraw from the study without any consequences. Your participation is completely voluntary.

**WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?**

Your anonymity will be protected if you decide to participate. A pseudonym will be used to identify you and the views that you express in the interview process. There are some situations, however, whereby breaking anonymity may be seen as necessary. For example, if I feel strongly that there is a genuine risk of harm to you or another individual based on what you say I am obliged to share this information with the appropriate authorities. I will make sure to raise this issue with you first, however.

**HOW WILL INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?**

Non-anonymised (distinguishable) data will be collected in this study in the form of audio recordings and signed consent forms. This means that you can be easily recognised by the content of this data. Procedures are in place for the storage of this data. Any audio/electronic records that are generated will be stored under password protected files on my personal computer that only myself and my research supervisor will have access to. Any physical non-anonymised data generated will be stored in a locked personal filing cabinet. The data will be retained for a minimum period of two years in line with Trinity College Dublin’s guidance for good research practice. If at any time you wish to access this data, you can simply contact me (contact details included below) and I will facilitate this. You are entitled to do this under the Freedom of Information Act (2014).

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?**

The results of the study will be used for academic purposes in the submission of my dissertation. Depending on the significance of the results of the study, my dissertation may be put forward for publication in an academic journal and/or presented at a conference.

**WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?**
Please feel free to contact me at any time before, during or after participation. I can be reached by email at cunninro@tcd.ie or by phone at 0872808651. You can also contact my research supervisor Professor Trevor Spratt by email at sprattt@tcd.ie or by phone at (01) 8963790.
Appendix 2 – Teacher Consent Form

A study on the perceptions and experiences of SLD students and their teachers of additional support received in a mainstream Irish secondary school.

Consent to take part in research

• I………………………………………… voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

• I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

• I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

• I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

• I understand that participation involves a 30-45 minute interview with the researcher.

• I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

• I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

• I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

• I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in a research dissertation, and potentially in published papers and academic conferences.

I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.

I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained. Any audio/electronic records that are generated will be stored under password protected files on the researcher’s personal computer that only the researcher and research supervisor will have access to. Consent forms will be stored in a locked personal filing cabinet. This data will be kept for the minimum retention period of 2 years as outlined by Trinity College’s guidelines for good research practice.

I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for at least two years following the interview.

I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

**Contact details**

Ronan Cunningham, Researcher

Email: cunninro@tcd.ie

Phone: 0872808651.

Professor Trevor Spratt, Research Supervisor
Email: sprattt@ted.ie
Phone: (01) 8963790.

Signature of research participant

-----------------------------------------
Signature of participant Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

------------------------------------------
Signature of researcher Date
Appendix 3 – Teacher Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule (Teacher)

OPENING

(Establish Rapport) - [Smile and shake hands with teacher. Offer refreshments and ask them to take a seat when ready.]

Hi, (teacher’s name) how are you doing today? Thank you for coming along, how’s your day going?

I’m really happy that you are available to help me with my study. Have you read and understood everything on the information sheet? I would be happy to go through anything that you are not sure about at this time or answer any questions that you might have?

[Make sure they are comfortable before explaining purpose of interview.]

(Purpose of interview) –

If you’re happy you understand, I’ll begin by briefly explaining the purpose of this interview. This interview is about exploring some of your perceptions and experiences of students with specific learning disabilities receiving additional support in school. As a teacher, your perspective and insights into this topic are really valuable and will help in understanding the nature of this support in a mainstream secondary school.

I want to learn about some of your experiences of support in school, and how you perceive the additional support structures in your school.

Remember that all of your information is extremely helpful and that there are no wrong answers to these questions.

I’d like to remind you at this time that your identity will be protected and that your name will not be used in the interview.
(Time line) -

The interview should not take too long, maybe about 30 – 45 minutes.

Remember that you can stop me to ask questions at any time and if you want to stop the interview or skip any questions at any time there is no problem at all with that. If you’re happy that you understand everything, I’d like to begin the interview now. Are you available to respond to some questions at this time?

**Preamble**

- Can I ask what subject(s) you teach and how long you have been teaching for?
- Have you got experience of teaching students with SLD in the past?

**Transition to main interview questions.**

**Body of interview**

**Section 1 – Experiences of additional support.**

1. What is your experience of the types of support measures received by SLD students in school?

   -(Provide examples of support types if necessary for prompting – in-class support, out of class support, revised curriculum, assistive technology.)

2. From your experience, do you think that these support measures are helpful for these students?

   - Do they address the specific needs of these students?
   - Please expand on this if you could.
   - Can you think of any examples?

3. Do you feel that teachers in general have adequate training and knowledge of SLD and other SEN in schools?

   - Could you tell me a bit more about this with an example or two if possible?
   - If not, what could be done to promote this?
4. Do you as a teacher offer a revised curriculum to SLD students in your
   class in order to facilitate their accessing of the curriculum?

   - Can you give me an example of a strategy that you may have used?

5. In your opinion, are there factors in school that have an impact on the level
   of support that teachers are able to offer SLD students?

   - Pressure for good exam results?
   - Resources?
   - Please expand on this.

1. Roughly how many students with SLD do you teach?

   - Have there been changes over time?
   - Why would this be?

2. From your experience, who is in charge of SLD students’ Individual
   Education Plan construction and implementation?

   - Teachers? Parents? Other school professionals?

3. Who is in charge of the management of the allocation of support for SLD
   students?

Section 2 – Perceptions of additional support

1. Do you feel that SLD students need the level of support that they currently
   receive in school?

   - Is there too much/too little support?

2. What are the benefits and hindrances of additional support for SLD
   students?

   - What kind of difficulties/benefits can arise? Academic/social?
3. What impact does additional support have on peer perceptions?
   - Please expand on this.
   - Is this a good or a bad thing?
   - Can you think of any examples?

4. What impact does additional support have on teacher perceptions of SLD students?
   - Are they seen as the same as other students or different?

5. How would you describe your relationship with the SLD students that you teach?
   - Different/the same as your relationship with other students?

6. Do you feel that SLD students should receive support in mainstream classes or smaller, special classes?
   - Could you tell me why you think this?

7. Based on what we’ve discussed, would you describe your overall feeling to the support received by SLD students as positive or negative?
   - Are your feelings reflected in the entire faculty do you feel?

Finishing statement

OK, we will finish the interview there. Thanks for your informative and helpful responses.

CLOSING

➢ It has been a pleasure getting to know more about you and some of the experiences that you have had in school and the information that you have
shared with me has been really helpful. I thank you again for taking the time to take part in this interview and helping me with my study.

- Is there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know before we finish this interview?
- Have you got any questions or issues that you would like to discuss with me?

OK, thanks again. If you find that you have any questions at a later date, please feel free to contact me at any time via phone or email. My contact details are provided on the information sheet that you received before this interview. If you would like another copy of, I’d be happy to give you one now.
Appendix 4 – Gatekeeper Information Sheet

Information Sheet (Gatekeeper)

TITLE OF THE STUDY: A study on the perceptions and experiences of SLD students and their teachers of additional support received in a mainstream Irish secondary school.

I would like to invite you to assist me in conducting a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you and for the participants. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Feel free to ask any questions if anything you read is not clear or you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

WHO I AM AND WHAT IS THE STUDY ABOUT?

My name is Ronan Cunningham and I am a postgraduate student at Trinity College, Dublin. I am conducting this research in order to complete a dissertation as part of the requirements for the M.Sc. in Disability Studies.

This study is designed to investigate the perceptions and experiences of teachers of students diagnosed with a specific learning disability on the additional support received in a secondary level mainstream school.

WHAT I NEED YOUR ASSISTANCE WITH

This study will involve 8-10 teachers. The teachers involved will be teachers of students with specific learning disabilities. I will need your assistance in gaining access to these populations and in distributing information sheets and consent forms to these populations. Any questions or uncertainty among prospective participants can be addressed directly to the researcher and you will not have any responsibility in dealing with this.

WHAT TAKING PART IN THE RESEARCH WILL INVOLVE?

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Participating in a semi-structured, friendly interview. In the interview, we will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of receiving additional support for SLD students based on the perceptions and experiences of SLD students and their teachers.

The interview will take place in school and will last for about 30-45 minutes approximately. Interviews will be audio recorded. This is done to assist the researcher later in the dissertation writing process by listening back to interviews. Any recordings will be stored securely and only the research team will have access to the recordings. If a participant has strong opposition to being recorded, there is no issue at all with this. They can still take part in the study and the researcher can simply take notes during the interview.

Participation in this project is completely voluntary. If participants become uncomfortable with the research topic or decide that they no longer wish to participate, they can withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. If they later decide that they wish to discontinue their participation in this project, they may withdraw participation at any time also without any consequences.

**WHO WILL HAVE ACCESS TO DATA FROM RESEARCH?**

Non-anonymised (distinguishable) data will be collected in this study in the form of audio recordings and signed consent forms. This means that participants can be recognised by the content of this data. Procedures are in place for the storage of this data. Any audio/electronic records that are generated will be stored under password-protected files on the researcher’s personal computer and only the researcher and research supervisor will have access to this. Any physical non-anonymised data generated will be stored in a personal filing cabinet with a lock. The data will be retained for a minimum period of two years in line with Trinity College Dublin’s guidance for good research practice. If at any time participants wish to access this data, they can simply contact the researcher (contact details included below) and this will be facilitated. They are entitled to do this under the Freedom of Information Act (2014).

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?**
The results of the study will be used for academic purposes in the submission of my dissertation. Depending on the significance of the results of the study, the dissertation may be put forward for publication in an academic journal and/or academic conference.

**WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?**

Please feel free to contact me at any time for further information. I can be reached by email at cunninro@tcd.ie or by phone at 0872808651. You can also contact my research supervisor Professor Trevor Spratt by email at sprattt@tcd.ie or by phone at (01) 8963790.
Appendix 5 – Consent to Facilitate research

A study on the perceptions and experiences of SLD students and their teachers of additional support received in a mainstream Irish secondary school.

Consent to facilitate research

- I…………………………………… voluntarily agree to help facilitate this research study.

- I understand that even if I agree to help now, I can withdraw at any time without any consequences of any kind.

- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

- I understand that I will assist the researcher in accessing the necessary populations for this project and will distribute the necessary information to these populations as requested by the researcher. I also understand that I will assist the researcher in selecting appropriate candidates to partake in this research project.

- I understand that all data collected in this study is confidential and anonymous.

- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Contact details

Ronan Cunningham, Researcher

Email: cunninro@tcd.ie

Phone: 0872808651.

Professor Trevor Spratt, Research Supervisor
Email: sprattt@tcd.ie

Phone: (01) 8963790.

Signature of gate keeper

---------------------------------------------------------------

Signature of gate keeper    Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

---------------------------------------------------------------

Signature of researcher    Date

**Appendix 6 – Letter to School board of management**
Coláiste Eoin,
Stillorgan Road
Bootsrstown,
Co. Dublin

Dear Board of management,

My name is Ronan Cunningham and I’m currently beginning a qualitative research project for my M.Sc. in Disability Studies course at Trinity College, Dublin.

Subject to approval by the Ethics review committee in Trinity College, this study will be using interviews to gather information on the perceptions and experiences of teachers of students diagnosed with specific learning disabilities on the additional support that these students receive in school. Teachers will also be interviewed on their perceptions and experiences of the additional support that students with specific learning disabilities receive in school. It is intended to interview 8-10 teachers on the subject.

I’m writing to ask your permission to be allowed access to your school in order to facilitate the interviews for this study. This should not take a large amount of time (each interview will be about 30-45 minutes long) and can be done at a convenient time and date for the school. I will need to distribute the appropriate information sheets and consent forms to all prospective participants. I would ask for the assistance of the school in doing this.

I have attached an information sheet and consent form for you as a gatekeeper of this institution. Rest assured that all answers and results from the interviews will remain confidential and will be available to all participants at any time. I have outlined the measures in place to ensure this in the attached information sheet.

If it is possible to conduct the research in this school, please could you email me at cunninro@tcd.ie or call me at 0872808651. Alternatively, you could contact my
research supervisor, Professor Trevor Spratt at sprattt@tcd.ie or by phone at (01) 8963790.

I appreciate that you have taken the time to read this letter and hope to hear from you in the near future.

Thanking you in anticipation,
Ronan Cunningham.
Coláiste Eoin,
Stillorgan Road
Booterstown,
Co. Dublin

Dear Principal,

My name is Ronan Cunningham and I’m currently beginning a qualitative research project for my M.Sc. in Disability Studies course at Trinity College, Dublin.

Subject to approval by the Ethics review committee in Trinity College, this study will be using interviews to gather information on the perceptions and experiences of teachers of students diagnosed with specific learning disabilities on the additional support that these students receive in school. Teachers will also be interviewed on their perceptions and experiences of the additional support that students with specific learning disabilities receive in school. It is intended to interview 8-10 teachers on the subject.

I’m writing to ask your permission to be allowed access to your school in order to facilitate the interviews for this study. This should not take a large amount of time (each interview will be about 30-45 minutes long) and can be done at a convenient time and date for the school. I will need to distribute the appropriate information sheets and consent forms to all prospective participants. I would ask for the assistance of the school in doing this.

I have attached an information sheet and consent form for you as a gatekeeper of this institution. Rest assured that all answers and results from the interviews will remain confidential and will be available to all participants at any time. I have outlined the measures in place to ensure this in the attached information sheet.

If it is possible to conduct the research in this school, please could you email me at cunninro@tcd.ie or call me at 0872808651. Alternatively, you could contact my
research supervisor, Professor Trevor Spratt at sprattt@tcd.ie or by phone at (01) 8963790.

If you are happy to facilitate this research, I would ask if the school has any particular policies or regulations in place with regard to external research being conducted in the school? If so, it would be great to familiarise myself with these before the commencement of research and I would request a face-to-face meeting with you if at all possible to discuss such matters.

I appreciate that you have taken the time to read this letter and hope to hear from you in the near future.

Thanking you in anticipation,
Ronan Cunningham.

Appendix 8 – Example of Interview Transcription

Interview 4 – Transcription (Art)
P = Participant  
R = Researcher

R – So, as we discussed already, this interview is broken up into two separate parts. The first section is about your experiences of additional support that students with specific learning disabilities receive so, students with dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia for example. So just to begin, I’ll ask you what subjects you teach and how long you’ve been teaching for?
P – I teach Irish, and only irish since 95 I suppose ye.
R – OK, and have you got experience of teaching students with SLD in the past?
P – I would do ye. Ye, ye.

Section 1 – experiences of additional support

R – OK, so we’ll start off by talking about you experiences of additional support. So what is your experience of the type of support measures received by students with SLD in school?
P – When you say additional support?
R – Ye so, examples would be in class support, out of class support, technological support, revised curriculums etcetera
P – I suppose I wouldn’t have experience of SNAs in the classroom, so I wouldn’t have experience of in class support. That hasn’t been in my experience so far, students in my classes would have, would be under, would be receiving special needs resources, would be availing of the resources I suppose is that the way to put it?
R – Ye I understand.
P – in different classes from junior cert to leaving cert ye. They would be ye. Different ranges I suppose, dyslexia, all on the varying different spectrums from difficulties with spelling to difficulties with understanding, some would, more now than in previous years, some would now do their exams orally, from mouth. So that’s something that would maybe stand out. And it would appear to me that the help they get and the resources they avail of definitely help them. For example a student two years ago, (mentions student’s name), he received a lot of help from the resources in the school and from the resource faculty in the school and that was a huge help for him because that special one-on-one help, it gave him, I think it’s a two pronged thing, it gives them, the students, help with the subject itself and strategies and methods to deal with the subject. The practical then, the actual using of a tape or using of a computer with regard to their subject and also a huge one is it gives them
confidence. So for example, that particular student in that situation up to 5th year would’ve been very quiet in class, extremely quiet to the extent that you wouldn’t have got to know him very well. But with him in 6th year I would’ve noticed a definite difference in his confidence, even in the class. Not that he was talking in every class or participating in every class but he was certainly more visible in the class I suppose could be the word. So the help he was getting, for example he would ask questions of the notes on the board for example, he would ask you a question. Whereas before he would’ve been very much under the radar. So I think the resources in that situation that were availed of in the case of this student, for example would be a huge help to him personally. I know his results were quite good at the end so that was a big help for him. It just gives them a boos, it gives them the ability to, it gives them the knowledge that they are actually, that they can actually deal with the subject. Whereas before they might have gone under and maybe be forced to sink or swim in a class of 28, 29, 30 students but now the resources are there and the facility is there for them and once they get into that resource system where they can be helped, the help itself makes a big difference.

R – Ok, so the next question then will be, do you think that the support measures are helpful for the students but you’ve already kind of answered that!

P – OK, I was jumping ahead a bit there. But they are helpful. They can only help. Anything extra, anything that gives the student eh, anything that gives a student confidence and that helps them with the actual subject of the subject if that makes sense, is a huge help. It also may be sometimes there are students who are, sometimes you see in students’ behavior that they might cover up the difficulties that they have in a subject by their behaviours, with unacceptable behaviours.

R – So acting out?

P – Ye a little bit perhaps. Also maybe avoiding work, escaping from the work. Not in a troublesome or difficult or bad behavioural way per se, but its kind of through themselves they might avoid an exam, they might avoid written homework, they might not do as much as they should do but then when they avail of the resources and the resources are there for them, it helps, one-on one in particular, or on a continual basis, in more significant cases when maybe you might need an SNA in the room, and as I said I’m not experienced in that and not sure how helpful that is to a student, it depends on the student I think. Some students will accept it gladly, some students
don’t want it and might even refuse it. It’s case by case, but the question was does it help them? It definitely helps them, absolutely it helps them.

R – OK, so next question is do you feel that teachers in general have adequate training and knowledge on SLD and other forms of SEN?

P – Speaking on my own behalf I would say that it’s a learning curve for me. Before you probably would’ve sat down with a student who you would call weaker academically in certain subjects, right, you might give him the extra class here or there where you can. Certainly for oral Irish leaving cert that kind of thing, for written work in the junior and leaving cert you could sit down with them and maybe go through an exercise with them maybe give them the exercise to do again and correct it again for them. But that’s something that you would choose to do yourself maybe, but when it’s part of an official thing that they can avail of, and they get three classes with a resource teacher per week or three classes with whoever is helping them, that’s official and they know and they go and because also they’re leaving a class to go and have that special class at that time, there’s more of an emphasis on it and it’s important. It becomes recognised by them as being of a huge advantage to themselves, so sorry the question again?

R – Do teachers have adequate training and knowledge of SLD?

P – I’m not sure about training. I think we could all maybe, it’s nearly like first aid in one way. We have a very basic grasp of it, most teachers, but how many teachers can actually go and, say if someone did needs a defibrillator, we’ve done the course but we always need refreshing. Maybe that’s not the best example as obviously first aid is completely different to special needs but from the point of, it’s a learning curve and I would know now a lot more. And also, you know kind of where they’re struggling, what’s being done in the special classes to help them and then on that course, say during 6th year you’ll be aware of the type of waiver that that student will get so you can tailor your teaching. So for example if I were to give a poetry question out to a student in 6th year and I know from the start of 6th year that he’s going to get a waiver from spelling and grammar, or he will be doing the exam orally, then you can practice that with them during the year. That’s vital. And also the fact that you know that he’s going to get the waiver in spelling and grammar, you can tell them two things you can say do your very best with the accuracy in your written work but also then in exams and in the mocks and stuff like that you can say I’m not going to take this into account, so you’d have it exactly the way that it will be for his leaving cert. Right, so
that’s, I’d emphasize that it’s a learning curve for myself and I would know more now than I did maybe two years ago, three years ago, because of the fact that there’s a special resource room, obviously because of the resource teacher who does a huge amount of work in that respect and then keeps us in the loop as regards what’s needed, what’s going on with students, is it dyspraxia or even Aspergers or something like that, obviously dyslexia and the various other special needs as well. And it’s special needs, they’re doing the same course, they’re doing the same, every student is, you know it’s that classic quote of its not ask how clever or capable is the child, it’s how is this child capable. How is this child, what’s this student’s ability, so how do you get the best out of this child as a teacher and that’s, and if the resource is there, if you know what’s happening, it obviously makes things easier, you know?

R – So do you as a teacher offer a revised curriculum to these students in order to assist them in accessing the curriculum?

P – If I take leaving cert say, every student at the moment in my experience is that they do the same course as the other students in the class, with Irish obviously the oral exam will help them a huge amount unless they have a specific problem expressing themselves which I haven’t experienced so far. By tailoring or by revising the curriculum you mean giving them a different kind of curriculum?

R – Ye so, strategies like different homework....

P – Ye Ok, I get you ye ye....Not so much different homework no because of the fact that they have to do it in the leaving cert and in the mocks and they will do the same course...the only thing is, to go back to the previous question, I would take into account whatever they would get or hope to receive as a waiver or as a special recognition in the exam. I would tailor that into the way I correct it. So for example, a student in my 5th year class now has huge difficulties with spelling but is very intelligent and can, knows the subject matter of a poem say, but it is very difficult in spelling so the spelling isn’t taken into account. So what I would say to him is, do your best and I find that nearly every student who has a special need or that, with a special kind of amount of very hard work from themselves can improve a certain level before the help and then the help also brings them on a huge amount then and it also releases a pressure, a pressure valve and that pressure is gone. They’re not being corrected in the exact same way so they don’t have to be particularly under stress about, if I make this mistake in the spelling am I going to lose marks for it. So, but as regards giving them different homework, its something that has been discussed here,
I’ve discussed it with another teacher and that kind of thing and its something that comes up, perhaps for eh junior cert, you, eh its something that I must look into for next year actually perhaps. The only thing again, to come back to that is because they do the same questions on the junior cert as the next student beside them in the class, what I do do is perhaps explain to the student with special needs, be it dyslexia, about the learning difficulty of the poem. That would be different. So if you had to orally learn a poem for a class in two days time, that’s the way it normally works, I’d say lads learn the first verse maybe, but I’d give them an extra time to do it. So would that be revising the curriculum? So I’d give them extra time to learn or in some cases where a student has huge difficulties with learning a poem, students have come to me in 2nd year for example and said I find it difficult with the poem. Also with communication with parents, they might say he’s finding it very difficult so please don’t ask him to say the poem in class. That’s perfect. So that’s a help. That would be revising if that means tailoring to their needs, you’re not going to put any pressure on a student who has huge difficulties in reading for example in class, or reading out a poem or even answering a hard question. So from that point of view revising from day to day in the class you know exactly what someone needs, so you’re not going to ask someone something hard, but you’re going to try and ask them some question for their own confidence. So maybe an easier question on a list of grammar exercises in the future tense or the past tense, or fill in the gap or whatever, you’d be able to get one question that they can answer and that gives them a confidence thing because if you never ask them a question, that’s not good I don’t think. So orally with the poem, stuff like that, or else give them extra time to do a written exercise so from that point of view, yes. But it’s not changing the curriculum, it’s just going through exactly what they might need. So if they can just give me the basic and if that’s written clearly and if I can understand that they understand, that’s OK.

R – OK, so next question is, in your opinion, are there factors in school that can have an impact on the level of support that teachers are able to offer?

P – I think work in general, let’s say if you’re going the average day it’s, we’re talking about eh the day goes by very very quickly. So you’re dealing with 5 to 6 to 7 groups of 30 different students, well between 26 and 30 lets say, and you have to obviously, attend to the needs of every student, and that means maybe out of the 26 or the 28 maybe 2 would have a special need. And that’s manageable, but the day and the weeks go very very quickly with the work on the subject itself and other things
outside the classroom, so that would be a factor. So time, making the time to sit down with someone for an hour makes a huge difference, and if you can do that regularly brilliant, sometimes and not all the time are you able to do that, so that’s a factor ye. Class size, I’m not sure is it a huge factor if you have the time to do it outside the class. If you can sit down with someone on a regular basis so the time for that. And then when they have the three classes per week with the special needs and resource room, that’s huge. That wasn’t there before. So that’s important. Other factors...I’m trying to think. But I think that’s the main one. Workload, time, making the time and getting them actually. Because sometimes it’s a case of the teacher trying to sit them down and when they’re maybe not, when they’ve enough to be doing and there’s enough on their plate and when the work is difficult for them and its challenging, and its tough being young and being in school with the 8 or 9 subjects, that’s very hard for students and if you have a learning difficulty on top of that, it’s hard enough for any teenager to be doing that so then there’s a question of evasion. So from the teacher making time to do it, from the student not to evade the, or trying to impress upon the student that this is to help you, it’s not extra work it’s not a penalty, it’s work that will be advantageous to you as a student. So then it’s trying to work out a system of when to meet and how often to meet that student. So for example if you want to meet someone who’s doing it orally, then you have to make time to sit down and go through a tape, go back over them give it to them again and make sure the student will come back to you. That’s probably a big thing instead of chasing down the student. You do that as well but when the week is going by and the terms fly by and there’s a lot being don, I would say the special needs is a lot better now than what it was. So it’s working much more effectively and of course it’s to the students’ advantage, ye.

R – OK, so actually I was going to ask roughly how many students with SLD do you teach?

P – roughly...let’s say there’ll be three in my 5th year class going into 6th year now who’ll be looking for the waiver from the spelling and grammar. There might be two in my second year class or three. So what’s that, five overall. So there’s 6, 8 third year classes there would have been one and my other third year class we had two and then you had another class with maybe one or two as well perhaps. It could be 10 maybe, in and around that. So there’d be enough I suppose when you add it up, ye.

R – And have you noticed a change in the number of students getting help over time?
P – Without question. Without question. I’m not sure what that’s down to. I think it was always there but maybe it wasn’t recognised. Maybe the resources themselves weren’t there, maybe having a resource teacher whos qualified in the specific area, in the arena of special needs is huge, I don’t know if that’s in every school. And then I think that it’s a societal maybe thing as well. There seems to be, and its hard to say this without being very general or without being, kind of, old school, and its not that its, there seems to be a lot more and I’m not sure what the reason is for that. Unless it was always there and we didn’t recognize it for what it was, be that aspergers, dyslexia, dyspraxia, whatever. But definitely with computers and things like that now the kids can do it on laptops and that eases the pressure of writing. You have skilled resource teachers who can help a student one on one and give them confidence and go through subjects and that’s the time thing again. If you’re doing history or geography in junior cert or anything in leaving cert, the extra times mean extra help means beneficial. So there is definitely more cases of people and students in need of resources. And on the flip side of that then, with Irish I think certain students would be, its not most frequent but I think it is there to a certain extent of availing perhaps or seeking to avail when its maybe not entirely necessary. I’m not sure how right or wrong I am about that. I think it’s a certain element of it, I don’t think it’s the predominant at all. No, it wouldn’t be. But I do think that people do seek perhaps exemptions when in days gone by they wouldn’t have needed it and they would have done OK, right. If that makes sense. So I don’t know if that’s a societal thing where it’s there, there might be some aspect, a very mild form of whatever spectrum we’re talking about. A very mild form but the full blast or the full whammy is sought.

R – So there’s more knowledge about what can be given in school?

P – oh there is, there is of course and I think with the pressure of the points in the leaving cert parents obviously want to get the very best for the students, for their own daughters and sons so therefore they have the need to, or they would be more inclined to avail of anything that’s going and 90% of cases are genuine I think and then I’m not saying the other cases aren’t genuine but I’m saying maybe there’s an inclination, if there’s any, any hint I think then maybe the full whammy is availed of. And I think, if this is part of the interview, that sometimes we need to encourage students to get the absolute most, maximum out of what they are capable of themselves. I’m not talking about someone like (names students) or someone like, we’ll say my 5th year students who have that very clear difficulty in spelling. It’s there. But perhaps on the other side
of things, to a certain extent, maybe its societal, maybe it’s the pressure of points, that maybe in some cases, and I don’t know does that put pressure, for example it might be two or three years ago that two or three rooms of special needs (in exams) and now you’re looking at, we might have 10-15. So I don’t know how its going to go in the future. So the absolute genuine cases, absolute bonafide cases, they are the students who need the help, who should have the help and that means the system should be there for them and for them alone. And I don’t know how you’d go about deciding. I know there’s tests aren’t there and if the tests come back saying the student needs help, that’s it then. You know. But I think that thing of teachers maybe encouraging students and even when they get the special help to encourage them to get the most out of themselves and not to completely lie back on the special needs, so I’m going to have that so I don’t need to do XYZ.

R – So not relying on it?

P – Not over reliance. In cases where its not completely....There has to be differing degrees there, in the same way there’s differing degrees on the spectrum, and the help then should be completely devoted to the students who most need it. That’s a slight worry I would have going to the future, looking at the amount of people who are now availing of the resources.

R – Brilliant. Ok so that’s the end of the first half of the interview.

Section 2 – Perceptions of additional support

R – So this part of the interview is to do with your perceptions of additional support, so we’ve touched on some of it already. So the first thing I’d like to ask is, do you feel that students with SLD need the level of support that they currently receive in school?

P – I think it comes back to the answer just previous, in the first part of the interview. I would say most students are bonafide cases, they need the resources. They’ve gone through, I suppose, the psychological testing and it’s usually fairly clear if a student is bonafide if they have very serious difficulties. Well maybe not very serious difficulties, if they have difficulties and they can be helped, if the resource is there to help them then they should avail of the resource and there has been an increase over the years, yes, of the amount of students availing of resources again, the vast majority would be bonafide cases I would say, and again to come back to the question before that was well, other students, maybe their parents possibly worried about the pressure of points or whatever, genuinely worried or unduly worried, I’m not sure, and then
they would avail of whatever was there. So would there be a worry of students who might not necessarily need all the resources and then students who are genuinely in need of resources and then would that in the future put a pressure on the system? Judging by the increase that’s happened in the last couple of years of the amount of students now, for example seeking special accommodation in the exams, so we’ve gone from maybe 2 special exam centres to maybe 8 this year, 8 special centres whereas that’s more sometimes than the ordinary amount of exam centres. I don’t know does that make much sense but there’s definitely an increase. So, maybe that’s something to be looked into, it’s very hard to say, I would imagine, you will get the resource and you won’t if a student is entitled to it. So it’s all about the genuine need and then that gives the resource teachers and it gives the school the means to go and direct themselves toward those students who will not only need it but who will benefit from it. So there’s two things maybe I would say, ye.

R – Ok, so next question is a general one on what you think the benefits and hindrances that the additional support can give to the students so what kind of difficulties can arise. So maybe talking from an academic or a social point of view.

P – Difficulties or benefits...difficulties that resource teachers might meet?

R – No, just any difficulties or benefits that the support might bring about for the students.

P – Well the main one that would jump out would be the student who would be very reluctant to admit to themselves or to their parents or to their peers, I don’t like that word peers, but to their friends that they have to avail of the special needs. But I think it’s much better now whereas before, possibly some might have been called out of a class to do an extra something, but now because there’s a resource centre there, I don’t like even calling it a special needs room, I would much prefer an extra resource centre, so the resource room, instead of going, you’re going off to the special needs room now are you? It shouldn’t be phrased like that I don’t think. So for the student, it’s about impressing upon them that this is just another variation of education. That you’re doing the same subjects as everyone else and you’ve got a certain difficulty...say if you break your hand, you’ve to do a certain amount of physiotherapy to get it back together again and so why shouldn’t it be the same and looked at as being the same if someone has a difficulty with spelling, its just not the students’ fault and it never is. So if you can avail of the help, and of course it’s easy for me to say as a teacher, as an adult, if you’re 12, 13, 14, and all your other friends
are flying it, as they say, then it comes down to, if the student with special needs is doing his best or her best, they’re the same as a student who is doing their best in the subject. What’s the real difference with someone getting grinds in 6th year? Even if they don’t need them or they do need them. People go into the institute and that’s not looked upon as being in any way negative. It could be viewed as being a negative in the sense that you’re happy with the knowledge you have in the classroom from yourself, don’t, you don’t need perhaps to get a whole new supplement of notes. So that’s, eh you could maybe throw it back on the other side of things by saying that example. So I would say, that would be perhaps up to the students. To accept the fact they’re getting the special resources. To fully avail of them and to go at it. And then it comes down to a student who doesn’t have special needs and doesn’t do the homework for you. So you’ve to go at them in a different way, so you’ve sometimes got to go at a student and say look, this is there for you, avail of it and as much as you can press upon them that it’s for their own benefit and they’ll be more confident and all the rest of it at the end of it all. It’s not just about getting the A or the B it’s just getting them up to a level of confidence and ability I suppose, isn’t it? that gives them the influence I suppose to create their own future. R – Brilliant, ok....So now we’ll talk about what impact does the additional support have on the perceptions of peers or classmates as you said, so do you think that it can have a negative effect or a positive effect? P – I’d be very surprised if there was any kind of bullying going on for example of a student who has special needs, because very often you might have this image of a special needs student being on their own, being withdrawn, being isolated, being very weak academically, but there’s so many different, on the different spectra, or spectrums, that the student who could be brilliant at football or hurling might have a special need situation as regards dyslexia. The student who mightn’t be strong academically. So there’s no real, I haven’t experienced, I don’t get the sense of any kind of a mocking element or a student being, you know, anything being said. I think students have their own actual in-built code nearly, a lot of young people like that would, they would know, and that’s, it’s an unwritten rule sometimes you don’t go near that. You wouldn’t slag someone off if that’s part of the answer of the question, if that’s the kind of thing you’re looking for there. I would say not in my experience, I haven’t seen a child being, they might be down on themselves for a certain amount of time because of the fact that they have to go and get the special needs and resource, as
if they look at it like extra work and that might panic them like how am I going to deal with this? But once they know exactly what’s there for them, how it’s going to help them, how it’s going to be for their junior or leaving cert, then they’ll be fine with that. As regards their perceptions of themselves it, amongst their friends that’s a personal thing for them as a student then. I would totally understand if a student was a bit shy or, you know, not exactly broadcasting it, but you know, my experience is the students who come in to my 5th year class lets say and go to the resource room, that’s grand, they’re very open with it and I think that’s a thing that should be definitely encouraged, it’s just part of the education system. It’s like someone who can’t train fully with a team if they’re injured they’ll do their own special bit of training, if someone breaks their cruciate or something like that, they go and do it and they get back up in their own way. Again, I’m not sure if the sports metaphor works, it might, it’s obviously not the same thing, obviously, but it’s a question of when you look at it like that, this is just a different way of, getting yourself to the best you can possibly do in the subject. And if it’s going to help your confidence and if it gives you the ability... If you’re without the help and you’re getting maybe a very low mark and you’re struggling and you’re on your own with it, and the thing is, when the marks start improving and when the ability and the work starts improving, that automatically creates more confidence and it also gives a student a desire to do well again, so that’s a big thing. In terms of hindrances, other hindrances I’m not sure really. I don’t think there’s... The teachers will accept every student obviously in every class regardless of ability.

R – Well, actually, the next question is do you think that the additional support can have an impact on teacher perceptions of students with SLD? So are they treated or seen as different?

P – I don’t think they’re treated differently, I don’t think, again speaking on my own behalf, in my Irish class I wouldn’t perceive a student... I would have a lot more respect for a student who works very hard, be that with resource or without resource. But take an example of a student with resource, who’s getting resource, who’s very, who’s work is genuinely very difficult for them. They accept the resource workload, they work hard, they go at it, they put their head down, they avail of it, they gradually accept it, you have a lot of respect and a lot of time for a student. So the perception would be, if in any way altered, would be for the better. And not to mollycoddle the student wither, see you also have to treat them the same, if you have work and if you
give them extra work to do, and if they don’t do it then you have to come down on them and say, you know. Now you’re not going to say, you’re getting special needs classes, of all people you should be... you’re obviously not going to say that, because that’s not the truth. You’d have to encourage them and say look, if you’re doing extra work, if you’re availing of extra work or resources and if you’re not putting it in on the other side, that’s the exact same as any other student. So I would say equal treatment, in a different way.

R – Ok, that’s brilliant. So do you feel that students with SLD should receive support in the mainstream classes or would it be more beneficial being in smaller special classes?

P – I don’t know about putting everyone with special needs or a need for special resources, special one-on-one.... One-on-one to me is the ideal, two in a group maybe. If you have 40 minutes twice a week with a student, and you have to do geography, history or whatever you have to do,... one person with two students to me is the, that’s a lot. You can’t ....So putting a group of students they’d obviously have to have the same, I would imagine, learning difficulty. You couldn’t group them all because of the different difficulties so that wouldn’t work. Certainly not for every class. I think the way it works here, it’s ideal. They might miss, let’s say you might have 6 classes of Irish for example in 6th year, they take one of those Irish classes and go to the resource centre and direct themselves on another subject, it’s not harming the subject, the core subject that they’re leaving and they’re getting a benefit in the other subject so it’s ideal. No, I think definitely stay in the mainstream class and get the help outside that and the other question of having SNAs in the classroom, unless it’s absolutely necessary I wouldn’t be a fan of that. I don’t think it works when there’s 2 or 3 adults in the classroom. I know for example in England, you could have 6 or 7 and I don’t think that’s a good idea. I don’t think it’s good for the students to have an adult with him in the classroom unless there’s a serious behavioural problem. That’s different. Any of the students in my classes who are under the, what’s the word, not the care of but under the supervision of the resource centre, they’re happier in the class, they go and avail of the class in the different times and they come back into the mainstream classes which is the best of both worlds.

R – Ok so we’ve come to our final question. So overall, based on what we’ve discussed, would you describe your feelings towards the support that the students receive as positive or negative?
P – Positive. Ye absolutely positive on the overall. For those students who are availing of it, I can only see improvements in the student. I can give specific examples of that, because I have only seen improvement in students’ ability and in their confidence, I would say.

R – Ok so one final thing, do you feel that your feelings of positivity are reflected in the entire faculty of this school?

P – Eh, I would imagine so. Yes. I would say the feeling is very positive towards the resource. I would say, and to come back to an earlier answer from my own point of view of is there very many now availing of it... Is that an issue going forward, perhaps that would be an opinion, I Can’t say that may be shared by other members of staff, or maybe it’s not shared, I just cant answer that in any kind of comprehensive way because all I know is, but I would say that if you were to discuss it as a staff, it would be interesting to do this interview as a staff even for half an hour as part of a meeting maybe if you came back in next year at the start of the year and asked for half an hour with the staff just to discuss it, even with 10 teachers together, they might have a, maybe the staff might say if the issue would be, how many more ...where is, is there a point that there might be too many availing, if I’m allowed say that, and I don’t mean it’s too many if they’re all genuine cases then you have to attend to those cases and help them as much as possible to give them the same chance as the student who doesn’t need the same amount, the same as you give them extra help if necessary. But will there come a point where parents, for example would be so worried about points or to get them to college or whatever, that if there’s a chance that, I don’t have the waiver in Irish, therefore I want to get these points so if there’s any small slight chance that I might get the waiver, even if I don’t really need it.

R – Would you say manipulation of the system?

P – Manipulation is a strong word. It could be that’s one way, I’m not sure would I use manipulation but it must happen. It must happen in certain cases but as I said before, I would say the vast majority of cases are genuine. And the vast majority of parents are genuine in looking for the help. I think in very clear cases, the help is very needed and there are then I think being honest, cases where it’s driven on by parents perhaps driven on suggesting that it’s going to make things easier..A lot easier. And I think if the student gets it, fair enough. But does that take away from the genuinely in need students, would it put pressure on the resource system in the future. In the next year or two, let’s say if 10 more put in for a waiver, what happens to the integrity of
the classroom then we’ll say, if they’re all not genuinely in need of it. If through very hard work and graft they can bring themselves up near the mark with or without the special needs, so that’s an issue for the future I think. At the moment we’re quite new to it, the resource room, the different students getting the different help and I think we’ll be very proud of the fact that we attend to the students and we’ll be very cognisent of the fact that we need, the students need the help and they’re getting it as we see the improvement in them. Perhaps on the other hand then, on the flip side, a worry may be that in the future will there be a lot more, is it a societal thing as I said, is it linked into different things in their own lives, eh is it social media, the whole I don’t know how to explain it really. But would there be an issue going forward of there being, and will it be overwhelming the system and how then does a school deal with that? Ye so just to come back to the last question there regarding an example of people perhaps being overwhelmed and perhaps if a student for example, the article in one of the papers last week about a student maybe getting an exemption, a waiver, a grammar or spelling waiver in Irish or even a complete exemption from doing Irish, which is a little bit different from getting special needs of course, but if you get a special waiver in the grammar in the Irish and perhaps classes to help with that but you’re doing French and German, is there an issue there? I think it might be a slightly separate issue if you’re not going to do the language at all, that doesn’t come in then to the special needs on the other hand, so if you’re not going to do the subject then you’re not actually availing of the special resources anyway so it doesn’t hinder the system, it doesn’t overwhelm the system, but is there and issue overall there of different exemptions, different needs and eh and then perhaps a student who is genuine. The only worry is that in the future, will there be enough resources in the school to deal with that? Because you want the resource system to be exactly that, an extra resource to help the student who badly, genuinely needs it. Who genuinely needs that help, and schools all over the country will be under pressure for teachers, for time, for space, even the physical space. I mean the resource room we have is quite small even though it’s been made and it was never there before, so that’s a huge leap to have it there, to have a special centre you know. You know we have a huge computer and we have different rooms for different things so, in the future will space be an issue? So all of those points are relevant but overall to come back to what you said earlier, I would say the experience would be positive and I would imagine that
the staff reaction would be overall positive with a few different issues that might be addressed in the future. That would be my opinion anyway on matters.

R – Thanks a million for your insights and your time. We’ve covered a lot here and your opinions were really interesting. I thank you again.