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Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, School of Education

Curriculum, Accreditation and Transition Pathways;

Pupils with Intellectual Disability in Special Schools (Ireland)

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Chapter 1

Research Rationale, Aims and Objectives

The landscape of special education provision in Ireland has seen dramatic shifts over the past several decades. The aim and objective of this research was to explore the curriculum and accreditation programmes students with intellectual disabilities (ID) engage with and participate in at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland and to examine the transition pathways available to students when they leave post primary education. The target population of this research were students with ID in Senior Cycle in post primary education in Irish special schools.

Legislative and policy changes in the area of special education have served as the foundation for the drive towards inclusion and focused attention on the issue of equality and entitlement for students with SEN (NCCA, 2009). A major concern for inclusive education policy has been that children's rights were compromised by special education which was segregated from their developing peers and the mainstream education curriculum and educational practices (Lindsay, 2007). The existing curriculum was deemed not fully appropriate by the NCCA for this group of students who needed greater support in personal, social, and vocational development. In mainstream post-primary schools and in special schools all students can engage in the Junior and Senior Cycle programmes, although not universally available, but there is no identified automatic system for disaggregating results for students with SEN (Douglas et al. 2014). O'Mara et al. (2012) highlight the difficulty in ascertaining participation levels of students with SEN in the different types of certification options. Robust studies that synthesize what is already known and evaluate the different methods and strategies for improving curriculum and access to it would be extremely useful for the international audience of educators (O'Mara et al. 2012). Cosgrove et al. (2014) stated that there is no systematic information, in the Irish context, on the levels and types of progress (academic and non-academic) made by children with special educational needs. This research seeks to

identify the curriculum and accreditation programmes available to students with ID at Senior Cycle in Irish special schools.

This research aims to address key questions in relation to curriculum, accreditation, and transition pathways for young people with ID in Irish special schools. The core research aims were reviewed under the following themes:

1. Curriculum Programmes
2. Accreditation Programmes
3. Transition Pathways

Similar themes were identified as core issues in Project Iris – Inclusive Research in Irish School (Rose et al. 2015) and the authors helped to establish a focus through which the research design was constructed. The acquisition of new knowledge in this specialized field of education provision in Ireland is relevant and will help to fill a gap in the existing knowledge available regarding students with ID attending special schools in Ireland.

Thesis Terminology

The terminology used to classify students with intellectual disabilities was complex. European Union countries do not have an agreed list of categories of special educational needs (SEN) (OECD, 2020). This research was concerned with investigating students with ID, which is a specific group within special educational needs classification. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) defines a special educational need as arising from physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability. The term intellectual disability refers to students who have a significant below average general intellectual functioning (NCSE, 2014). For the purposes of this research the term intellectual disability (ID) is used. This term refers to students who have a mild or moderate general learning disability. This research recognises that students with ID may have multiple disabilities in addition to a general learning disability. The primary focus of this research is post primary senior cycle students with ID attending special schools in Ireland.
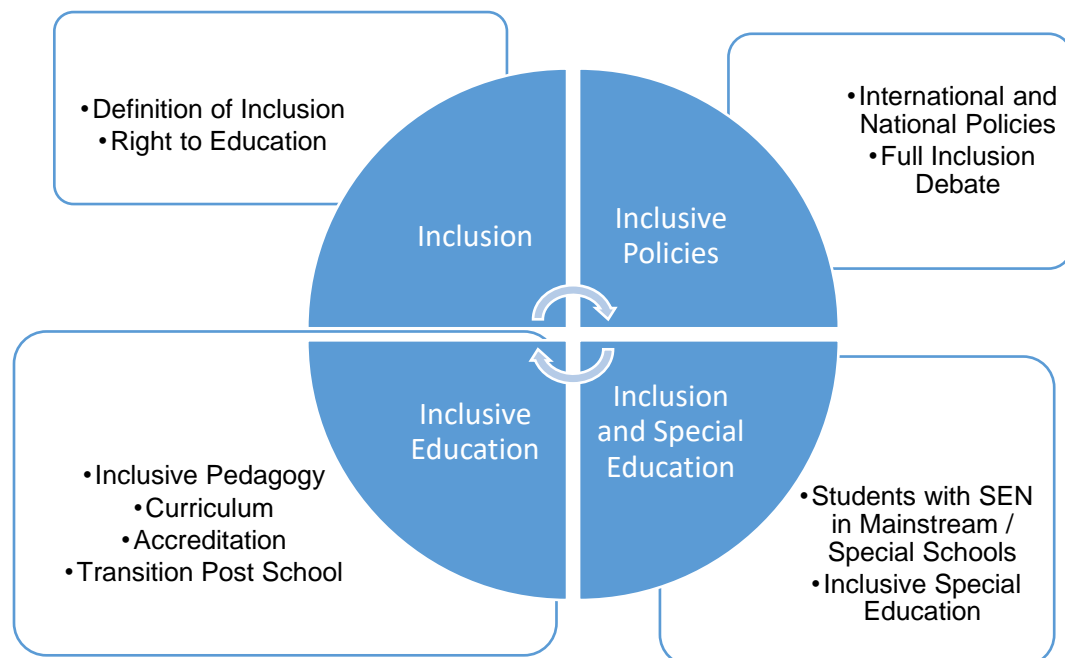
Research Cohort

This research focused on the curriculum and accreditation programmes which are available in special schools only. The research acknowledges that students with ID attend post primary mainstream schools which may provide different opportunities, programmes, supports and resources for those students. However, the focus of this research was to provide an overview of what curriculum and accreditation pathways students with ID could participate and engage with in special schools in Ireland. The Department of Education Special School List 2017 (CSO, 2017) formed the framework for the data collection in this research. The Special School List (DES, 2017) identified 137 schools which provides education to cater for students with a wide variety of disabilities. This research was focused on special schools catering for students with intellectual disabilities (ID). A total of 77 special schools were viewed as pertinent to the research as they were schools catering for students with ID in post-primary education.

This research explored, highlighted, and reflected on the scope and depth of the existing knowledge in the area of special education provision in Ireland and this was central to the research questions concerning curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland. This study aimed to address the shortage of research that currently prevails in the area of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with ID attending special schools in Ireland. The findings form this research were positioned within the current and prevailing literature, theory and in the broader context of the provision for policy and practice for special schools in Ireland. The design of this research and the resultant findings can make a meaningful contribution to the debate on special education provision. This new knowledge provides a more transparent, detailed overview on the provision of education in special schools and can help to inform practice and future policy within the Irish education system.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

To fully understand the present situation special education finds itself in today, it is necessary to take a broader view of educating students with intellectual disabilities in Ireland and delve into the inclusion debate. The literature review will identify, explore and contextualise the current debates surrounding special education and the policies and good practice which are relevant to educating students with intellectual disabilities. Figure 1 outlines the key themes which will be explored in this chapter and how they provide a context to the current debates in the special education field.

Figure 1: Outline of Literature Review

- Definition of Inclusion
- Right to Education

Inclusion

- International and National Policies
- Full Inclusion Debate

Inclusive Policies

- Inclusive Pedagogy
- Curriculum
- Accreditation
- Transition Post School

Inclusive Education

Inclusion and Special Education

- Students with SEN in Mainstream / Special Schools
- Inclusive Special Education

Inclusive education is a political aspiration and an educational strategy (Slee et al. 2019). The current focus of debates surrounding special education centres on inclusive education, social justice, the rights of people with disabilities and how special education and inclusion have perpetuated an education system which actually facilitates exclusion (Florian et al. 2017). The international and national policies which have developed over the past three decades regarding educating students with disabilities / special educational needs / intellectual difficulties will be explored. A parallel system of special needs education has the challenge of providing an equitable education for diverse groups of learners (Florian, 2019). This chapter will explore how inclusion and special

educational needs have become interchangeable terms and how, ironically, special educational provision may contribute towards excluding students for the education system. This research is focused specifically on students with intellectual disabilities in special schools. Florian (2019) highlights how different terminology is used in different national contexts. Florian (2019) outlines how a child or young person is commonly considered to have 'special needs' if they have a learning difficulty and / or a disability that requires additional supports that is different to what is ordinarily available to others of similar age. Following a review of international and national literature, there are various definitions of the term learning difficulty and intellectual disability. However all terms refers to some kind of barrier to learning which can sometimes lead to the categorisation of special needs. The concept of special needs is broad and can seem confusing and many countries use categorical descriptions of disability to determine eligibility for special needs education (Florian, 2019). There is no universal agreement as to how students with special educational needs (SEN) should be referred to, how they should be defined and to what, if any, categories they should be classified.

Theoretical Framework

The literature review focuses on providing an analytical review of the relevant current literature for this research. Implementing a theoretical framework which can capture the developments and influences on students helps construct more robust research. The focus of this research is students with intellectual disabilities attending post primary special schools in Ireland. Research on inclusion is inevitably about social justice and such research should be able to capture individual differences and multiple interpretations (Lawson et al. 2006). It was necessary for the conceptual framework of this research to explore the inclusion of student's with intellectual disabilities, in education, in post primary special schools. The importance of the relationship between the child, their development and the environment (ecology) they grow up in cannot be underestimated. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical framework was adopted in this research as it pertains that human development depends on the complex interactive processes between numerous systemic or contextual factors.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986, 1999, 2005) offers a conceptualisation of the child's ecology as a multi-layered set of nested and interconnecting environmental systems, all of which influence the developing child but with varying degrees of directness.   Within Bronfenbrenner's ecology models, human development is defined as an evolving conception of the person's ecological environment and their relationship to it. Figure 2 illustrates Bronfenbrenner's ecology system.

Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's Ecology System
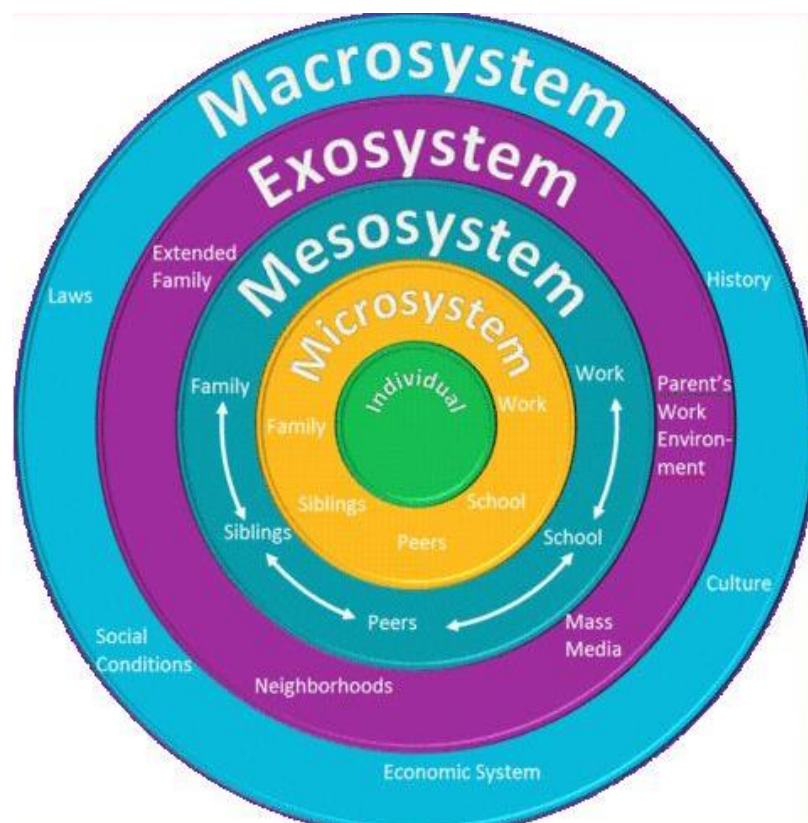
Ref: Diagram cited by McGuckin and Quirke in Conference paper. *Career Guidance Needs to Learn from 'Disability' if it is to Embrace an Uncertain Future*. European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) 'Educational Research (Re) Connecting Communities' University of Glasgow. Glasgow, Scotland, 24th-28th August, 2020

Bronfenbrenner's ecology system allowed for the consideration of factors beyond the immediate settings in which young people were embedded. For the exploration of inclusion, the ecology systems can capture a multiplicity of factors, and can help explore the influence between individuals and contextual characteristics, which include those of
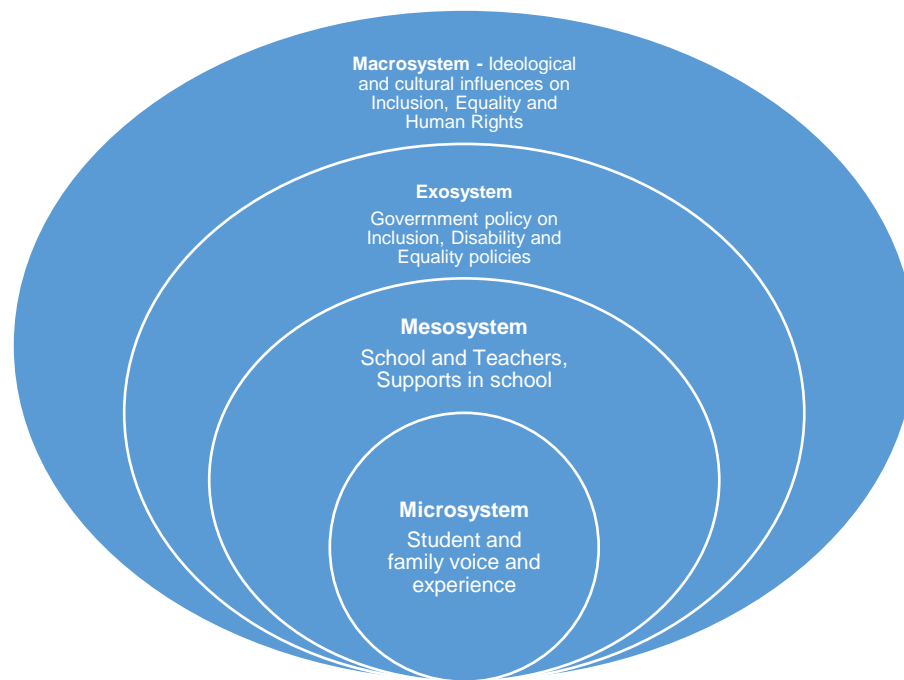
the immediate context or those of contexts such as the macro-system and the exosystem, which the researcher may not be able to directly access (Kamenopoulou, 2016).

The individual is at the centre of Bronfenbrenner's ecology system and is surrounded by the microsystem which is closest to the individual and consists of child's family – parents and siblings. The mesosystem consists of interrelationships among home, school, friends and clubs etc. The next layer within the Bronfenbrenner ecology system is the exosystem which represents the experiences of systems in a social setting in which the child is not directly involved, but which has an indirect influence upon the child's life. This layer includes the parent's place of work, government agencies, political systems, education, media and religion. The fourth layer is the macrosystem which represents the cultural, attitudinal and ideological contexts in which the child lives. The macrosystem layer is fluid and dynamic and changes over time. The ideology of social inclusion and the right to an education is a cultural development beyond the individual but which impacts upon them. Students with intellectual disabilities and their right to an education is seen under the umbrella of social justice and equity for all.   This international and national ideological movement of governments towards a social justice model for inclusion and education for all, has an impact on the life and opportunities of students with intellectual disabilities. This final layer, the chronosystem, represents environmental events which effect the individual over their lives. This layer is dynamic and focuses on the level of influence of events in a child life over time.

The theoretical framework developed by Bronfenbrenner, who was a constructivist as well as a contextualist, centred on a revolutionary idea to conceptualise human development as a nested series of influential factors (McGuckin and Minton, 1994). This research considers Bronfenbrenner's theoretical approach as the most suitable for the exploration of inclusion in education, because it permits the consideration of multiple interconnected and interdependent factors directly or indirectly related to the individual, which may influence their inclusion (Kamenopoulou, 2016). This theoretical framework

approach adopted by this research study reflected the different levels of the societal and educational systems that might impinge upon student experience in their educational setting. Figure 3 outlines the direct and indirect influences on students with intellectual disabilities in post primary special schools in Ireland.

Figure 3: Theoretical Framework for Research

Macrosystem - Ideological and cultural influences on Inclusion, Equality and Human Rights

Exosystem
Goverrnment policy on Inclusion, Disability and Equality policies

Mesosystem
School and Teachers, Supports in school

Microsystem
Student and family voice and experience

Inclusion

Before we can debate inclusion it is necessary to investigate how inclusion has been conceptualised. Inclusivity was not always the guiding ethos within education (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). Initially disability was understood through a medical lens and the disability was seen within the child. Florian et al. (2017) highlighted how it was not until the1970s in Britain that educational inclusion could ever be a realisable goal and grant all children and young people the right to attend school. Prior to this, some children were assessed as being 'ineducable', and many such children were categorised as being 'severely educationally sub-normal' (Florian et al. 2017). This situation extended to segregated provisions - one for children who are considered to be 'ordinary' and another for those who are not (Florian et al, 2017). International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) defines special needs education as that which is designed 'to facilitate

learning by individuals who, for a wide variety of reasons, require additional support and adaptive pedagogical methods in order to participate and meet learning objectives in an education programme' (UNESCO, 2016, 10).
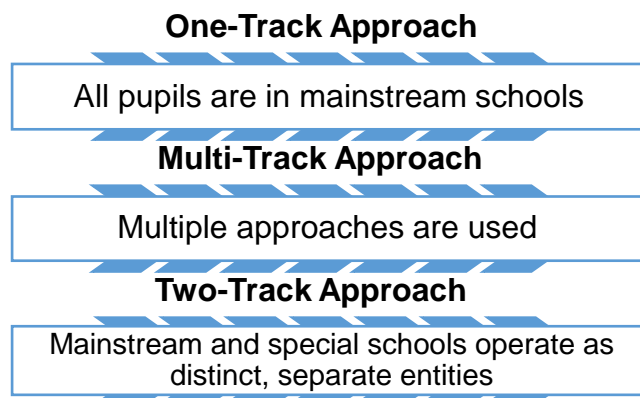
The Evolution of the Inclusion Debate

The original concept of inclusion as a meaningful and effective involvement of an individual in a mainstream setting has shifted considerably over the years (Rix, 2011). Definitions of inclusion often distinguish between a school adjusting to include children (inclusion) and children having to change or fit in with unchanged school (integration) (Mittler, 2000). Research increasingly stress that inclusion means each child can be educated to the fullest extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend, regardless of the severity of their disability (Banks and McCoy, 2011).

Education Provision for Students with Special Educational

Figure 4 illustrates the different approaches which European countries use to describe their education provision for students with SEN.

Figure 4: Approaches to Education Provision for Students with SEN

One-Track Approach

All pupils are in mainstream schools

Multi-Track Approach

Multiple approaches are used

Two-Track Approach

Mainstream and special schools operate as distinct, separate entities

Children placed in the same category do not necessarily have the same learning needs and there is a risk that, as an unintended consequence, incentives are given to identify greater numbers of children, to attract higher levels of resources (Rose et al. 2015). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2015) now

takes a broader view of what it means as education for all. Inclusion and equity in and through education is the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda, and we therefore commit to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes. (UNESCO, 2015, iv). The European Agency for Inclusive Education and Special Educational Needs (2015) position on inclusive education has moved away from the UNESCO (2008) broad definition and how views inclusive education as provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities for all learners in their local community, alongside their friends and peers. The structure of special needs education can exclude those who receive it from the educational opportunities available to others of similar age, the ideal of an inclusive educational system where everyone belongs and no one is excluded has had wide appeal within a narrow education community concerned with issues of special needs education (Florian. 2019).

The Right to Education

The term inclusion can encompass concepts such as access, quality, equity, diversity, social justice, democracy, equal opportunity of involvement (Norwich, 2013). The philosophy of inclusion is based on the fundamental principles of human rights and equal opportunities for everyone (Merrigan and Senior, 2021). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) has impacted significantly on international developments in supporting persons with disabilities to participate fully in society. As a rights-based notion, inclusive education is linked to the idea of education as a human right of intrinsic value to individuals (Florian, 2019). Access to education is a basic human right for all children and young people (OECD, 2017). Inclusion refers to the removal of barriers to the presence, participation and achievement of all learners (Ainscow, 2007). Supporting achievement and inclusion is about being equitable towards all learners (Slee, 2019). Inclusive education seeks to identify and dismantle barriers to education for all children so that they have access to, are present and participate in and achieve optimal academic and social outcomes from school (Slee, 2019). Within inclusive education, the emphasis has shifted from the deficit model where the problem is with the

individual child to a more social model which focuses on the environment, the school curriculum and school climate more generally (Kinsella and Senior, 2009).

Kinsella and Senior (2009) suggest that a cultural shift, moving away from deficits within the individual, is required. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2010) highlights that whether in health, in education, or in material well-being, some children will always fall behind the average. The European Agency for Development of Special Needs in Education (EADSNE) (2002) asks the critical question – how far behind the average will some children fall? Is there a point beyond which falling behind is not inevitable but policy susceptible, not unavoidable but unacceptable, not inequality but inequity? (EADSNE, 2002).

Inclusion in Ireland

Inclusive education and Ireland has a distinct and complex history regarding the education of students with SEN and its approach to inclusion (Kenny and Mihut, 2020). The system of special education has undergone dramatic changes in the last twenty years (McCoy et al. 2012). These changes have occurred due to government reports, changes to legalisation and a global trend towards a policy of inclusion. Historically in Ireland, there was a widespread belief that children and young people with SEN were qualitatively different from their peers and that their social and learning needs were significantly dissimilar to other children so that they required separate education away from their mainstream peers (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). In 1992 Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) which led to a fundamental shift in Irish policy and legislative precedent. There was movement towards a rights-based perspective regarding the education of people with special educational needs (Kenny and Mihut, 2020).

Shevlin and Banks (2021) highlight the discernible shift in government policy on educational provision for specific categories of disabled children toward a more inclusive

approach to educating children with SEN within mainstream schools.   The movement toward developing and implementing an inclusion policy within the Irish education system can be seen by the ratification of some of the significant policy documents in Ireland.   These national policy developments were ratified in the context of an international shift towards inclusion and education being a right on a global level. Figure 5 highlights the progression Ireland has made over the last two decades with the implementation of key policy documents.

Figure 5: Development of Inclusion Policy in Ireland
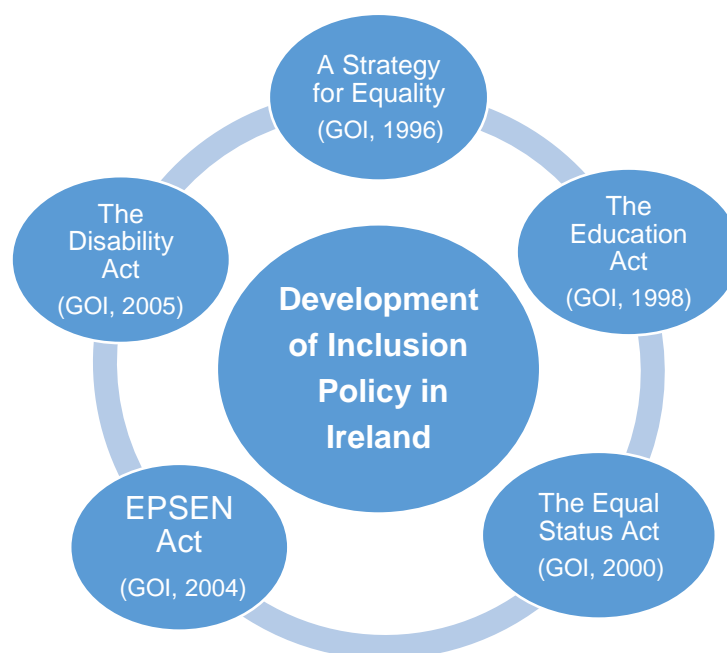
The NCSE (2019) has consistently recommended a flexible and fluid approach to educational provision for students with SEN and has acknowledged that special schools should continue to play a role on the continuum of educational provision, in line with the commitment of the EPSEN Act (2004) to inclusion (Merrigan and Senior, 2021). Consequently, Ireland now faces the fundamental question about whether it wishes to on how inclusive learning environments can be established as envisaged in the EPSEN Act (2004).

Special Education and Mainstream Education

Special education and mainstream education, while connected, have largely developed in parallel, but separately (NCSE (2019)). Special education occupies little presence in general education decision-making and policy development and often appears to be fragmented and lacking coordination and vision (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011; McCoy et al. 2016). It is evident that the impetus towards inclusion in mainstream settings has gathered momentum, though the capacity of schools to respond appropriately remains open to question (Shevlin et al. 2008).

Ireland is considered to have a multi-track approach to the provision of education for students with SEN (McCoy et al. 2019). Shevlin et al. (2021) further state that the educational provision for children and young people with special educational needs is in a transition phase as inclusion policy and practice has yet to become firmly embedded in Irish schools. The framework for existing government policy has resulted in the implementation of special education grafted onto the general education system (Shevlin et al. 2021). Special education seems to hold the position of an afterthought when it comes to policy and is made to 'fit' into the general education system, which may not value the education of students with ID in the same light as students in mainstream education.

Inclusion and Society

Societal attitudes towards people with disabilities have evolved considerably in recent decades and progress has been significant in developing more inclusive policies and provision for this population (NCSE, 2021). Community, diversity and inclusion are prominent in official educational policy discourse (Slee, 2019). Slee (2006) explores how there is often a gap between expectations for progress in inclusive education and the reality of both policy and practice. Society has historically held a deficit locked assumptions that binds our thinking about equity and justice in education and registers "unfortunate others" as the targets for change in order to boost their educational achievement (Slee et al. 2022).

Inclusion and Diversity

The UNCRPD has widened the evolving and ongoing international debate about how students with disabilities and/or additional learning needs should best be educated and what is understood by inclusive education (Banks and Shevlin, 2021). Florian et al. (2017) refers to inclusive education as not about providing something 'special' or 'different ' for some, it is about providing meaningful education for all. Inclusive education is based on the principle that local schools should provide for all children, however there are different interpretations of what this means in practice (Florian, 2017). There is awareness within policy and practice framework of the dangers of labelling and categorisation and being sensitive to diversity and difference (NCSE, 2018). Ensuring that policies of inclusive education are implemented in ways that support the social and academic well-being and progress of all students is necessary work but it is hard work (Florian, 2019). Seeing some learners as 'problems' or 'extra work' undermines the dignity of these learners and those who teach them (Florian, 2019). Florian (2019) argues that equity within education demands that differentiated approaches are needed to accommodate individual differences between learners, however, such approaches can create problems which reinforce school structures that are designed for 'most' students on the grounds that something different can be available to 'some'. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) reported that inclusive education systems will ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities both academically and for social achievements (NCSE, 2021). In many countries, the drive for inclusion has been allied to policy statements about teachers having a responsibility for all the students within their class, while at the same time they are expected to deliver the traditional educational skills and qualifications, frequently set within a framework of national curricula, standards and inspections. (Rix, 2020). The idea of inclusive education for everyone embraces diversity as an imperative of practice rather than a secondary consideration to be dealt with separately (Florian, 2019). Inclusive education remind us of the importance of belonging for all and an often-unrecognised fact of inclusion, suggests that the beneficiaries are not just those who have been the objects of separation (Slee, 2019).

Inclusion and School Culture

NCSE (2019) highlighted conflicting views from stakeholders about whether full inclusion, as required by the UNCRPD, in mainstream was desirable. If full inclusion in mainstream, were to be achieved, it would require a fundamental change of school culture (NCSE, 2019). School culture needs to be based on the acceptance that all students rightfully belonged in their local school and this right is not dependent on the generosity or willingness of individual boards of management to enrol a student with complex special educational needs (NCSE, 2019). There is also concern that students with special educational needs, by attending school outside their own local areas, were losing connections to their own community (NCSE, 2019). The consultation process of the NCSE report (2019), stated that mainstream schools are not able to cope with the level of student's medical, behavioural and / or care needs. Further reasons for students to attend special schools included students who didn't progress in mainstream or felt very isolated. Concerns were identified how educating a child in a separate specialist setting can have life-long consequences for a child and there is clear evidence that once placed there, children rarely leave this setting. Although student progress is regularly reviewed, the NCSE were deeply concerned that specialist educational placements appear to be only rarely, if ever reviewed, given the life-long implications of being educated in a special setting placement (NCSE, 2019). Banks and `Shevlin (2021) highlighted that there is some evidence that students with disabilities in mainstream classes are more likely to achieve better academic results and qualifications than those in special class settings and that they are also more likely to develop the social skills which will be valuable to them in later life. Other debates argue that students with disabilities in special classes benefit from having small class sizes, specially trained teachers, individual attention, and an emphasis on teaching functional skills (Banks and Shevlin, 2021).

Inclusion and Special Education

Florian (2014) notes that special education's policy framework, which is intended to ensure the right to education for those who would otherwise be excluded from schooling, has paradoxically created problems of inequality within education. Additional supports

is a hallmark of special needs education and it positions special needs education as a resource based response that is provided when individual learners require something different from or additional to what is on offer to everyone else (Florian, 2019). This understanding came about in part because additional support is defined by what is not generally available to all (Florian, 2019). This distinction represents an important way of reconceptualising provision so that differences between learners can be seen as professional challenges for teaching and learning, rather than problems of learners (Florian et al. 2017).

Article 24 (2) of the UNCRPD obliges States, to ensure that children can access an inclusive, quality and free education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live (UNCRPD, 2018). The UNCRPD obliges policymakers to avoid segregation and educate all pupils together in mainstream classes (Banks and Shevlin, 2021). Given the significant changes that have taken place over the past number of years the NCSE maintains that it is now timely to review whether special schools and classes should continue to be offered as part of the continuum of educational provision for students with special educational or whether greater inclusion in mainstream classes offers a better way forward. Banks and Shevlin (2021) describe Ireland as having currently a hybrid model, with students educated in mainstream schools, special classes in mainstream schools or special schools. Special education and inclusion are now at a crossroad (Banks and Shevlin 2021). Currently there is much debate surrounding where special education fits within the inclusion debate.

The development of the distinction between inclusion and special educational needs can also be seen through how the UNESCO (2009) guidelines, which help equip the education system manage diversity, through recommending flexible teaching and learning methods which can be adapted to different needs and learning styles and a flexible curriculum to be responsive to diverse needs and not overloaded with academic content.

These policy guidelines do not now sit with the policy of inclusion which centres on teaching and learning for all in the classroom where no student feels their learning experience inferior nor diluted to that of their peers. Special educational needs and inclusion are not one in the same terms which can be interrelated.

Inclusive education and special education are based on different philosophies and provide alternative views of education for children with special educational needs and disabilities and they are increasingly regarded as diametrically opposed in their approaches (Hornby, 2015). Hornby (2015) interprets the aim of inclusive education is to provide facilitative and constructive focus for improving the education of children with special educational needs. This current debate explores the value and purpose of special schools in inclusive education at a critical time in Irish education (Merrigan and Senior, 2021). Hornby (2015) puts forward the argument that it is now widely recognised that the policy of 'full inclusion', with its vision of all children being educated in mainstream classrooms for all or most of their time at school is impossible to achieve in practice. Florian (2014) notes that special education is intended to ensure the right to education for those who would otherwise be excluded from schooling, has paradoxically created problems of inequality within education. These questions are complex and challenge our view of full inclusion. Hornby's view is a direct contradiction to that of Florian, Slee and Rose. This research is attempting to review these debates and analyses the connections between inclusion, special education, curriculum and accreditation. Reconciling the right to education for all learners, with the drive and momentum towards implementing inclusion in our education provision for students with ID is complex and needs to overcome many barriers if full inclusion is to become a reality in Irish schools.

Inclusive Special Education

Hornby (2015) suggests that the vision of full inclusion is unachievable and a new vision for the education of children with special educational needs is needed to replace inclusive education and special education. Hornby (2015) proposes that this will best be achieved

by developing a theory of inclusive special education. Hornby (2015) sees inclusive special education as ensuring that special schools, resource rooms and special class teachers assist mainstream schools in implementing effective education for children with SEND, while at the same time effectively providing for those children with higher levels of SEND who need to be educated in these special education settings. Inclusive special education strives to achieve the right balance for each student with special educational needs between an academic or developmental curriculum, which is focused on the needs of the majority of children and a functional curriculum tailored to specific individual student and their needs (Hornby, 2019). Within Irish special education there is a strong emphasis on creating inclusive learning environments that can cater for pupil diversity (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). Students who are situated in more 'cosmopolitan' educational environments made greater gains in their social studies grades (Blau et al. 2001). It is important for students with special educational needs to be with peers with shared interests and similar abilities or disabilities to themselves, than peers of the same chronological age (Hornby, 2015). Merrigan and Senior (2021) view special schools as being the essence of inclusive practice as they educate and include students with a wide variety of abilities and needs. By adopting this perspective the location of student educational placement becomes less significant in the inclusion debate with special schools being viewed as an inclusive options on the continuum of provision (Merrigan and Senior, 2021).

Implications of Inclusion Policy in Ireland

The NCSE (2019) refers to the UNCRPD as the most significant external influence exerted on the future development of policy on special schools and classes. The move in the direction of full inclusion for all learners is the dominant educational policy, however there is much debate surrounding how this can be a realistic educational provision for students with special educational needs. Recent changes within Irish education policy have seen substantive improvements in the wider system of supports for students with special educational needs and provides a movement towards what would constitute full inclusion in Ireland. The Irish government have been described as a *'latecomer to*

inclusion' (MacGiolla, 2007, p.289).   The economic considerations of developing an inclusion policy within educational provision served to delay the Irish education system adopting a policy of inclusion for students with SEN (MacGiolla, 2007). The NCSE (2019) announced the pilot of a new integrated model for supporting inclusive education in mainstream and secondary education – the School Inclusion Model (NCSE, 2019). This new model is a move away from separate mainstream and special education provisions which are not compatible with the view of inclusion under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2018). Parallel systems are not considered inclusive (NCSE, 2019).

Full Inclusion Debate – New Brunswick Model

The ratification of the UNCRPD by Ireland highlights a disparity in the existing multitrack approach to education which Ireland presently follows and towards the necessary full inclusion model as proposed by the UNCRPD. NCSE (2019) reported on the experiences of a 'full inclusion policy' in New Brunswick, Canada where the term 'inclusion' is referred to as a fundamental human right principle underpinning the education system and relates to all students including socially disadvantaged, First Nation, newcomers, those with a disability or additional learning needs and those with exceptional ability (Shevlin and Banks 2021). Inclusion is seen as both possible and realistic (NCSE, 2019). There are no special schools or special classes in New Brunswick. NCSE (2019) observed that schools were very committed to the task of full inclusion as demonstrated by strong leadership, teacher confidence in including all students, parental support and a pro-active approach to addressing any issues that arise. Full inclusion has brought about a transformation in how schools and education are conceived in New Brunswick. Shevlin and Banks (2021) commented that the full inclusion 'New Brunswick' model is being seriously considered by Irish policymakers for the first time. This has challenged the traditional mind-set that promoted special schools and special settings within mainstream schools for students with additional needs (Shevlin and Banks, 2021). The NCSE (2019) further reported that full inclusion in mainstream, while it could be achieved, would require a fundamental change of school culture where every child in the community is welcomed and educated, irrespective of need or ability. School culture

would need to be based on the acceptance that all students rightfully belonged in their local school and this right was not dependent on the generosity or willingness of individual boards of management to enrol a student with complex special educational need (NCSE, 2019).

Challenges to Implementing Inclusive Education

Both nationally and internationally, the challenges of implementing inclusive education policies have been recognised (Rose et al. 2015). Ireland is not unique, among the OECD countries, in facing the challenge of developing inclusive learning environments against the backdrop of rapidly changing educational and societal landscapes (Rose et al. 2015). Dyson et al. (2004) state that 'solutions', which lead to initiatives that are simply overlaid or bolted on to an inherently unfair system, will inevitably fail. Schools believed they were incapable of accommodating this cohort of children. School leaders and school staff defended their stance by highlighting the waiting time for assessments to be carried out, for additional resources to be sanctioned, and deficiencies within the school, such as lack of resources or trained staff, and the belief that the child's perceived 'care' needs or behavioural difficulties could not be accommodated within the school (Shevlin et al. 2011). Shevlin et al. (2013) questioned the ability of schools to translate policy into credible practice and recognised the importance of the school's ethos as a starting point for the development of inclusive provision.

Inclusion and Pedagogy

Messiou and Ainscow (2021) refers to inclusion as being an interconnected processes which involves talking about diversity; learning from experiences; developing inclusive practices and engaging with students' views. This indicates that inclusion is less about the introduction of particular techniques, or new organizational arrangements, and much more about processes of social learning within particular contexts (Messiou and Ainscow,

2021). Florian and Beaton (2017) refers to inclusive pedagogy as a pedagogical response to individual differences between pupils that avoids the marginalisation that can occur with differentiation strategies that are designed only with individual needs in mind. Pro-inclusion policies in school are staffed by teachers whose pedagogical practices are based on beliefs that all children can learn and they accept the responsibility for educating all children in the classes they teach (Florian, 2019). Inclusive pedagogy focuses on how teachers are able to include everyone without marginalising some (Florian and Beaton, 2017).

Supporting class teachers to extend what is generally available to everybody rather than including all students by differentiating for some, can avoid the negative effects of treating some students as different (Florian, 2019). All teaching staff should focus on creating learning experiences that are positive, success-oriented and foster learning. Teaching should be planned and informed by whole-school planning to enable pupils with special educational needs to access the curriculum in a meaningful manner (NCSE, 2011). Florian and Spratt (2013) highlights that too often inclusive education has been interpreted as educating all students in the same building, while continuing to provide those identified a having 'special needs' with an educational experience that is different from that which is available to others within the class. Differentiation of education based on 'ability' and 'needs' creates a dual track model of additional or special education. This highlights and exacerbates the marginalisation and isolation of these students and contributes to the social construction of disability (Grenier, 2010). Inclusive pedagogical approach seeks to provide appropriate support while avoiding the stigma of marking certain students as different (Florian and Spratt, 2013). Florian and Spratt (2013) explain how inclusive pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that supports teachers to respond to individual differences between learners but avoids the marginalisation that can occur when some students are treated differently. Inclusive pedagogy advocates an approach where by the teachers provides a range of options that are available to everybody in the class rather than a set differentiated options only for some. This pedagogical approach acknowledges human diversity as a strength and fosters an open-ended view of each student's potential to learn (Florian and Spratt, 2013).

Universal Design for Learning

Inclusive pedagogy is a cornerstone of inclusive education. Over the past two decades, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework has become a key pedagogical framework which seeks to address the traditional 'one size fits all' curriculum that exists in many countries (Meyer et al. 2014) and seeks to promote inclusive and equitable education in response to student diversity (Flood and Banks, 2021). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a set of principles and guidelines that aim to support all learners by using a variety of teaching methods to reduce barriers to learning (AHEAD, 2021). The concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is key to inclusion because it increases access to equal learning opportunities within the mainstream teaching environment, including learners with disabilities (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). The Universal Design for Learning perspective recognises that every learner is different, that learning or training needs to be adaptable and responsive and, that there is no such thing as the average learner (Burgstahler, 2009). UDL assumes diversity in the student population and provides guidelines where they have flexibility and choices around how they learn and how they can share what they have learned (Flood and Banks, 2021). In recent years, education debates have begun to focus on moving towards more equitable systems of education and the use of innovative pedagogies such as UDL to enhance the school experiences of every student (NCSE, 2019). By presenting information in multiple ways to students, teachers reduce barriers to accessing learning, therefore creating an inclusive learning experience for every student (Flood and Banks, 2021).

Universal Design for Learning in Ireland

Inclusion demands major changes within society itself and it is essential to recognise that what happens within all aspects of education and training is integral to achieving authentic inclusive education and practice (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). Universal Design for Learning is a relatively new concept in Ireland. In recent years there has been growing diversity in the profile of the learner population across the Irish education system (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). There is a desire to uphold the rights of learners who have a

disability to an education that is appropriate to their needs (Quirke et al. 2018). This requires a multi-tiered approach that involves leadership, teaching and learning, assessment and a Universal Design for Learning approach (Quirke et al. 2018).

UDL at Higher and Further Education, Junior cycle and Senior Cycle

Until recently UDL in Ireland has traditionally focused in the higher education sector with little discussion about the role UDL can play at primary and second-level education to achieve inclusion (Flood and Banks, 2021). A UDL approach may change how education and training is delivered, quality is maintained and the learning experience is often enhanced by the implementation of such an approach (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). Active inclusion enables every citizen, notably the most disadvantaged, to fully participate in society, including having a job (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020). Active inclusion was a key goal of the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy (2014-2019).

The philosophy of UDL has been associated with the recent review of the lower secondary curriculum and introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle in 2015 (DES, 2015). For the first time in Ireland, there is explicit mention of UDL in curriculum design in the Framework for Junior Cycle which was specifically designed with the intention of having one curriculum for every student (Flood and Banks, 2021). Senior cycle is currently under review in Ireland. Following extensive research and consultation by the NCCA, its review findings indicate an appetite among students, parents, and teachers for greater flexibility in subject and programme choices and more learner-centred approaches in teaching, learning, and assessment at senior cycle (NCCA, 2019). The NCCA review findings shows that there is a keen focus on flexible pathways and assessment in a future curriculum design (NCCA, 2019).

Curriculum

The quality and strength of learning, teaching and assessment, leadership, and curriculum in schools is dependent on the vision, commitment, and capacity of the teachers who bring the curriculum to life (Flood and Banks, 2021). With the advent of inclusive education policies and practices, many countries are addressing the need for

students with SEN to have access to the general curriculum. Ware et al. (2011) reported that, if inclusive education is to become reality, a curriculum needs to be in place which can set suitable learning challenges for the diversity of learners (including those with SEN). Debates about inclusion now involve considerations of how all children and young people might be meaningfully included in national curricula and systems of assessment and how their participation might be judged (Florian et al. 2017). Teachers need to be equipped to respond to pupils' diverse learning needs. Potential barriers to learning and assessment need to be overcome so that students with SEN can access the breadth of the curriculum at a level which meets their learning needs (Ware et al. 2011).

Students with SEN may be excluded from certain activities which teachers feel cannot be modified sufficiently to include them, in particular science and sports (O'Mara, 2012). However, students with lower academic abilities can be excluded from full access to more academic aspects of the curriculum. There is a real risk that students with SEN could be excluded from a substantial proportion of the curriculum for these different reasons. Tomlinson (2001) reported that pupils with SEN follow a narrow curriculum, which has consequences for achieving certification. It is generally agreed that providing access to a full curriculum for many students with SEN requires a degree of modification of what is taught and how it is delivered and assessed. But the degree to which this happens in practice is variable (Newman, 2006). Meegan and MacPhail (2006) highlighted that the general acceptance of the right to schooling of individuals with disabilities had not been matched by a right to full educational access to all aspects of the curriculum.

Curriculum in Ireland

Policy in Ireland is consistent with the general view among most education professionals: that it is entirely fair and equitable that students with SEN should have access to a broad curriculum at post-primary (O'Mara et al. 2012). The NCCA (2007) states that the curriculum should aim to produce meaningful outcomes which deliver benefits to those with special educational needs which are not separate from, nor devalued in any way

relative to those available to their peers. Figure 6 illustrates the Irish post primary education system and the relevant curricula.

Figure 6: Irish Post-Primary Education System
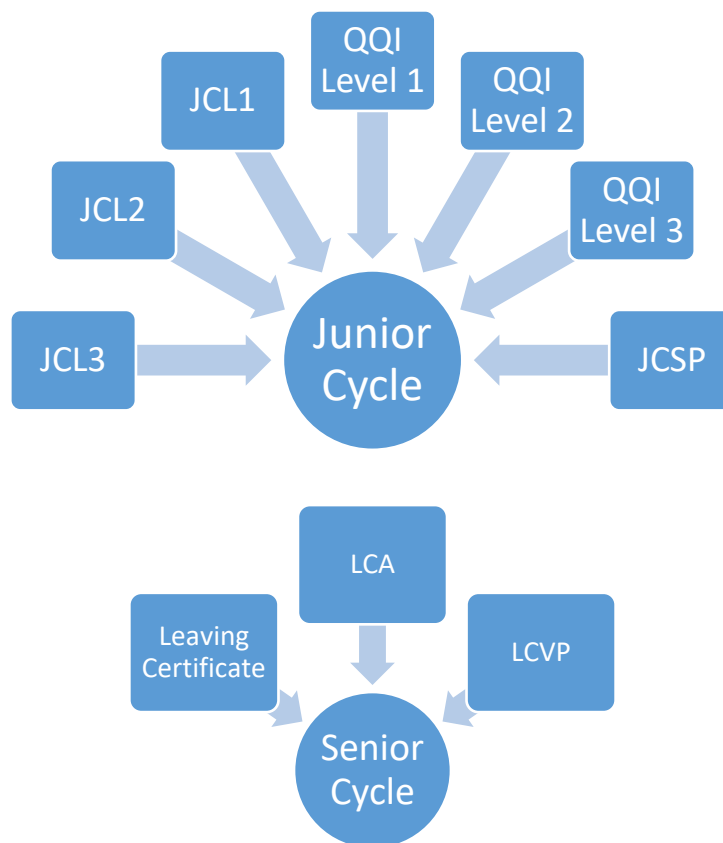
It is generally agreed that providing access to a full curriculum for many students with SEN requires a degree of modification of what is taught and how it is delivered and assessed. The implementation of the new Junior Cycle, specifically addresses for the first-time, curricular reform and the need for a more inclusive approach for students with SEN in 'a range of settings: in mixed ability classes and special classes' and in special schools

(McCoy, 2014). There remains a considerable issue over assessment of students in post-primary and special schools who do not participate in these programmes. The new developments in the Junior Cycle are a step towards further inclusion in terms of curriculum and assessment. NCCA (2018) identified the need to have a variety of teaching methods and assessment approaches to mirror those used in Junior Cycle such as the use of group and team work as well as projects and portfolios and an emphasis on oral presentation skills was also mentioned.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) are in the process of reviewing the existing Senior Cycle curriculum. The working groups and consultation processes reported that the existing Senior Cycle was deemed to be very content heavy, making it difficult to complete the course in the available time and constraining the use of more active teaching methods and a focus on independent learning by the NCCA (2018). Teachers highlighted that some aspects of Senior Cycle did not promote inclusion, as the existing Senior Cycle, which was more oriented towards academic rather than practical subjects, was seen as posing challenges for including young people with lower achievement levels and those with special educational needs (NCCA, 2018). The Senior Cycle review highlighted the need to ensure continuity between Junior and Senior Cycles as this lack of continuity of provision was seen as a particular issue for young people with SEN (NCCA, 2018). The review of the new Senior Cycle curriculum would benefit from the progress made in the new Junior Cycle Framework (2015), which focused on the implementation of Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes. This would ensure access to all learners to an appropriate curriculum and a continuity of curriculum for students with special educational needs at Junior and Senior Cycle.

Accreditation

It is appropriate now to highlight the accreditation pathways avail to students with intellectual disabilities and how these accreditation pathways compare to their peers in mainstream. In recent years, the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE) has argued that assessment processes can both contribute to and

hinder the process of inclusion. The overall goal of inclusive assessment is that all assessment policies and procedures should support and enhance the successful inclusion and participation of all pupils vulnerable to exclusion, including those with special educational needs (Watkins, 2007).

EADSNE (2002) emphasised that education and training systems should aim to ensure that all learners, including those with special needs, should. complete their education through the provision of more personalised learning. It is evident that countries need to develop national and local level data that will provide a comprehensive account of pupil progress across academic and social domains which can inform future provision for this cohort of pupils (Rose et al. 2015). While policy and practice designed to address equity issues remain at the margins rather than at the centre of mainstream education, little progress is likely to be made (EADSNE, 2002).

Accreditation in Ireland

In Ireland Department of Education Circular 0030/2014 states: '*a key aspiration for pupils with special needs is that they will, on completion of their school-based education, be able to graduate as young independent adults insofar as this is possible. People, including those with disabilities, need clear information when making choices about education and training courses that best meet their needs*'. This aspiration is facilitated through the validation of courses under the National Framework of Qualifications or other recognised validation arrangements (NCSE, 2014). Figure 7 illustrates the NFQ framework.

Figure 7: National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)
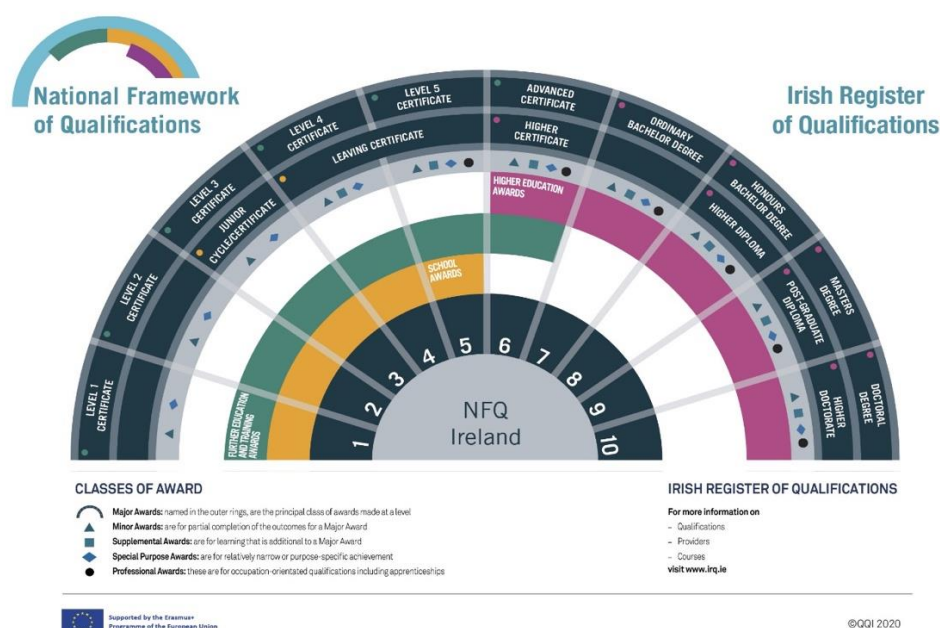
Ref: QQI 2020

The NFQ provides a structure to compare and contrast the level and standard of different qualifications. Developing inclusive learning environments is complex and schools need to be proactive to ensure students are fully engaged academically and socially otherwise they risk students experiencing a far from inclusive learning environment (McCoy et al. 2019).

Expectations and Aspirations

Shevlin et al. (2008) reported that the limited curricular access for pupils of post primary age was concerning and that the perceived lack of teacher expectations for these children was noted as a severe limitation on the efficacy of the education received in certain special school. Rix et al. (2013) emphasised the teacher's significant role in shaping interaction and enhancing learning opportunities in the classroom. Teachers who see themselves as responsible for fostering the learning of all their students promote higher order interactions and engage for longer with their students with SEN (Rix et al. 2013). Often, low expectations from teachers of students with SEN can result in a denial of curriculum access or involvement in assessment for accreditation (Rose et al. 2015). The ethos and culture of the school influences the level of importance placed on inclusive practices, affecting teacher attitudes towards achievable goals for pupils with SEN (Doyle

et al. 2017). Positive academic outcomes were most consistently reported, where young people participated alongside their peers in classrooms, characterised by higher scores in maths and reading (Rose et al. 2015).

Transition Pathways

This research aims to review transition pathways and consider if they equate with their mainstream peers or has the landscape of inclusion and equality for all learners altered as students with ID progress through the education provision at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland. OECD (2012) highlight how many young people leave school with no worthwhile qualifications, whilst others are placed in special provision away from mainstream education and some choose to drop out since the lessons seem irrelevant (Messiou and Ainscow, 2021). Having an upper secondary education is crucial to a young person's life chances (EASNIE, 2016). It is often seen as the minimum entry requirement to the labour market and is an important protector against unemployment. A fundamental structural problem of equal opportunity lies at the heart of a system where those considered capable of high achievements are encouraged to stay at school and beyond into higher education, while those who struggle, because their learning needs are not properly addressed or their parents are not able to advocate for their interests, may be marginalised in school or leave education at the earliest opportunity (Florian et al. 2017). Under the Disability Act people with disabilities are entitled to have their health and educational needs assessed (NCSE, 2021). Under the EPSEN Act (2004) the NCSE has a specific role to review the provision made for adults with disabilities to avail of higher, adult and continuing education, rehabilitations and training and to advise educational institutions concerning best practice (NCSE, 2021).

At present, education provision tends to be ad hoc in health settings/HSE- funded services (NCSE, 2021). Young people with ID face an uncertain future on leaving school (McConkey et al. 2017). Accreditation provides a pathway for students with ID to transition to further placements, training courses and employment post school.   The '*Comprehensive*

Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities' (Government of Ireland, 2019) states that the vision for this governmental strategy is that people with disabilities can get a job and enjoy a rewarding career. The vision and values underpinning this report focus on a person's capacity not their incapacity and that people with disabilities are supported to maximise their potential. People with disabilities have fewer education qualifications than non-disabled people when they leave school (NDA, 2012). The transition experiences of student with SEN have received little attention (McCoy et al. 2019). Transitions services have been proposed to help transitions from age 14 onwards to explore more person-centred options for school leavers with ID (McConkey et al. 2017). Doyle et al. (2017) highlights the need to create Individual Transition Plans which have the same function as an IEP, representing continuously evolving documents that are transferable to post-secondary settings.

Transition Procedures and Planning

The NCSE Inclusive Research in Irish Schools: Project Iris (2015) emphasised the challenges facing students with SEN when transitioning from primary to post primary. It is imperative that young people take ownership of their own transition and associated tasks and actions (Doyle et al. 2017). Transition pathways need to ensure student participation, the importance of students voice and respect the personal choice of the student. In Ireland, inequitable access to IEPs, and a lack of policy infrastructure to provide formal transition planning, means that transition journeys are varied and uncertain (Doyle et al. 2017). Engaging in a supported transition programme can provide parents and young people with SEN with access to information, options, confidence, and some of the hard and soft skills required for successful transition into education and employment contexts (Scanlon and Doyle, 2019).

Role of Guidance Counsellor

Schools (including primary, post primary and special schools and PLC colleges) through their school guidance plans seek to ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices (NCSE, 2014). The Indecon Report (2019) defined guidance counselling as an effective mechanism to

provide career information and impartial advice guidance counselling is one of the most effective modalities for providing career intervention. Given the importance of the role of guidance counsellors, it is necessary to consider the position of students with special education needs who are in special schools, as there are no separate guidance counsellors allocated to these schools (Indecon, 2019). Grigal et al. (2012) highlight that few transition co-ordinators, teachers, higher education personnel, personnel from adult services, students and families know the options available post school. Scanlon and Doyle (2019) identified a dearth of basic information to enable informed decisions by parents and students on post school options. Scanlon and Doyle (2019) emphasised that there is an urgent need for greater clarity around options and financial implications of post school options.

Transition Pathways Options

On leaving school there is a range of services available for young people with disabilities wishing to enter the labour market or further education and training (Watson et al. 2015). In recent years there has been an improvement in the transition for students with ID to adult services and in offering a wider range of choices post school (McConkey et al. 2017). Training programmes are also available for people with disabilities by specialist training providers such as the National Learning Network (NLN) (DES 2012). For those wishing to pursue further education or training after school, SOLAS is the organisation responsible, and many of its programmes operate through the newly established Education and Training Boards (ETBs) which replaced Vocational Education Committees (VECs). The Department of Health also provides rehabilitative training, training that is not linked to the labour force, and sheltered work for people with disabilities. Few students with ID avail of mainstream further education, vocational and employment training while, in contrast, over half of non-disabled students transition to higher education, over a quarter enrol in training of further education and 7% transition into employment (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). Figure 8 illustrates the options and choices that are available to students with SEN post school.

Figure 8: Transition Pathways options for Students with SEN
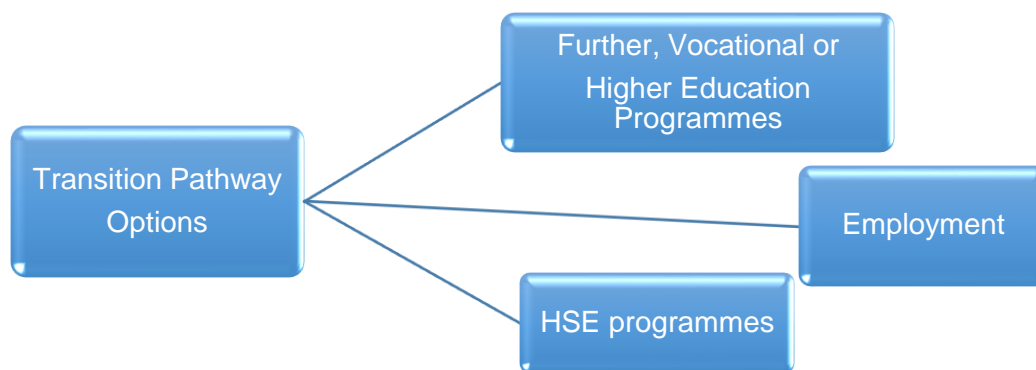
Ref: NCSE 2016

Scanlon and Doyle (2019) reported that adult services were viewed as appropriate for only a few young people, based primarily on a perceived lack of opportunity for growth and skills development in current models of provision. Scanlon and Doyle (2019) highlighted that the move to HSE Adult Services was the least favourable option for many parents, and comments alluded to the fact that this option was a by-product of lack of choice. Schools perceived transition pathways and options post school to be limited and highlighted the difficulty of bridging the gap between a QQI Level 2/3 programme in school, and the QQI Level 5 courses in further education (Scanlon and Doyle, 2019).

Conclusion

The literature review has outlined a number of significant changes in the past three decades which has seen a shift in the cultural and societal view of students with intellectual disabilities (macrosystem). Societal views has moved away from a deficit model which placed the problems within the child and towards a social justice and right based approach to special educational needs, disability and inclusion. These shifts in societal and cultural views of disability have emphasised the fundamental right to education for all children. A more equitable system of education has developed. Bronfenbrenner robust theoretical model (1979; 1986, 1999, 2005) highlighted how student experiences are always at the centre of the system (the microsystem) while the

Irish Education system and international policies are at the outer edge of the system (the macrosystem).

Over the last several decades, inclusive education, both nationally and internationally has been a focus in special education provision, with the development of policy and legislative changes and the adoption of inclusive education frameworks have been broadly welcomed (Watson et al. 2015). Within Ireland the development of provision for students with SEN, in common with other European and international administrations, has tried to address issues of equity and equal opportunity by embracing a more inclusive educational philosophy (Rose et al. 2015). Due to policy legislative commitments in Ireland, there is a firm commitment to inclusive education at a policy level, however, in practice, the funding and provision of special education operates parallel to the mainstream education system (Banks et al. 2021).

The National Council for Special Education's vision is a society where children and adults with special educational needs receive an education that enables them achieve their potential (NCSE, 2019). Following recent international and national policies focusing on inclusion, additional teacher supports and investment in resources, there is much that is good about the current education provision for students with special educational needs (NCSE, 2019). Data is not formally collected on the outcomes of students who attend special schools (NCSE, 2019). The following research will attempt to shine a light on the real life experiences of education policy in practice in special schools. This new knowledge will add to the current debates surrounding inclusion, inclusive policies, inclusive education and inclusive special education.

Special education is made 'fit' into the general education system which may not value the education of students with ID in the same light as students in mainstream education

(Shevlin et al. 2021). The view of inclusion under the UNCRPD (2018) emphasise the move away from separate mainstream and special education settings, as they are not compatible with as parallel systems are not considered inclusive (NCSE, 2019). The implementation of policy has often struggled to live up to the ideas expressed in policy documents (Meijer and Watkins, 2016) and the challenges to inclusion were identified.

Over recent years the broadening of the curriculum and accreditation options has provided a greater availability of programmes which are aligned with the National Framework of Qualifications. The exploration of recent curriculum developments and reviews in Ireland indicates a shift in mind-set towards inclusive education in Irish schools (Flood and Banks, 2019). The movement towards a 'full inclusion model' in Irish schools, provides an opportune time to proactively embed inclusion in policy and curriculum design as well as learning and teaching design and practice (Flood and Banks 2021).

Young people with disabilities are at a disadvantage, and face many more barriers to accessing the same opportunities in further/higher education, training, or employment, than their non-disabled peers (Doyle et al. 2017). The Government Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities policy (2019) embodies a vision where people with disabilities are supported to maximise their potential for employment and to focus on a person's capacity and not their incapacity. Each person with a disability will have the education, skills, competence and independence to obtain employment (GOI, 2019). The ratification and implementation of inclusive policies and programmes do not always mean true inclusion for students (Banks et al. 2017). This research delved into what are the 'true' experiences of inclusion for students with ID in terms of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways in post primary special schools in Ireland. This review of the literature provides a context and framework to inform the research design and to focus on the research questions at the core of this study which are curriculum and accreditation programmes and transition pathways for students with SEN. The following chapter will outline the key research questions which arise from this comprehensive

literature review and Bronfenbrenner's ecology system will provide a structure for the research design for this research.

Chapter 3 - Research Design

The following chapter will detail the research design which was constructed based on the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecology model (1979, 1986, 1999, 2005). The ecological model acknowledges that students influence and are influenced by their environment. This research study combined the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods to allow a much fuller understanding (McCoy, 2014). Following a comprehensive review of the international and national literature, the following research questions evolved from the current debates focusing on inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities.
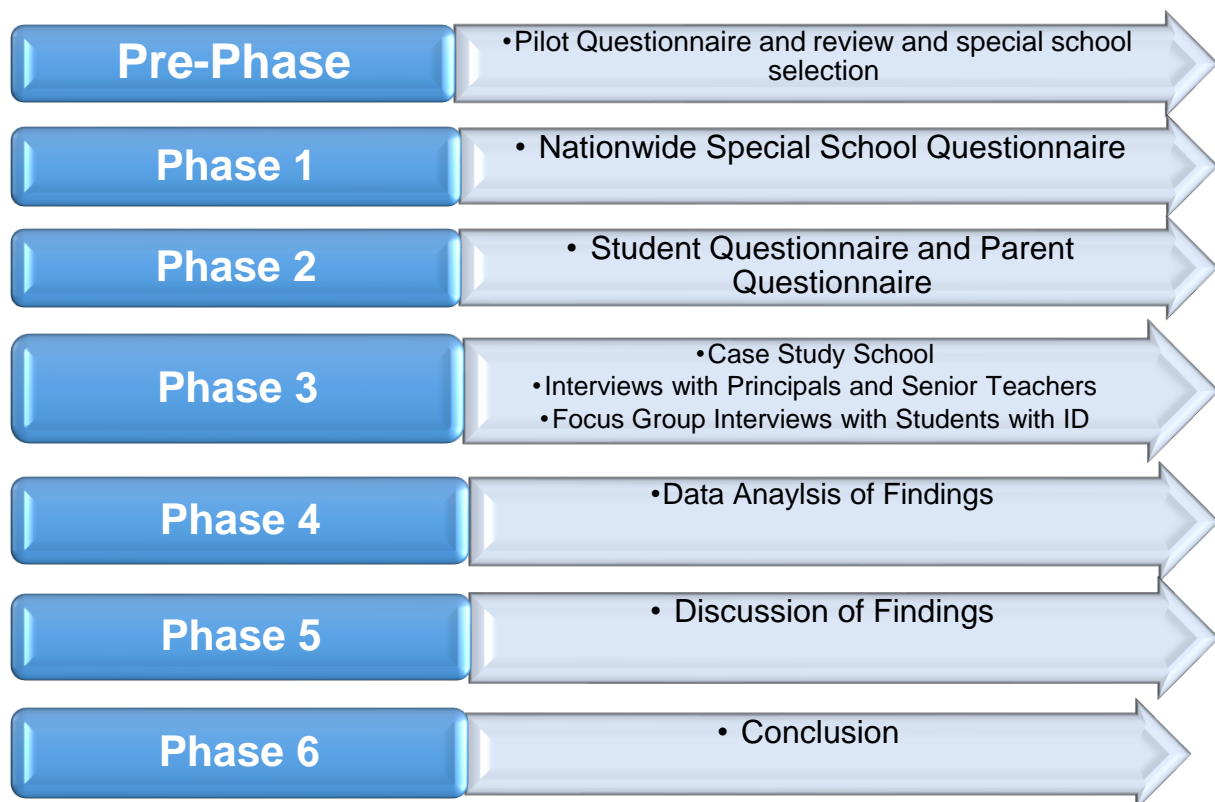
1. What curriculum is available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland?
2. What are the accreditation outcomes for students with ID in special schools?
3. What transition pathways are available to students with ID in special schools after they leave post primary education?

Throughout the research design it was important for the researcher to be aware of positionality and reflexivity to minimise the possibility of bias, to remain as objective as possible through the data collection and finally to be aware of the culture and attitudes the researcher brings to the process of research design.
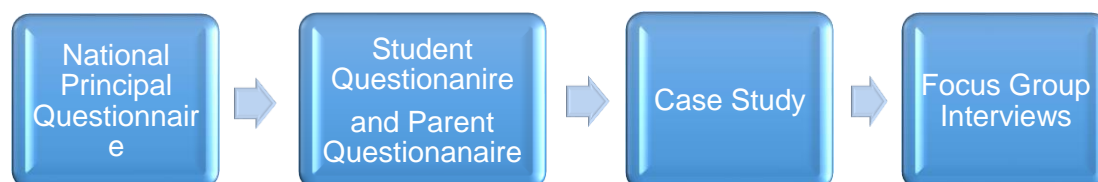
Data Collection Instruments

There were five phases of the research. Figure 9 illustrates the stages of the research.

Figure 9: Stages of the Research

Pre-Phase	• Pilot Questionnaire and review and special school selection
Phase 1	• Nationwide Special School Questionnaire
Phase 2	• Student Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire
Phase 3	• Case Study School • Interviews with Principals and Senior Teachers • Focus Group Interviews with Students with ID
Phase 4	• Data Anaylsis of Findings
Phase 5	• Discussion of Findings
Phase 6	• Conclusion

The research design enabled the researcher to progress through the stages of the research on the key themes of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways. Each stage of data collection informed the next stage and allowed for minor adjustments as each stage progressed. Figure 10 outlines the data collection instruments employed in the research.

Figure 10: Data Collection Instruments

National Principal Questionnaire → Student Questionanire and Parent Questionanaire → Case Study → Focus Group Interviews

Design of the Research

Research Cohort

For the purposes of this research the term intellectual disability (ID) is used. This term refers to students who have a mild or moderate general learning disability. The primary
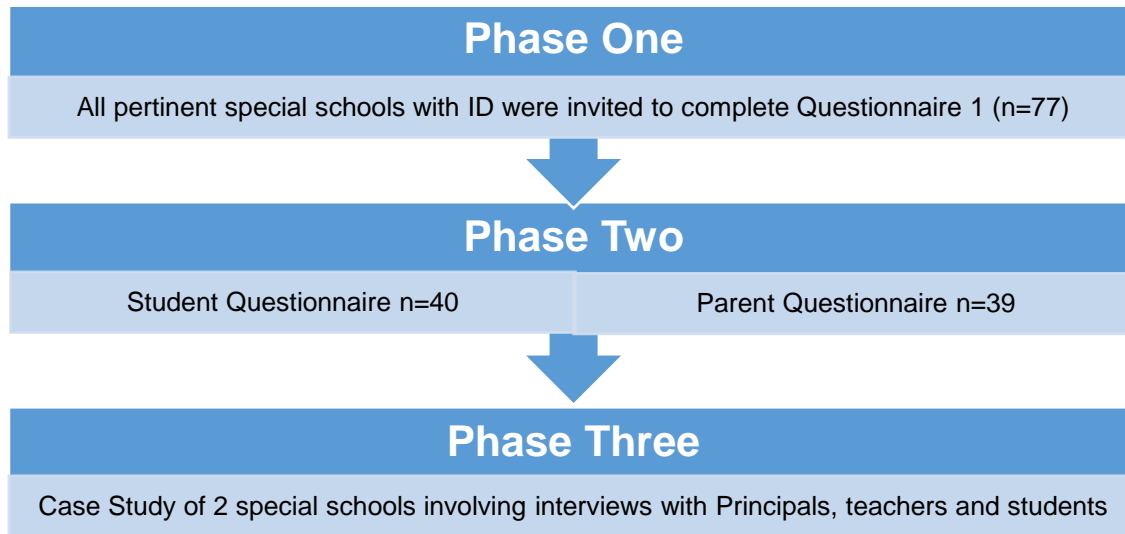
focus of this research is post primary senior cycle students with ID attending a special school in Ireland. The study wanted to capture a national picture of what is happening in special schools in Ireland presently. As this student group is classified as minors and a vulnerable group ethical issues were paramount during all aspects of the research. The voluntary and confidential nature of the research was emphasised and consent was sought from all student prior to questionnaires and interviews. The cohort for this research was students with mild ID in their final year of post primary education. The starting point for compiling this cohort was the Department of Education Special School list 2017. This list contains 137 schools, however, not all schools were pertinent to the research due to a variety of factors as outlined in Table 1 .

Table 1: Phase One – Special Schools pertinent/not pertinent to the research

Department of Education Special School List 2017	137
Schools not pertinent to research due to student profile	
Students of pre-primary or primary age	6
Hospital school	9
Students with physical and/or multiples disabilities	2
School for the Blind	1
Rehabilitation unit	2
School for EBD	6
Reading school	3
Traveller school	1
Early School leavers	3
High Support Unit, Special Care Unit, Child Detention Centre	8
ASD	14
Irish Speaking Child Education and Development	1
Youth Psychiatric Unit	2
School for the Deaf	2
Total of schools not pertinent to research due to student profile	**60**
Total of Post Primary Special Schools with students with ID	77

Figure 11 provides details of the process of selecting participates for this research.

Figure 11: Process for Selecting Research Cohort

Phase One

All pertinent special schools with ID were invited to complete Questionnaire 1 (n=77)

Phase Two

Student Questionnaire n=40 | Parent Questionnaire n=39

Phase Three

Case Study of 2 special schools involving interviews with Principals, teachers and students

Phase One of the research invited all 77 special schools in Ireland, catering for students with ID, to participate in Questionnaire 1 which was completed by the principal/senior teacher in these schools. Table 2 illustrates the response rate.

Table 2: Response Rate for Questionnaire 1

Phase One – Questionnaire 1 Target population	
Number of schools to whom questionnaires were sent	77
Number of questionnaires returned	39
Response rate	51%

Phase Two of the research focused on special schools who had volunteered to participate in Phases Two and Three from Questionnaire 1 (n=15). Phase Two involved a Student Questionnaire and a Parent Questionnaire. The research adopted a qualitative approach to data collection in Phase Three to capture the experiences, perspectives and opinions of the main stakeholders in this research – students, parents, teachers, and school management.

Phase Three of the research involved a case study of a sample of special schools (n=2). Two schools who had participated in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the research were invited to participate in Phase 3 - case study. Visits to two schools were organised as part of the

case study to provide an in-depth insight into the perspectives and experiences within special schools. The number of case study schools was limited to two school due to the means available and the limitations of the scope of this research. The case study involved, semi-structured interviews with principal and/or senior cycle teacher, semi-structured interviews with parents of students in their senior year of post primary school and finally focus group semi-structured interviews with a sample of students in their final year of post primary school.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 was concerned with providing an overview of the design of this study. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system provided the framework which underpinned this study. Paramount to the research design were the experiences of the participants and their interaction with their world. The study adopted a mixed methods design approach to collecting data. The rationale for designing both qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments ensures deeper, more insightful findings, while triangulation was achieved which increases the accuracy and reliability of the findings. The research cohort for this study were students with ID attending Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland. It was important in the research design to acknowledge student contribution to the data. Student voice was encouraged through the questionnaires and focus groups in Phase Two and Three. Following piloting of the questionnaires and interview questions, the final research design consisted of a nationwide questionnaires to principals and senior teachers in special schools, a student questionnaire, parent questionnaire and two case study special schools which involved interviews and focus groups. The research design was divided into six phases and a time schedule was implemented. This chapter created the framework for the study based on the research questions of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways in the context of the comprehensive literature review outlined in chapter 2. Based on the information and findings in the literature review and the research design Chapter 4 will provide an extensive insight into the findings of this study.

Chapter 4 – Data Analysis

The overarching objective of this research was to analyse academic outcomes, academic achievements and transition pathways for students with ID after they leave post primary education in special schools in Ireland. The research findings were explored and analysed under the following themes of Demographics and School Context, Curriculum, Accreditation and Transition Pathways. The analysis of this research was cognisant that the findings are not designed to be generalised across the population of special schools in Ireland. The findings provide a snapshot of what is occurring in special schools in Ireland currently.
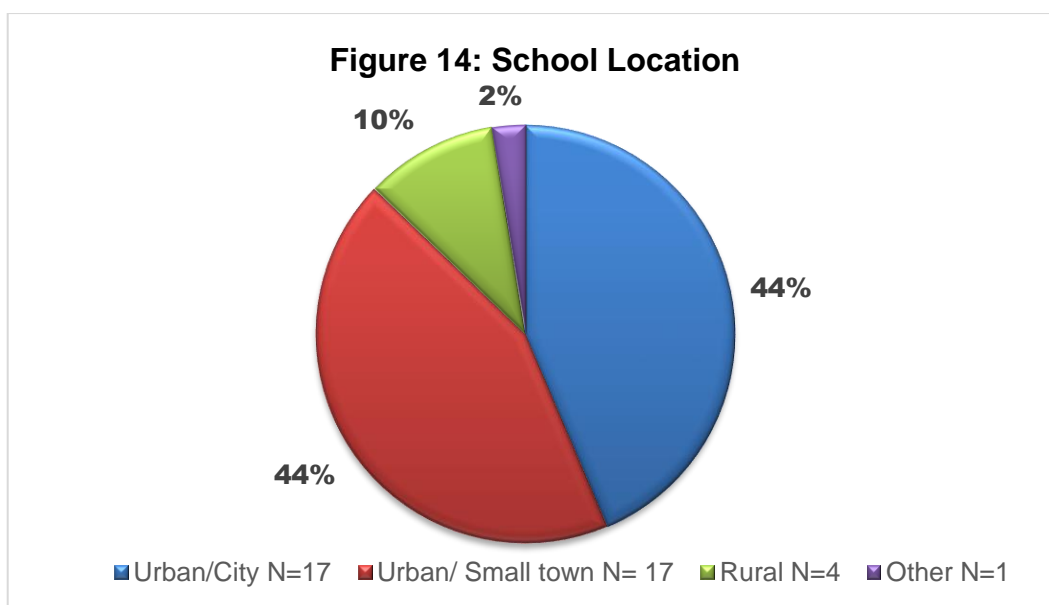
Figure 12: Phases of Analysis
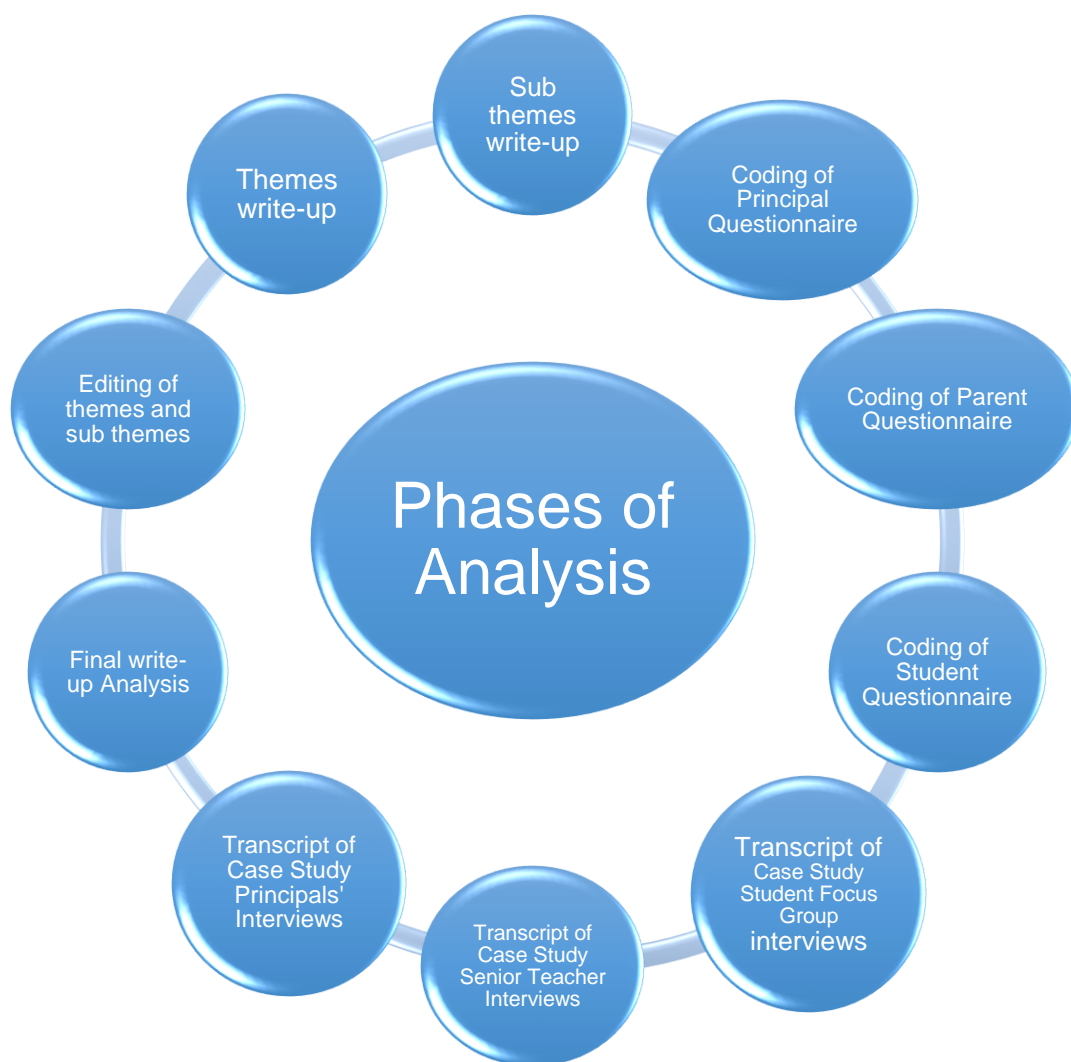
Demographics and School Context

The Department of Education and Skills Special Schools List 2017 provided the baseline data for this research. This list consisted of all 137 special schools in the Republic of Ireland. Not all special schools on the Department of Educations and Skills Special Schools list were pertinent to the research due to their student cohort. A response rate of 51% (n=39) was achieved in Phase One. Thirty-nine special schools in Ireland catering for students with ID participated in Phase One of the research. The findings highlight that the research had an equal response rate from small, middle and large special schools in Ireland. See Figure 13

Figure 13: Size of School

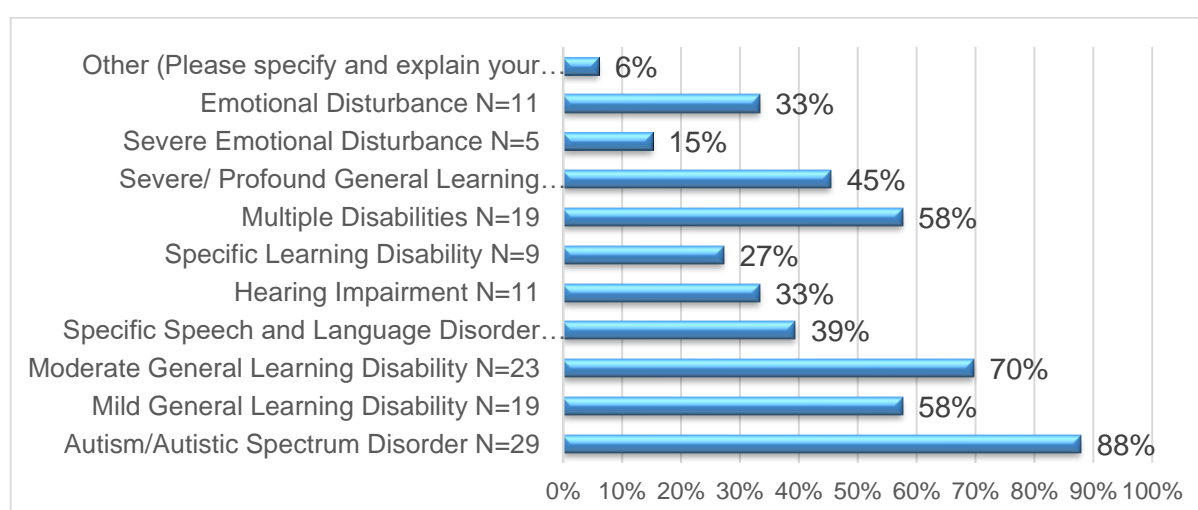Legend: ■ 0 - 49 N=13 ■ 50 - 99 N=14 ■ 100 - 200 N=12 ■ 201 - 300 N=1

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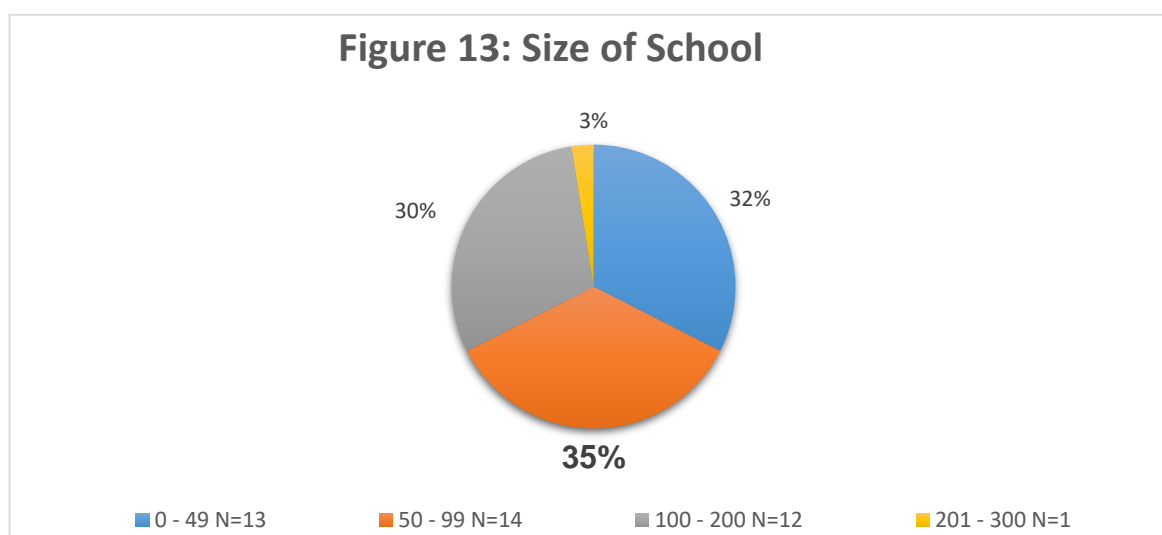
An overwhelming majority (88%, n=34) of respondents described the location of their school as either urban/city or small town while 10% (n=4) described their school as being in a rural location. See Figure 14.

Figure 14: School Location

- Urban/City N=17 — 44%
- Urban/ Small town N= 17 — 44%
- Rural N=4 — 10%
- Other N=1 — 2%

Profile of Students in Senior Cycle

The research focused on special schools catering for students with ID in Ireland. In addition, within these special schools a wide range of disabilities were identified in Senior Cycle students.

Figure 15: Profile of Students in Senior Cycle

- Other (Please specify and explain your... — 6%
- Emotional Disturbance N=11 — 33%
- Severe Emotional Disturbance N=5 — 15%
- Severe/ Profound General Learning... — 45%
- Multiple Disabilities N=19 — 58%
- Specific Learning Disability N=9 — 27%
- Hearing Impairment N=11 — 33%
- Specific Speech and Language Disorder... — 39%
- Moderate General Learning Disability N=23 — 70%
- Mild General Learning Disability N=19 — 58%
- Autism/Autistic Spectrum Disorder N=29 — 88%

Participant Information

The majority (61%, n=23) of principals and nearly one fifth (18%, n=7) of deputy principals completed Phase One - Questionnaire 1. In addition, the majority of respondents (59%, n=23) had more than 20 years teaching experience and 48% (n=16) were teaching in the special school for more than 20 years. The findings from the principal Questionnaire in

Phase One indicated a profile of an experienced, long-term professional body of teachers educating students with ID.
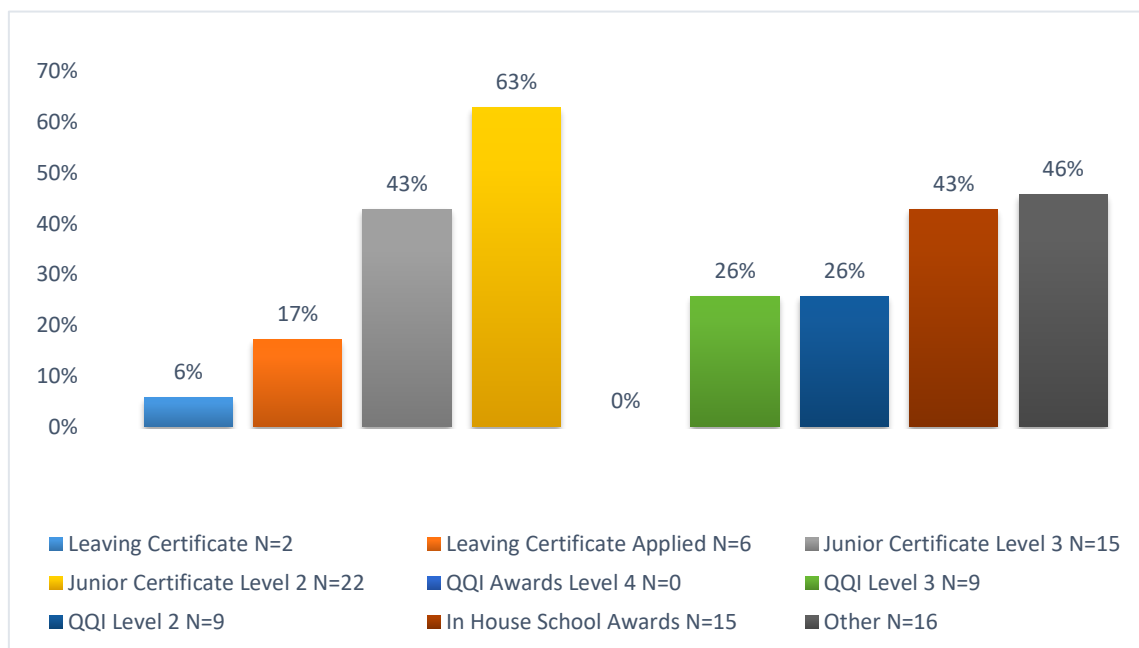
Student Profile and Background

The overwhelming majority 85% (n-= 35) of students who responded to Students Questionnaire in Phase Two had been attending their school for 4-10 years. The respondents from the student questionnaire were senior students in their final years of post-primary education and were participating in a variety of senior programmes available in their schools.

Curriculum at Senior Cycle in Special Schools

The data gathered in Phase One highlighted that the majority of special schools (59%, n=23) offer a Senior Cycle programme at post primary level. A third (33%, n=13) of special schools in Ireland did not offer senior cycle programmes. Data from Phase One reported that a wide range of curricular programmes were available which students with ID could follow in their schools. The majority of special schools (63%, n=22) follow the Junior Cycle Level 2 curriculum programme while 43% (n=15) of schools offer the Junior Cycle Level 3. (See Figure 16).

Figure 16: Curriculum Programmes

Legend:
- Leaving Certificate N=2
- Leaving Certificate Applied N=6
- Junior Certificate Level 3 N=15
- Junior Certificate Level 2 N=22
- QQI Awards Level 4 N=0
- QQI Level 3 N=9
- QQI Level 2 N=9
- In House School Awards N=15
- Other N=16

Nearly two thirds of respondent schools (63%, N=22) operate the Junior Cycle Level 2 programme. While nearly half of participant special schools (43%, n=15) offer the Junior Cycle Level 3 programme. Just less than a third (32%, n=11) of respondents participate in the Junior Certificate Schools Programme initiative, while over two thirds (68%, n=23) were not involved. Over half (52%, n=18) of special schools in Ireland participating in this research engaged with the QQI programmes. Nearly one quarter (23%, n=8) of special schools' respondents to Phase One reported that their school is engaged in the Leaving Certificate Applied and/or Leaving Certificate. However, it should be noted that 17% (n=6) of special schools participated in the Leaving Certificate Applied while only 6% (n=2) offer the Leaving Certificate programme. Nearly three quarters of respondents (74%, n= 23) from Phase One stated that their school always or sometimes restrict the curriculum which would be available in mainstream schools. See Figure 17.

Figure 17: Does your School Restrict the Curriculum?
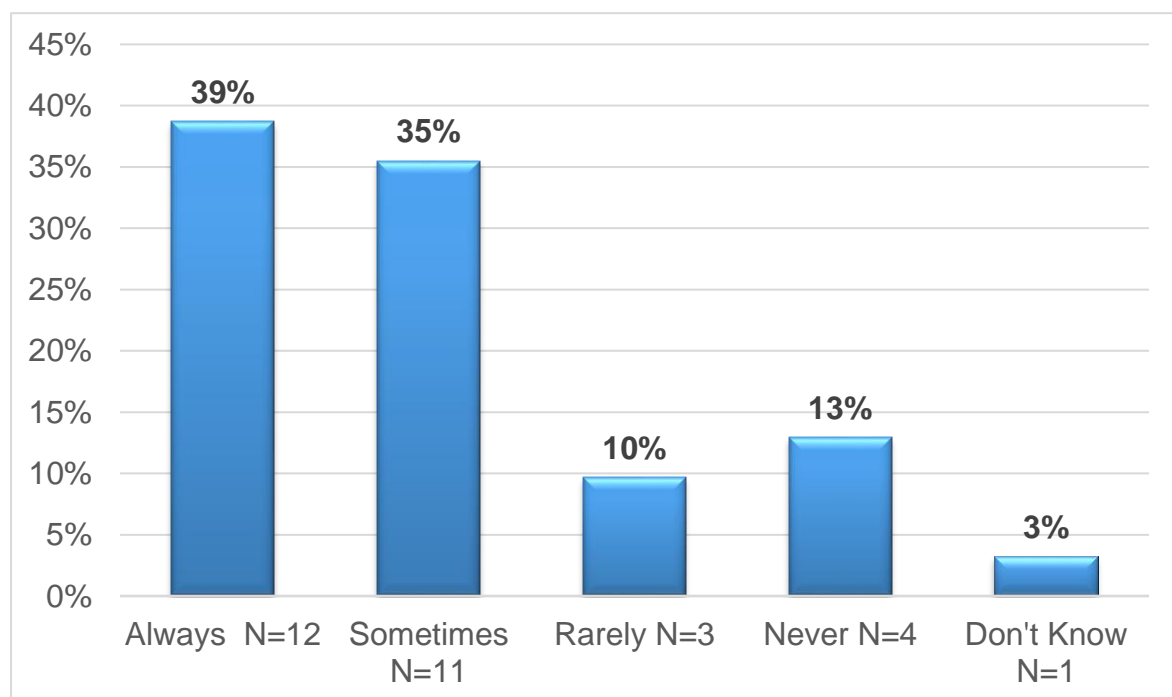
Accreditation Pathways

Data received from special schools in Ireland in Phase One (n=21) highlighted the number of students who participated in Senior Cycle and the number of students who participated in accreditation programmes from the academic year 2013-2014 to 2016-2017. Figure 18 illustrates this data in detail.

Figure 18: Students in Senior Cycle and Participating in Accreditation Programmes
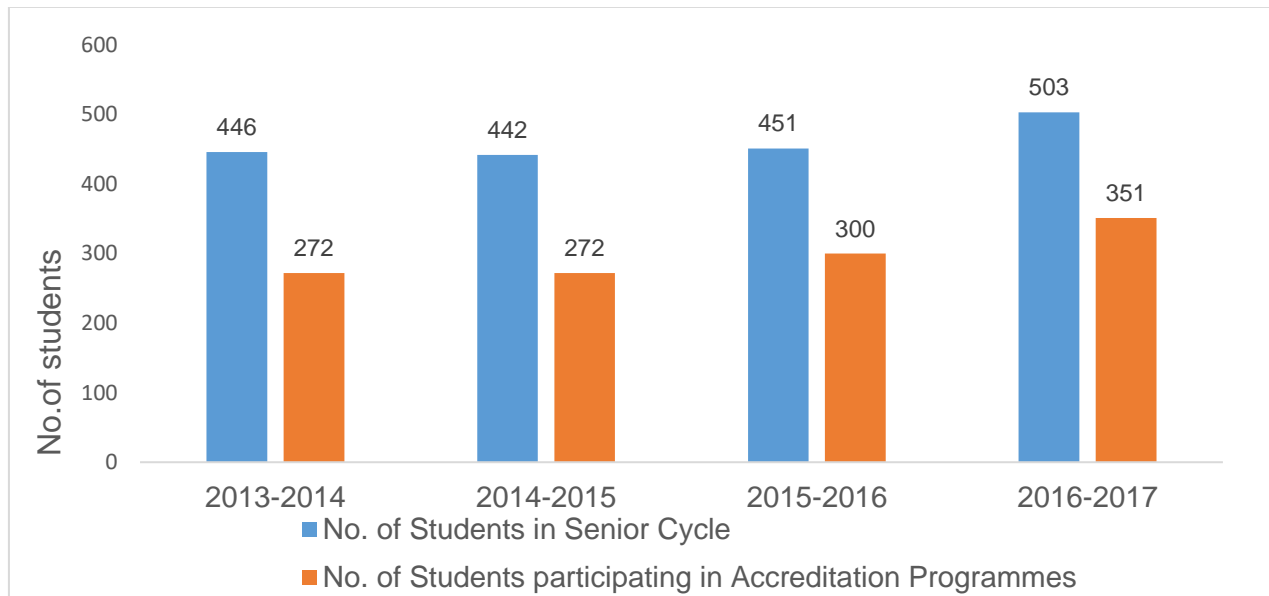

Twenty-two parents (61%) reported in Phase Two that their child was engaged in an accredited programme. In the majority (54%, n=19) of special schools, students could follow two or more accreditation pathways at the same time.

Levels of Accreditations

Slightly under half of all respondents from special schools in Phase One (49%, n=18) were happy with the level of accreditation available in their school; 38% (n=14) were not happy and 14% (n=5) answered 'don't know' to this question. (See Figure 19).

Figure 19: Are You Happy with the Level of Accreditation Available to Students?
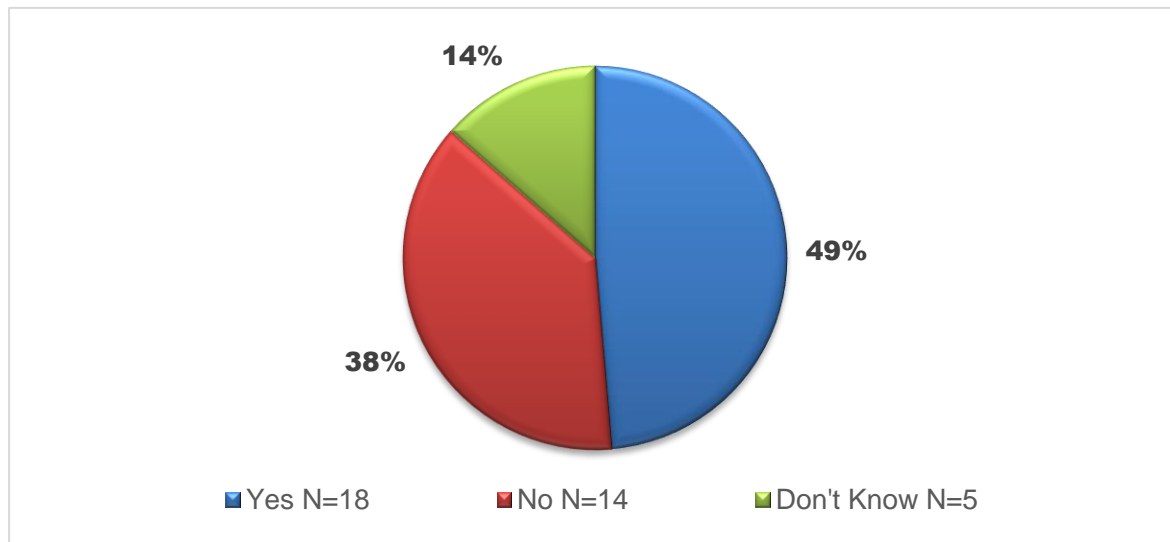
Over half (58%, n=19) stated that students, for whatever reason, do not participate in accredited programme in senior cycle. (See Figure 20). Feedback from respondents identified other programmes which are available to students. These include ASDAN, Gaisce (The President's) Awards, in–school programmes and life skills programmes.

Figure 20: Non-Participation in Senior Cycle Assessment
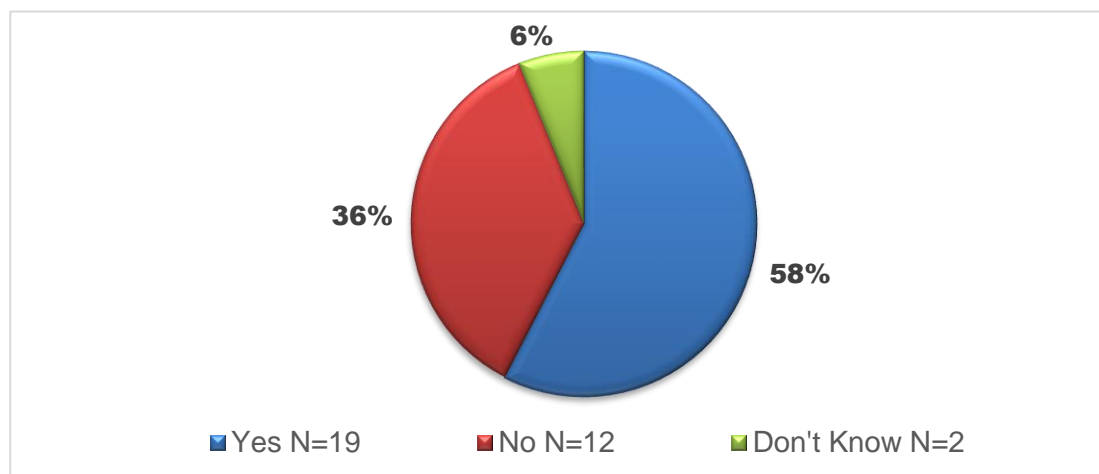
State Examinations

Figure 21 shows that over half of all special schools, with students with ID, were entered into state examinations (53%, n=18).

Figure 21: Are Students with ID Entered for State Examinations?
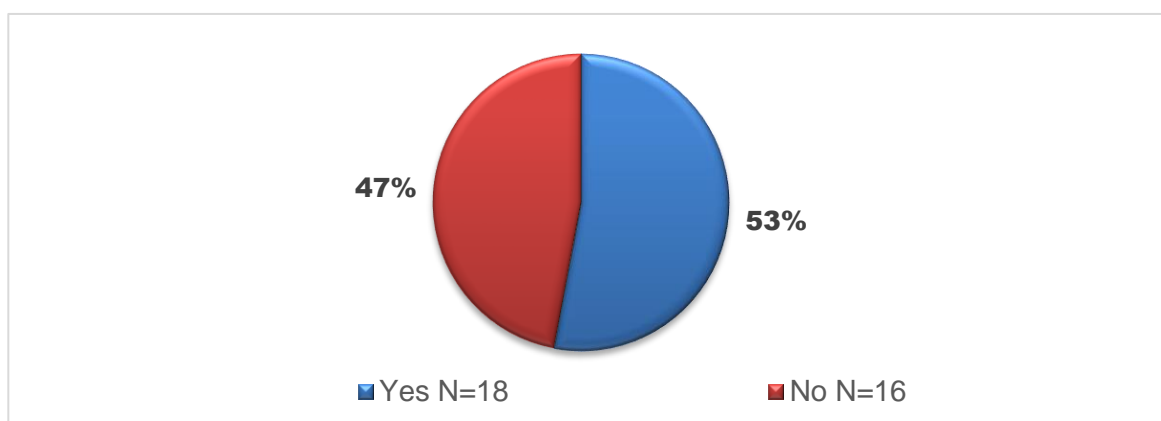

47% 53%

■Yes N=18   ■No N=16

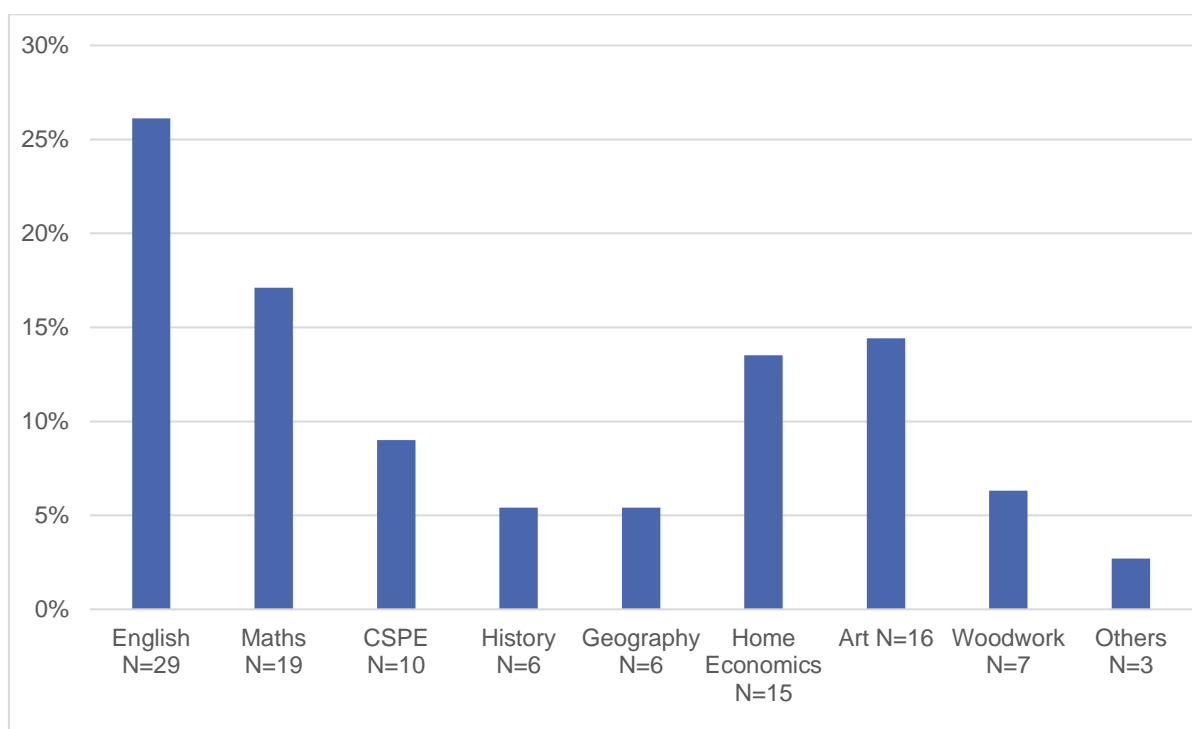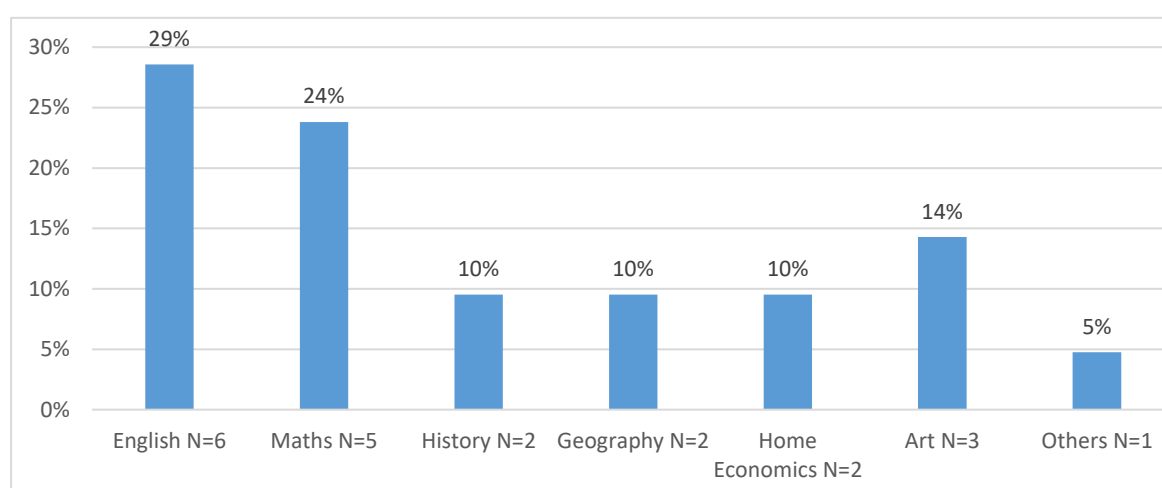### Figure 22: Examination Subjects at Junior Cycle

Figure 22 shows feedback from principals in Phase One on the examination subjects which are taken at Junior Cycle level in their school. The graph shows the breakdown of subjects, in which students can participate, at examination level in special schools in Ireland.

Figure 23: Examination Subjects at Senior Cycle

Most students (57%, n=22) and nearly three quarters of parents (73%, n=27) stated that the choice of subjects available to study in their schools was extremely good or very good. Over three quarters of students (76%, n=16) stated that there were additional programmes and subjects they would like to study. Feedback on this topic included history, languages, woodwork, music, PE and science. The majority of students (70%, n=25) and parents (74%, n=25) reported that the school was extremely good or very good at preparing students for examinations. Figure 24 represents the breakdown of this data.

Figure 24: Preparing for Examinations
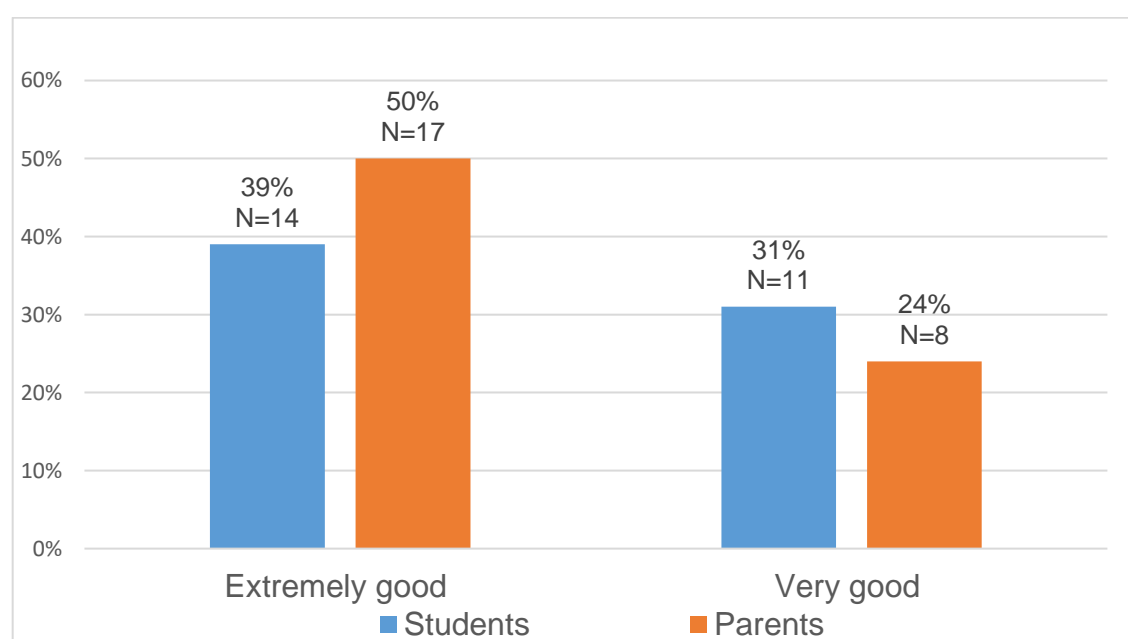
Academic Culture

All respondent schools stated that the culture within their school, always or sometimes, encourages students with ID to achieve accreditation. Nearly three quarters of respondents in Phase One (73%, n=24) highlighted that their school always had a good reputation for encouraging academic success. Figure 44 illustrates this data. The overwhelming majority of parents (89%, n=32) reported that they were extremely satisfied, very satisfied or satisfied with the school's provision of accredited programmes available to their child. (See Figure 25).

Figure 25: Are you Satisfied with the Level of Accreditation Available for Your Child in Their School?
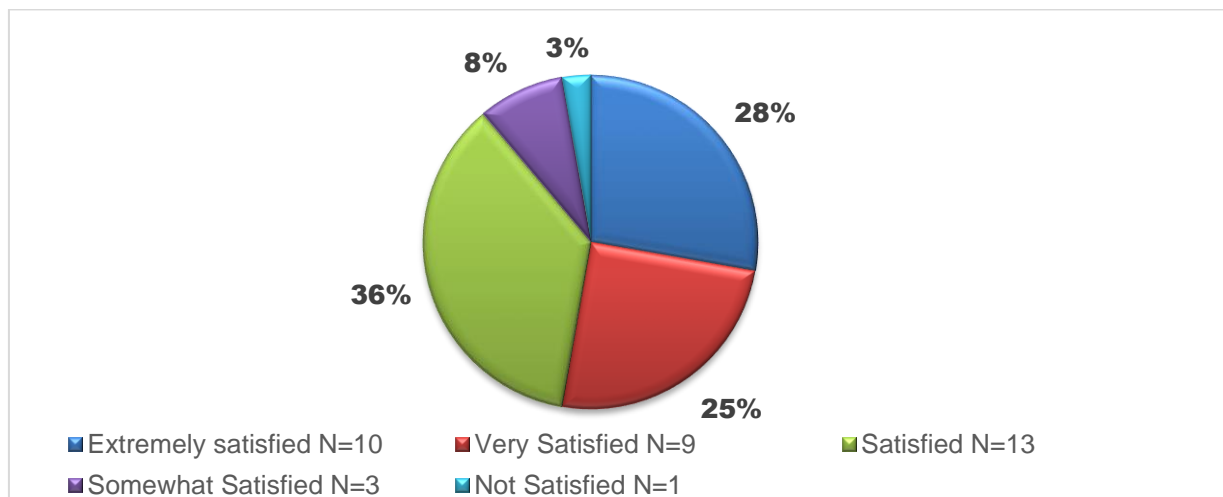

From Phase Two of the data collection, 78% of students (n=32) and 89% (n=32) of parents rated the teaching in their child's school as very good or extremely good. The overwhelming majority of students (84%, n=33) and parents (81%, n=30) reported that the school was extremely good or very good at supporting learning. Figure 47 outlines data from Phase Two on the question of supporting students to learn.

Student Voice in Educational Programmes

Over three quarters of special schools in Ireland (77%, n=26) reported that students always or sometimes had a direct input into what education programmes they could participate in. Feedback from special schools in Phase 1 indicated that the overwhelming majority 94% (n=33) of parents, always or sometimes, have an input into the education

programmes in which their child participated. Just over half (54%, n=19) of special schools in Ireland stated that barriers to participation of students achieving accreditation exist in their schools, while a third of schools (31%, n=11) felt there were no barriers.

Figure 26: Students have a Direct Input into their Education Programme
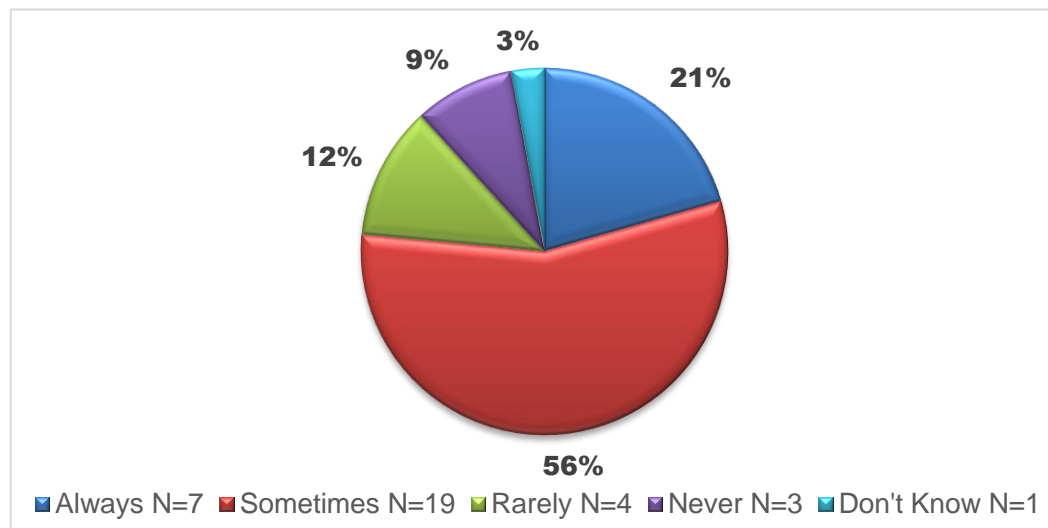
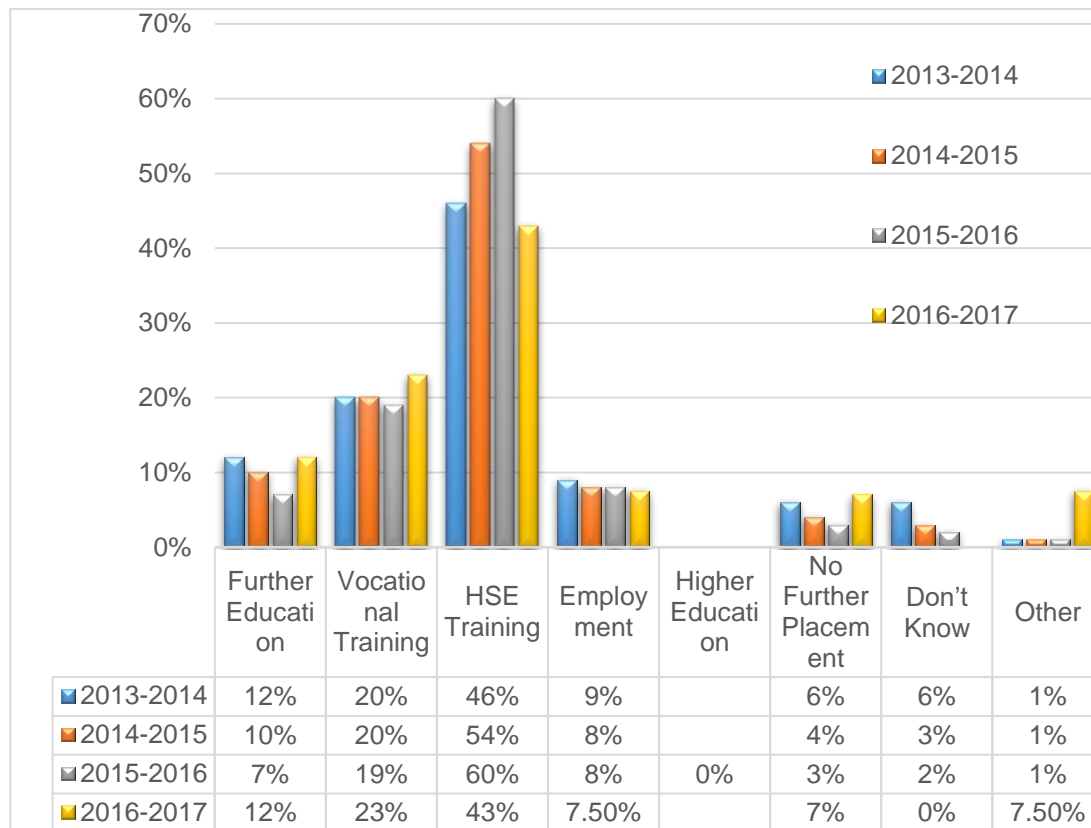**Transition Pathways in Post Primary Special Schools**

In Phase One, principals were asked to provide data on where students transition to after completing their post primary education. In total, 10 special schools responded and the data represents the transition pathways of 566 students in total during the period 2013-2017. (See Table 3).

Table 3: Transition Pathways between 2013-2017

Transition Placement	2013-2017
No. of Students	n=566
Further Education	10% (n=57)
Higher Education	0%
Vocational Training	20% (n=115)
HSE Training	51% (n=291)
Employment	8% (n=45)
No Further Placement	5% (n=27)
Don't Know	3% (n=17)
Other	3% (n=19)

Figure 27 illustrates, in further detail, the transition pathways of students following graduation from post primary education.

Figure 27: Transition Placements

	Further Education	Vocational Training	HSE Training	Employment	Higher Education	No Further Placement	Don't Know	Other
2013-2014	12%	20%	46%	9%		6%	6%	1%
2014-2015	10%	20%	54%	8%		4%	3%	1%
2015-2016	7%	19%	60%	8%	0%	3%	2%	1%
2016-2017	12%	23%	43%	7.50%		7%	0%	7.50%

This data represents 127 students graduating from their post primary schools in 2013-2014, 153 students in 2014-2015, 152 students in 2015-2016 and 134 students in 2016-2017. Data from Phase One reported that over half (54%, n=19) of special schools stated that the procedures for transitions of students to further placements always operate effectively within their school.

Impact of Subject Choice on Transition Pathway Options

Just over half of respondents (51%, n=17) from Phase One reported that the subject choice available in their school rarely or never impacted on the students' post-career trajectory.

Decision-Making Process

Respondents from Phase One reported that nearly three quarters (74%, n=25) of students were involved in the decision-making process regarding transition to further placement after their post primary education. An overwhelming 94% (n=33) of responses from special schools in Ireland in Phase One reported that in their school parents are always involved in the decision-making process regarding transition of their son/daughter from post primary education.

Student Voice

The overwhelming majority (81%, n=29) of students stated that someone had talked to them about the transition pathways available to them after they leave their post primary special school. Results from the Student Questionnaire in Phase Two identified that the majority (51%, n= 28) of students believed that their school had prepared them for the world of work when they leave school. Students was asked in Phase Two if they felt well-prepared for further study after they leave their post primary special school. Most students (60%, n=23) strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement. (See Figure 57). Over three fifths of students (64%, n=25) strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that they had real choices about what they can do after they leave post primary education.

Parent Voice

Over three quarters of parents (78%, n=29) described their role as having an 'extremely active', 'very active' or 'active' role in the decision-making process. Feedback from Phase Two (student and parent questionnaire) identified that nearly half (48%, n=18) of parents strongly or somewhat agreed that their child's school had prepared them for world of work. Parents were asked in Phase Two if they felt their child well-prepared for further study after they leave their school. Most parents (55%, n=20) strongly or slightly agreed with the statement that their child had real choices about what they can do after they leave post primary education. (

# Culture within Special Schools in Ireland

In Phase One all responses from Principals (100%, n=34) stated that their school always or sometimes had a culture of encouraging participation of their students to achieve accreditation. In these results, 79% of principals reported that the school always encourages students to achieve accreditation. In Phase One, principals were asked their opinion on the level of accreditation available for students in their post primary school. (See Figure 28).

Figure 28: Are You Happy with the Level of Accreditation Available for Students in Your School

14%

49%

38%

■ Yes N=18   ■ No N=14   ■ Don't Know N=5
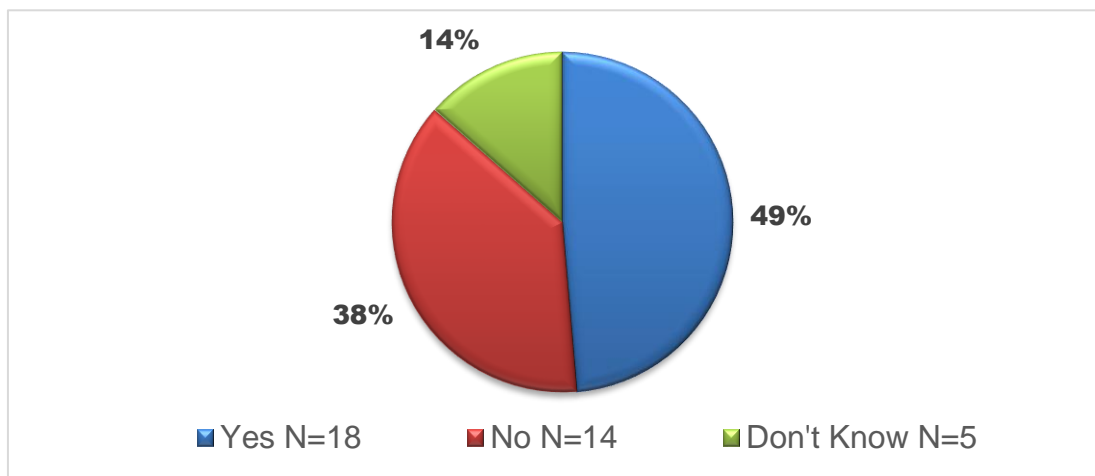
Nearly half of respondents (49%, n=18) from Phase One reported that they were happy with the level of accreditation programmes available to students in their school. All (100%, n=35) respondents from Phase One reported that their students were always or sometimes encouraged to have high aspirations about their learning in school. In Phase One, principals were asked whether barriers to participation of students achieving accreditation exist in their school. Figure 29 illustrates the findings.

Figure 29: Barriers to Participation of Students Achieving Accreditation
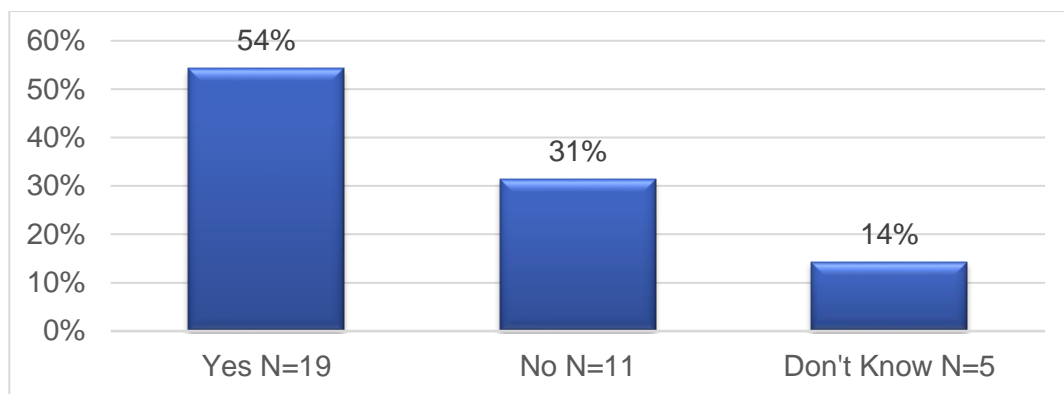
The majority (54%, n=19) of respondents from Phase One stated that barriers to participation of students achieving accreditation exist in their school. The vast majority (94%, n=31) of respondents from Phase One stated that their school always or sometimes had a good reputation for encouraging academic success.

Student Voice

The following section will explore those responses from students. Students (n=39) were asked to respond to the statement '*This school has been a good school for me*'. The vast majority (90%, n=35) of students strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement. Parents (n=37) were asked to respond to the statement – '*This school has been a good school for my child*'. An overwhelming 97% (n=36) of parents strongly or slightly agreed with this statement.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 provided a detailed outline of the data collected from a nationwide questionnaire for principals of special schools, a student and parent questionnaire and feedback from interviews from two case study schools. A response rate of 51% was achieved from the nationwide school questionnaire and the overwhelming majority of respondents hold a senior management position within a special school in Ireland. The findings highlighted that there is a wide range of curricular programmes which students with ID could follow in their schools. This research found that the majority of special schools offer the Junior Cycle Level 2 and QQI Levels 2 and 3 curriculum programmes while nearly all schools offer the Junior Cycle Level 3. A significant minority of special

schools offer awards in the 'other' category and In-House awards. The curriculum programmes offered to students in special schools attempt to reflect the students' individual choices and their interests. However, the majority of principals recognised that their school restricts the curriculum, while the majority of students with ID stated that there were additional programmes and subjects they would like to study. The majority of students with ID participated in accredited programmes at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland and over half of all participating special schools stated that their students were entered into state examinations. Nearly half of principals reported that they were happy with the level of accreditation programmes available to students in their school. All respondent special schools stated that the culture within their school encouraged students with ID to achieve accreditation and that their school had a good reputation and high aspirations for encouraging academic success. The majority of special schools stated that there were barriers to participation of students achieving accreditation in their schools.

Finally, this chapter focused on examining data on the transition pathways available to students with ID, post school. During the period 2013-2017, over half of all students transitioned to a HSE training programme. While one tenth of students secured a placement in further education and no student transitioned to higher education. The following chapter will analyse these findings and discuss them in the context of current national and international literature in the area of special education.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

Curriculum

Óskarsdóttir (2019) explored inclusive schools' policy across Europe and stated that all learners should have access to relevant learning opportunities within a single coherent curriculum framework and assessment that informs learning and recognises academic achievement and wider learning. The Government of Ireland is now examining educational provision in Ireland considering their obligations and responsibilities under

the UNCRPD (NCSE, 2019) which recognises that the best interests of children and their needs should be fundamental (Merrigan and Senior, 2021). Banks and Shevlin (2021) highlight the assumption that special schools and special settings are better resourced and capable of delivering better quality academic and social outcomes for their students. However, both internationally and nationally there is very little evidence that attendance at special schools produces greater academic and social outcomes for their students (Banks and Shevlin, 2021). The NCSE (2019) stated that it is timely to consider the educational journey of students who attend special schools and to investigate the programmes and outcomes students' experiences.

A key question of this study was to investigate what academic programmes are available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland. This new research is small in breadth and depth so there is a need to be cautious of over-generalising its findings. However, this research provides data on the variety of curricula options with which students with ID are engaging and participating in in special schools in Ireland. This research summaries the finding of current practice concerning what curriculum post primary students with ID are engaged with in special schools in Ireland.

Senior Cycle Programmes

There is evidence from this research to suggest that the majority of special schools offer a Senior Cycle programme at post primary level. Feedback from this study identified that special schools engage in a variety of curricula which includes the Junior Cycle Levels 2 and 3, JCSP, QQI Levels 2 and 3, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Established. This research suggest that a significant majority of special schools follow the Junior Cycle Level 2 curriculum programme, while just under half of special schools offer the Junior Cycle Level 3. Principals commented that the more practical subjects such as Home Economics, Art and Woodwork were engaged with at JCL3. The evidence of popularity of special schools to engage with the JCL2 programme corresponds with the findings of Project Iris (2015) which reported that JCL2

qualifications can address the difficulties experienced by some pupils with ID in achieving nationally recognised certification.

The LCA was offered as a curriculum programme in one fifth of special schools, while the Leaving Certificate was only offered in two schools. The results of this study concur with the findings of Project Iris (2015) which reported that the development of appropriate programmes and associated nationally recognised awards within Leaving Certificate represents an urgent task. Interestingly, this study identified that nearly half of special schools (46%) offered awards in the 'other' category and 43% offered in-house awards.

Additional Curriculum Options

In this research, nearly a quarter of principals identified Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) as an additional curriculum and accreditation pathway. This research concurs with the findings of NCCA (2019) and Smyth et al. (2019) which highlighted that some special schools, to meet the needs of their students, have diversified the curriculum they offer to include Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and ASDAN qualifications and/or school developed completion programmes to follow on from the learning achieved in Junior Cycle at Levels 1 and 2. Special schools await the outcome of the Senior Cycle review by the NCCA, which has indicated that there was an appetite among students, parents, and teachers for greater flexibility in subject and programme choices and more learner-centred approaches in teaching, learning, and assessment at Senior Cycle. The ongoing Senior Cycle review by the NCCA highlighted that many believe that the current senior cycle provision is too narrowly focused on students' academic ability. This means many students, including those with special educational needs are left without pathways post school (NCCA, 2019).

Subject Choice

Findings in this research reported that the majority of students and parents agreed that the choice of subjects available to study in their schools was extremely good or very good. Evidence from this study reported that the most popular examination subjects at Junior Cycle Level 3 were English (26%), Mathematics (17%), Home-Economics (14%) and Art

(14%). In addition, this research reported that the most popular examination subjects taken at Senior Cycle were English (29%), Mathematics (24%) and Art (14%). There is evidence from this research to suggest that most curricula followed by students with ID in special schools are practically based subjects or assessed through the compilation of portfolios.

NDA/NCSE (2017) stated that curricula inflexibility in Senior Cycle, apart from Leaving Certificate Applied, and a lack of resources, sometimes resulted in an overly academic focus when a more practical course would have been more appropriate for some young people with disabilities. Smyth et al. (2019) identified the need for more project and practical work and a combination of academic and vocational learning was also mentioned in this respect. Squires et al. (2016) highlighted that many students preferred accreditation which involved a portfolio rather than a written examination.

Evidence from this research suggests that just over half of principals reported that the subject choice available in their school 'rarely or never' impacted on a student's post-career trajectory. This is unlike their mainstream peers where subject choice can influence the courses a student wishes to pursue post school. The findings from this research suggest that very little importance is placed on the subjects which students with ID follow at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland. Does this suggest that the opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities and the transition pathways available to them post school are predetermined? Does it matter what subjects students with intellectual disabilities choose or engage with and receive accreditation for if pathways post school are already decided? The inclusion debate and the concept of equality in education for all learners, appears to fall short when the education provision and opportunities available to students with ID in their Senior Cycle are examined.

Restriction of Curricular Programmes

Nearly three quarters of principals in this research (74%) stated that their school 'always or sometimes' restrict the curriculum which would normally be available in mainstream schools. This result concurs with Squires et al. (2016) which reported that a more restricted choice of subjects was mentioned by students in special schools. Smyth et al.

(2019) highlighted that students' commented on the focus in schools on academic subjects to the detriment of other subject areas and skills. Several students' feedback referenced the absence of pathways or accreditation for those who were more vocationally oriented. This research reported similar findings and the data highlighted that more than three quarters of students stated that there were additional programmes and subjects they would like to study: these included Woodwork, Music, PE, and Science.

Limitations of Curricular Programmes

Project Iris (2015) identified that some pupils experience major difficulties accessing the current curriculum or do not have the opportunity to gain a nationally recognised certification. Students with ID have a right to an education and inclusion policies have dominated recent national and international policies. This research would suggest that students with ID cannot avail of the same educational opportunities as their mainstream peers. Limitations of subject choice and restrictions of curricular programmes negatively influence the educational opportunities for students with ID. Inclusion policies at the macro level of the ecological system does not appear to have filtered down to practice in the class. Rose et al. (2010) noted that, although the climate for inclusion was evident in national policy documents, there lacked comprehensive evidence of inclusion policy on the ground in classroom and educational settings. Greater flexibility to allow students to navigate different pathways through Senior Cycle was seen as desirable. The results of this research concur with Watson et al. (2015) which stated that a broadening of the curriculum is likely to be helpful, including greater availability of programmes such as the Junior Cycle Schools Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied Programme.

The changes to Senior Cycle should align fully with developments at Junior Cycle. The results of this research highlight the lack of stepping stones available to students with ID. The jump from JCL3 to LCA can be too big for a lot of students to navigate. There is evidence in this research which concurs with existing findings in Farrell et al. (2010) in the need for a balance between exam focused national post primary curriculum and the flexibility focusing on student needs and ability. Feedback from principals and senior

teachers in this study highlighted that presently there is no pathway to follow, after a student completes JCL2.

Challenges to Curricular Programmes

There is evidence from the findings of this research that half of special schools in this research stated that challenges to participation of students achieving accreditation exist in their school. In this research, it was noted in feedback from one senior teacher that their school does not have the same facilities as other post primary schools, such as a science laboratory, or specialised teachers and additional teaching hours. This research would suggest that these factors hinder a broad curriculum at post primary level, available to students with ID and therefore a narrower curriculum exists.

Student and Parent Voice on Curricular Programmes

O'Mara et al. (2012) highlighted how very few studies went to the trouble of assessing students' views and Squires et al. (2016) reported that students want to be involved in making curricular choices. This research found that the vast majority of principals in special schools reported that students 'always or sometimes' had a direct input into education programmes. This research concurs with Kenny and Mihut (2020) reporting how parents of students with additional needs are typically highly engaged in their children's education, in terms of attending school meetings or events and supporting homework completion. However, Smyth et al. (2019) reported that schools were not seen by parents as catering adequately for the needs of young people with special educational needs.

Accreditation

The NCCA (2019) reported that certification is an essential stepping stone, not only to individual success, but to building a productive and competitive economy and society. Educational outcomes for this cohort of students are very sparse and data is not systematically reported or tracked in Ireland (NCSE, 2006). Rose et al. (2015) identified

that developing appropriate programmes and associated nationally recognised awards within the Leaving Certificate represents an urgent task.

Data from this research provides evidence to suggest that the participation rate of students with ID engaging with accreditation programmes has increased over the last number of years, from 61% in 2013 to 70% in 2017. Rose et al. (2015) noted that the Junior Cycle Level 2 programme has the potential to address the difficulties experienced by some pupils with ID in achieving nationally recognised certification. The findings in this research reported similar accreditation and awards programmes which students with ID were engaged with in special schools. Two thirds of special schools follow the JCL2 accreditation pathways, while under half of special schools offer the JCL3 curriculum. These findings concur with evidence from Project Iris (2015) which highlighted that most pupils had experienced a degree of academic achievement. There is evidence in this research from feedback from principals and senior teachers which concurs with Smyth et al. (2019) who reported there was a lack of continuity for young people with SEN at Senior Cycle who had taken Level One or Two courses at Junior Cycle.

This research would suggest that the misalignment of the Junior Cycle and the present Senior Cycle for students with ID which highlights the ad hoc nature of government policies in relation to providing inclusive equitable education for all. Providing an inclusive curriculum and accreditation programmes for all students to participate and engage in seems to fall short of including students with ID. Government policy under UNCRPD is committed to inclusion but this policy has not been implemented when it comes to curriculum design for all learners. This research concurs with Smyth et al. (2019) as there is evidence from feedback from special schools which suggests that, following completion of Junior Cycle Levels 2 and 3 accredited programmes, some special schools offered a school-designed Leavers or Finishing Programme. The findings of this research highlighted that slightly under half of all respondents from special schools were happy with the level of accreditation available in their school. This research correlated with the findings of Smyth et al. (2019) who reported that special schools were diverse, not only in the profile of their students but also in the programmes they offered at Senior Cycle.

Challenges to Accreditation

Smyth et al. (2019) highlighted that in the majority of schools, the Senior Cycle programmes did not adequately cater for those students who are less academically oriented. There is evidence in this research to agree with Smyth et al. (2019) as slightly over half of special schools stated that students, for whatever reason, do not participate in an accredited programme in Senior Cycle. Smyth et al. (2019) reported that student feedback from their research stated that there was an absence of pathways or accreditation for those who were more vocationally oriented. Evidence from feedback received from principals and senior teachers in this research reported similar findings and suggests that a balance needs to be constructed between the demands of accreditation programmes and the needs of the student.

Preparation for Examinations

Squires et al. (2016) reported that students' value qualifications and they wanted courses to be meaningful in terms of their aspirations to college and employment. Many students preferred accreditation that involved a portfolio rather than a written examination. Feedback from principals and senior teachers in this research reported that nearly three quarters of principals of special schools highlighted that their school 'always' had a good reputation for encouraging academic success. This research suggests that the LCA is not a popular Senior Cycle programme, as less than one fifth of special schools offered the programme to their students. The NDA/NCSE (2017) identified that the current Senior Cycle curriculum may be considered to have an overly academic focus when a more practical course might have been more appropriate for some young people with ID.

School Culture

Squires et al. (2016) stated that the school culture and the climate in terms of teacher attitudes, values and attributes are very important in promoting student engagement and

encouraging participation. This research identified that the vast majority of students and parents rated that the school was 'extremely good or very good' at teaching and supporting learning. There is evidence from this research that nearly one half of principals from special schools were happy with the level of accreditation available in their school. Special schools involved in this research stated that their students were 'always or sometimes' encouraged to have high aspirations about their learning in school.

Student and Parent Voice on Accreditation

Barnes-Holmes et al. (2013) found that special school staff provide a strong supportive environment, which is accepting for students with SEN and attributed this as the reason why students attending special schools appear happier than their mainstream counterparts. Evidence from feedback from students in this research reported that most students stated that their school was a good school for them. The findings of this research, as over three-quarters of students stated that there were additional programmes and subjects they would like to study. These included Woodwork, Music, PE and Science. This research concurs with O'Mara et al. (2012) who stated that there needs to be a balance between meeting the standard criteria for accreditation and certification and preventing adapted curricula from becoming too narrow. Kenny and Mihut (2020) explained that parental expectations about the future educational achievement of their children had been found to impact children's academic achievement. Findings in this research revealed that most parents reported that their child was engaged in an accredited programmes. In addition, the overwhelming majority of parents indicated in their feedback that they were 'satisfied, very satisfied or extremely satisfied' with the provision of accreditation programmes available to their child in their school.

Transition Pathways

Young people with disabilities face many of the same challenges and opportunities as their peers in mainstream. However, in many cases these challenges are exacerbated (NDA/NCSE, 2017). Aston et al. (2021) highlighted that people with intellectual disabilities are significantly underrepresented within the workforce and within further and higher

education in Ireland. Feedback from principals in this research reported that during the period 2013-2017 over half of students, from a total of 566 students and 19 special schools, transitioned to a HSE training programme. One fifth of these students progressed to a vocational training programme while only one in ten students transitioned to further education. No student transitioned to higher education. In this limited sample of students with ID there is strong evidence to suggest that the transition pathway to further and higher education is not generally followed by students with ID from special schools in Ireland.

This research would suggest that by far the most popular post school pathway for students with ID in special schools in Ireland is attending a placement on a HSE training programme. AHEAD identified an increase in the number of students with SEN attending higher education, although specific SEN groups remain underrepresented. This research suggests that students with ID fall into this underrepresented group. This research focused specifically on the experiences of students with ID in special schools which may account for the majority of graduating students transitioning to HSE placements post school.

Scanlon and Doyle (2017) states that, when planning for transition, people with disabilities cannot be viewed as a homogeneous group, but rather as individuals who all have their own strengths, weakness and experiences. Findings in this research identified that principals, senior teachers, parents and students reported that successful transition procedures were often due to the IEP process, parent/teacher meetings, information nights and organised careers days within the school. In this research, feedback from principals, senior teachers and parents suggests that the IEP was identified as the key document for planning student objectives and targets. Grigal et al. (2012) highlighted that if attending a further and higher education programme is seldom or never listed as a goal on a student's IEP and transition plan, then it is doubtful that the outcome will ever occur. The scope of this study did not involve scrutinising and evaluating students' IEP's. The OECD (2011) and McGuckin et al. (2013) recommended developing bridges between

stakeholders that foster continuity and coherent paths between education at all levels and all sectors and strengthening local synergies among everyone involved in the transition process. Aston et al. (2021) stated that improvements in awareness and knowledge among teachers, Guidance Counsellors, students and their families could be achieved by developing formal linkages between schools and colleges. Formulating an IEP and transition planning should involve negotiating a plan that respects students' personal choices and opens up, rather than closes down, possibilities for them (EADSNE, 2002).

Deciding what constitutes successful transition planning for each student and who decided if the transition placement has been successful are issues that were raised in the findings of this research. Being offered a placement to attend a post school programme does not mean the placement is successful or appropriate. In addition, having a limited number of transition options from which to choose is also not an indicator of a successful transition placement. This research suggests that being allocated a placement or having limited options does not equate with a successful transition placement. The scope of this research did not involve follow-up interviews with students and their parents after they graduated from their post primary special school.

Transition Procedures and Planning

Aston et al. (2021) identified the genuine concern of school management, personnel and parents to support young people with ID to make suitable transitions which will allow them to achieve their potential. Evidence from this research reported that the majority of special schools stated that their school's procedures and plans for the transition of students to further placements operated effectively within their school. McConkey et al. (2017) identified that continuity of education and access to either training courses or employment opportunities is often not available to the same extent to students with ID as for their non-disabled peers. This research would suggest that a two-tiered system appears to be operating for mainstream students and for students with ID. Students with ID in special schools receive limited guidance from professionals, and more limited

options of appropriate courses and programmes than their counterparts in mainstream and have additional concerns regarding funding and HSE support. Aston et al. (2021) emphasised that barriers to successful transition from school for students with ID centre around a perceived loss of supports by parents and students and a fear that suitable appropriate places may not be available. Scanlon and Doyle (2019) reported that international research has emphasised the importance of developing a personal transition plan for students who have ID. In addition, evidence and feedback from this research agreed with the findings of NDA/NCSE (2017) which stated that it can be helpful to explore the need for transition planning to begin early in the post-primary school career of students with disabilities to adequately prepare them for life after school.

There is evidence from this research to suggest that, following the involvement of and contributions from students, parents, teachers and the principal, the local HSE Guidance Officer offers the student with ID a placement on a programme post school. This finding is in line with the NCSE (2014) which reported that the HSE occupational guidance service aims to provide one-to-one advice, support and guidance to enable individuals with disabilities to make an informed choices about their rehabilitative training and occupational services. Feedback from some principals reported an area of concern with this transition process. There is evidence from this research to suggest that the main cause of concern from principals was the process by which the HSE Officer drew conclusions regarding future student post school placements which were based on relatively short interviews with teachers, students and their families. Aston et al. (2021) identified that there was little evidence of any formal tracking system to monitor the progression of students with ID in post-school settings. The scope of this research did not pertain to investigating the process of transition to HSE placements after students leave post primary education. Aston et al. (2021) identified several barriers to successful transitions from school, which include a fear of a loss of supports in further or higher education institutes, a fear of a lack of suitable places for students with intellectual disabilities and a lack of access to relevant information and awareness of post school options among teachers, SENCOs and school Guidance Counsellors. This research would concur with Aston et al. (2021) and suggest that being offered a place by the local HSE

Officer on a programme post school, may not reflect the most appropriate or successful placement available for each particular student. Issues such as funding, location and resources may dictate post school placements for students with ID as opposed to continuing accreditation programmes.

Decision-Making Process

In this research, there was considerable evidence that most special schools reported that parents and students were always involved in the decision-making process regarding transition to further placements post school. Evidence from this research found that the vast majority of parents believed they were active in the decision-making process of their child transitioning to post school pathways. This research found that the overwhelming majority of students with ID stated that someone had talked to them about the transition pathways available to them post school. Feedback from students highlighted that family, friends, teachers, SNA's, information days and the local HSE Guidance Officer were identified as offering support and advice to students with ID about transitioning to future placements post school.

The vast majority of students with ID in this research believed that their school had prepared them for the world of work or for further study and they believed they had real choices post school. In contrast to this finding, the NDA/NCSE (2017) found that young people with a disability in adult day services stated that they had not received sufficient practical support in school, including life-skills, to prepare them for life in this post school environment. This research suggests that students with ID may have overestimated their abilities and the transition pathway options available to them post school. Feedback from over 90% of students stated that their school had been a good school for them. Feedback from students and parents in this research reflected a positive experience of their post primary education and that their special school provided a supported, educational environment. It was evident from this research that students had progressed, developed and benefited from the educational programmes in which they were engaged and believed they were well-prepared for their transition to new pathways and programmes post school. This research suggests that this positive and sheltered

environment where success, support and achievements are recognised, may amplify a student's view of their abilities.

Role of Guidance Counsellor

In Ireland special schools are classified as primary schools. The Department of Education and Skills do not currently sanction the post of guidance counsellor within special schools, even though some special schools are providing subjects and accreditation beyond the national school curriculum. Aston et al. (2021) highlighted that little is known about the type of career guidance they receive and the extent to which they make successful transitions from school. This research concurs with the findings of the NDA/NCSE (2017), NCSE (2014), McGuckin et al. (2013) and Aston et al. (2021) and the need for access to suitably qualified Guidance Counsellors in post-primary special schools, who would explore future options in post school environments. Feedback from principals and senior teachers in this research suggested that establishing a guidance counsellor role within special schools in Ireland would be of immense benefit to students and parents as they negotiate their way through the transition pathways available post school. This research suggests that providing information and guidance to all stakeholders in the transition process would help bridge the gap between post primary school and the transition pathways available post school.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

The focus of this study was to explore three questions:

- Firstly, what curriculum is available for students with ID, at Senior Cycle, in special schools in Ireland?
- Secondly, what are the accreditation outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities at Senior Cycle in special schools in Ireland?
- Thirdly, what are the transition pathways available to students with intellectual disabilities post school?

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems was used throughout this research, as a framework and guide to outline the many layers of influence on the education provision of students with ID and the curriculum and accreditation programmes they participate and engage in at post primary level.

Figure 30: Research Themes
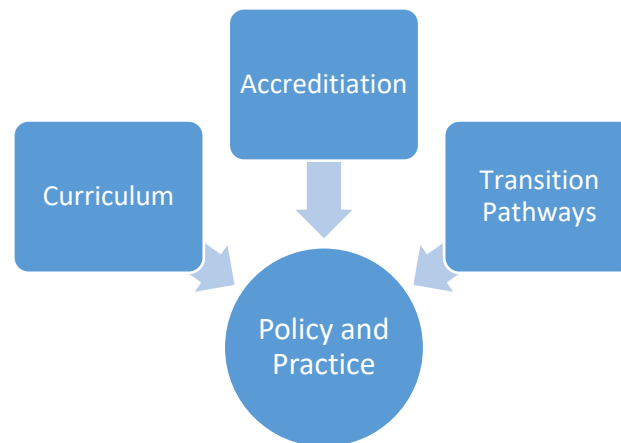
The key themes of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways are interlinked and provide a picture of the educational outcomes for students with ID and the reality of the policy and practice of inclusion on the ground in special schools. This study aimed to address the dearth of research which currently prevails in curriculum, accreditation, and transition pathways for students with ID attending special schools in Ireland. The cohort of this research were students with mild intellectual disabilities in Senior Cycle, attending special schools in Ireland. Following reflection and consideration of the research study in its totality, it is now appropriate and beneficial to discuss the findings of this research, its addition to new knowledge in this field and the implications of the findings for existing policy and practice. Findings from this research study aim to illustrate and outline, reflect, and evaluate opportunities to highlight existing policies and develop best practices. The ethical aspects of this research were based on care and establishing a relationship with the stakeholders, which included students, parents, principals, and senior teachers in this specialised sector of special education.

The origin of this research study was born from a place of personal interest, experience, and care for students with ID, in this specialized sector within the education system in Ireland. Analyzing the findings of this research, teasing them out and reflecting on them in terms of policy and practice has delivered new knowledge and a greater understanding of the research themes of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways.

This research would venture to assert that inequality, rather than equality of education provision, may be the experience of students with ID in special schools in relation to the curricular, accreditation programmes and transition pathways available to their peers in mainstream. This research would suggest that the ratification by the Irish Government of the UNCRPD in 2018, which obliges states to ensure access to inclusive education, is not being seen on the ground in special schools, by students with ID. The vision for inclusive education in Ireland is not apparent in practice in special schools in Ireland today. The NCSE (2019) policy advice on special schools suggested that there is no reason why special schools should be located on a site separate from a mainstream school. Shevlin and Banks (2021) reported that inclusive education research to date has highlighted that the continued use, and expansion, of special classes and segregated settings is at odds with the prevailing inclusive policy narrative. The current thinking appears to be to provide the physical space, a unit or special class within mainstream schools, a support teacher and special needs assistants and see what happens instead of providing funding or resources to schools, not only for student supports but for building teacher capacity which encourages inclusive practice. It can be argued that systems of segregation remain (Banks and Shevlin, 2021).

The findings of this research suggest that a shared education campus, for mainstream and special post primary schools, would benefit all students from a diversity and inclusion standpoint and provide for the sharing of resources. A shared educational campus for mainstream and special schools would enable access for all students to specialised teachers and specialised classrooms and equipment. This would level the playing field somewhat for students with ID, who endeavor to follow accreditation pathways and to have the equal opportunity to engage with a wide variety of academic

and vocational practical subjects and to ensure that they have equal opportunities for continued educational progression in their choice of transition pathways post school.

While the Department of Education and Skills continues to promote and develop the policy of inclusion, in practice there exists an inequity and imbalance between the provision of mainstream education and the provision of special education with regard to the curricular and accreditation choices, resources, supports and opportunities available to students in mainstream and students with ID in special schools. This pattern of imbalances and inequality can limit the choices available for students with ID in special schools and thus may have repercussions on their lives after school and the opportunities which may be available to them.

The findings of this research indicate that the policy, promoted by the Department of Education and Skills of providing and developing an inclusive education system for all students and providing equal opportunities for engagement and participation for all students in special schools, can pose a significant challenge in practice for the Irish education system. This research suggests that special schools operate curriculum and accreditation programmes similar to mainstream schools. However, in practice these programmes are diluted and are implemented with degrees of modification including age of students completing programmes, range of curriculum offered, modified choice of subjects, varying degrees of access to specialized teachers, lack of progression curriculum to build on previous accreditation and lack of specialised guidance counsellors' support to assist with clear transition pathways and options post school.

This research would suggest that there exists inequality of education provision for students with ID in special schools in comparison to mainstream education provision. The consequences of a limited form of education provision available in special schools for students with ID minimise the opportunities for continuity of education in Senior

Cycle, which limits post school options and access to other non-health board training and further education courses. This results in poor employment opportunities for students with ID post school as compared to the employment and training opportunities available to their non-disabled peers in mainstream education. This research indicates that the outcomes of the current inclusive education provision available in special schools are radically different from the education opportunities and provision available in mainstream education. Consequently, inequality exists in education provision, in employment opportunities and employability status in later life between students with ID in special schools and their non-disabled peers in mainstream.

This research indicates that there is little connection between curriculum and accreditation programmes students with ID pursue and the transition pathways options post school. The selection of curricula and accreditation programmes in practice does not influence or increase the post school options available to students with ID. There exists a presumption that students with ID, no matter what curricula or accreditation programmes they have completed, will traditionally transition to a HSE placement. This culture in special schools is dramatically different from the education provision and expectations which are present in mainstream schools where the vast majority of non-disabled students transition to higher and further education programmes.

This research would suggest that students with ID do not experience an inclusive education equal to their mainstream peers. In fact, the education provision for students with ID seems to be an afterthought in government policy, even though the Irish Government has committed to the principles of the UNCRPD and their view of quality education for all learners. It can be argued that systems of segregation remain in place due to a lethargic approach by the government to institute real reform and face the challenges of establishing mainstream pathways for every child (Banks and Shevlin, 2021).

Evidence from this research concurs with Squires et al. (2016) who reported that some students in special schools felt that they did not have the same examination opportunities as peers in mainstream. This research suggests that the provision of education for students with ID could benefit from a recognised Senior Cycle accredited programme being implemented at Senior Cycle in special schools. This research highlights that most special schools deliver a school-designed *'Leaver's Programme'* that may not be recognised within the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ). From a policy perspective, students with ID need to have equality of access to a continuum of accredited progression programmes in post primary schools equal to the curricula and accreditation opportunities of their peers in mainstream education.

The findings of this research concur with Aston et al. (2021) and highlight the existence of an obvious gap and inequality in the policy of inclusive education by the lack of provision of guidance counsellors in special schools. Following interrogation of the findings from this research, no principal, senior teacher, student or parent identified a guidance counsellor as assisting them in the challenging area of transition pathways post school. This research suggests that providing a guidance counsellor role within special schools in Ireland could be of immense benefit to students and parents as they negotiate their way through the transition pathways available post school. The support of a guidance counsellor may also highlight the options of transition pathways available to students with ID as opposed to the presumption that the majority of students with ID progress to HSE training courses rather than higher or further education or employment as is the norm for students in mainstream education.

Aston et al. (2021) reported that students with ID are presently not supported nationally with targeted progressions into further education or training that builds on their own achievements. The future education, training and career options for students with ID are limited based on a lack of suitable progression options outside of the traditional health service based adult day centres or vocational training centres (Aston et al. 2021). This research reported that the transition procedures and planning could be improved

through earlier intervention and in-depth discussions with parents and students and the personnel involved in transition planning.

The research findings suggest that being offered a place on a programme post school by the local HSE Officer may not reflect the most appropriate or successful placement available for every student. The findings suggest that being allocated a placement or having limited options does not equate with a successful transition placement. The scope of this research did not pertain to investigating the process of transition to HSE placements after students leave post primary education. The findings indicate that future study should investigate the placement procedures on a post school programme by referencing the criteria, aims and objectives of such a placement. NDA/NCSE (2017) states that bridging the gap between schools and post school settings is considered to be essential in fostering adequate preparation for movement to any new settings.

Information and guidance could assist in bridging the gap between post primary school and the transition pathways available post school. The research findings would suggest that the NCSE provide specific information on transition pathways available for students with ID leaving special schools in Ireland. This cohort is a unique group of students facing many unique challenges. This research would suggest that schools make available course literature designed to provide a comprehensive outline of transition pathways that are available to the students and their families. This could take the form of a 'Careers Day' held annually within the school. This would give all stakeholders an opportunity to view and discuss the transition pathways available post school. These suggested improvements, which became evident from the findings of this research, concur with the NCSE (2014) recommendations which highlighted that the transition from schools can be eased through pre-transition visits, ongoing support during and after transition by specialised school staff, and transition booklets adapted for students and their families.

Strengths and Limitations of Research

As with any study, there is no research that is exempt from some limitations.

Strengths

This research is the first of its kind in Ireland, investigating and discovering new knowledge on the themes of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways for students with ID in special schools in Ireland. All special schools in Ireland catering for students with ID were invited to participate in this research. Upon reflection, this research can hold its own on merit and has considerable strengths. It has allowed, for the first time in an Irish context, the opportunity to investigate the academic programmes, accreditation outcomes and transition pathways available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland. The research design framework focused on capturing all relevant voices, where possible, for this study. Being mindful, respectful and consulting all stakeholders added an authenticity to the research findings. The new knowledge in this research could better inform the inclusive education policy of the Department of Education and Skills. The findings have highlighted gaps, inequalities and imbalances in the current policy. The findings of this research aim to highlight how better connections between special education and mainstream education could balance some of the inequalities which are present.

Limitations

Cosgrove et al. (2018) identified the limitations of using any questionnaire-based survey which involves self-reporting, as this instrument can be prone to subjectivity bias. Questionnaires were used in Phases One and Two of the research. The findings of this research were analysed and reflected upon with knowledge of subjective bias. This research was subject to teacher selection of students to participate in the semi-structured focus groups. There was difficulty in getting special schools to participate in a case study. Principals rejected the invitation to participate in the research, based on time, GDPR and relevance of their students to the research. Some schools were reluctant to get involved in a case study due to the profile of their students and the limitations in their students' cognitive and communication abilities. This highlights how the student's voice

is often in the hands of other stakeholders, such as parents and teachers and that the views of students with ID can be overlooked.

The classification of students with special educational needs was problematic. The Department of Education Special School List 2017 formed the framework for the entire research. This research does not aim to generalise across all special schools; however, a significant response rate of 51% was achieved in the nationwide questionnaire targeting principals in special schools catering for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research provides a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the research questions curriculum, accreditation, and transition pathways available to students with ID in special schools in Ireland. This research journey has highlighted the imbalance and inequalities which exist in practice in an education policy which has inclusion as its core value. This research is pertinent and relevant to the discussion on special education currently in Ireland. The findings of this research suggest that students with ID in special schools do not have access to the same educational opportunities as their peers in mainstream; nor do they have access to the same supports, resources and choices available to students attending mainstream schools. The limited choice of curriculum, accreditation and transition pathways available to students with ID in special education provision may have negative lifelong implications.

As a result of this research, special education provision could benefit from providing a continuum of curriculum and accreditation programmes which students with ID can progress through Senior Cycle in special schools. Instead of special and mainstream education provisions running along two parallel tracks, it may be beneficial for both sectors to share their resources and expertise. This could attempt to right the imbalance and inequalities which exist now. Special education has undergone dramatic changes in the last twenty years and the policy of inclusive education is a positive, rights-based government policy. However, the core of inclusive education is the right to education for

all students. Education policy discussions needs to advocate for students with ID in special schools. Special education should not be seen as a lesser form of education due to lack of resources, limited curriculum, limited accreditation, limited transition pathway options and presumptions that the overwhelming majority of students with ID will only transfer to Health Board training courses.

Students with ID are being directed along a pathway which may not be the most successful option for them nor give them the best opportunities for employment and independence in later life. The Irish education system needs to promote aspirations and expectations for all its students, whether in mainstream or special education provisions. The Department of Education and Skills (2014) stated that a key aspiration for pupils with special needs is that they will, on completion of their school-based education, be able to graduate as young independent adults. This aspiration has a long way to go before it becomes a reality for students with ID who attend special schools in Ireland today.

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