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## Including Children with Disabilities in Mainstream Education: An Exploration of the Challenges and Considerations for Parents and Primary School Teachers

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*Including children with disabilities in mainstream education: An exploration of the challenges and considerations for parents and primary school teachers*

Gail Ferguson

October, 2014

This dissertation is submitted to the Department of Social Sciences, Dublin Institute of Technology, in part fulfilment of the requirements leading to the reward of Masters (M.A.) in Child, Family and Community Studies

Supervisor: Judy Doyle

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## **Declaration of Ownership**

I declare that the attached work is entirely my own and that all sources have been acknowledged.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Abstract**

Recent decades have seen children's rights and the rights of persons with disabilities come to the fore. Current policy emphasis on inclusive education means that more children with disabilities and special educational needs are being placed in mainstream education instead of special schools, as was traditionally the case. The aim of this study was to explore the area of inclusion in education, from the perspective of primary school teachers and parents of children with intellectual disabilities. A key objective was to determine if the reality of including children with disabilities in mainstream settings corresponded with the policy on inclusion.

A phenomenological approach was taken for the purpose of this study, as the researcher wanted to gain personal insight into the lived experiences of participants. Focus group and individual interviews were carried out by the researcher with a sample of primary school teachers and parents of children with intellectual disabilities currently attending mainstream school. Teachers' perspectives and experiences provided realistic insight into the process of achieving and implementing inclusive education in regular school settings, while experiences of parents of children with disabilities offered valuable insight into the reality of the education system from the point of view of accessing adequate supports for children.

Findings showed that while inclusive education is beneficial for children with and without disabilities, particularly in terms of social development, oftentimes opportunity for genuine inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities is compromised by challenges and barriers that exist within the education system.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge and wholeheartedly thank the parents and teachers who took part in this study. Thank you for your honesty. To the teachers, I extend great admiration and appreciation for the tremendous work that you do. To the parents, thank you for allowing me into your lives and the lives of your wonderful children. I encountered such love, dedication and strength within parents, that this was a truly uplifting and inspiring experience.

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To my amazing family, particularly my parents - this would not be possible without your support. Thank you for your limitless love, your patience and your encouragement.

And finally, I would like to dedicate this piece of research to my niece Emily, a little girl who opened my eyes and my heart to a whole new world. My inspiration for this project, and for so much more.

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## Glossary of Terms

**Disability:** Taken from an extensive definition of disability offered by Ireland's Equal Status Act 2000, this study understands the term to mean

- The total or partial absence of a person's bodily or mental functions
- a condition or malfunction which results in a person learning differently from a person without the condition or malfunction
- a condition, disease or illness which affects a person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgement or which results in disturbed behaviour" (Government of Ireland, 2000)

**Intellectual disability:** Someone with an intellectual disability is described as having a "greater than average difficulty in learning". A person is said to have an intellectual disability when "general functioning is significantly below average, significant deficits exist in adaptive skills and the condition is present from childhood" (Inclusion Ireland 2003).

**Inclusion:** For the purpose of this study, inclusion refers to the meeting of children's special educational needs within the mainstream, where children are socialised and educated alongside their peers (Nurse 2001).

**Integration:** This term is distinguished from the term inclusion. Nurse (2001) suggests that integration implies that children receive a 'parallel education', in that they are within the mainstream physically, but not always given access to all the activities available to other children in the class

**Mainstream:** This refers to the majority of schools. Traditionally they would have been considered as 'normal', and catered for typically developing children. Now of course, every child has the right to attend mainstream school, and children may receive help and support from learning support and resource teachers as well as from special needs assistants (Citizens Information Board 2012).

**Non-disabled:** This is a term used to describe persons without a disability. In this study, the term ‘**typically developing**’ is also used when describing children who do not have a disability of any kind.

**Special educational needs (SEN):** A person with special educational needs is someone whose “capacity to participate in and benefit from education is restricted due to an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability” (Citizens Information Board 2012).

**Special needs education:** refers to the special educational arrangements which are in place for people with disabilities (Citizens Information Board 2012)

**Special school:** refers to a school setting that specifically caters for children with particular types of disabilities and special needs. These include schools for students who are visually impaired or hearing impaired, or schools catering for students with learning disabilities, for example.

**Special unit:** some schools have classes which provide specialised provision for children that have particular educational needs. For example a unit for children with autism. The classrooms, or unit, are situated within the mainstream school and generally have low pupil/teacher ratios (Citizens Information Board 2012).

## **List of Abbreviations**

CRC: Central Remedial Clinic

DES: Department of Education and Skills

NCSE: National Council for Special Education

ESPEN ACT (2004): The Education for Persons with Special Needs Act (2004)

SEN: Special educational needs

SNA: Special needs assistant

SENO: Special educational needs organisers

UNCRC: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNCRPD: United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities

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# **Chapter One**

# **Chapter One**

## **Introduction**

### **1.1. Context and Rationale for the study**

“Inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights” (Salamanca Framework for Action, 1994).

Recent decades have seen increasing emphasis placed on rights and inclusion in relation to disability. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), for example, states that every child has the right to education, irrespective of disability and without discrimination of any kind. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006) emphasises the rights of persons with disabilities to access lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others, through reasonable accommodation of their disabilities (Minou 2011), and not to be excluded from the mainstream of education due to their disability.

Traditionally, Irish schools have been organised formally and informally in order to segregate diversity – single sex schools, religious ethos, and separate provision for the ‘differently abled’ for example (Lodge, Divine and Deegan 2004). Like many other countries, Ireland’s system of education involved segregation of schooling for pupils classified as ‘handicapped’, and these children were generally sent to special schools or institutions (Lodge and Lynch 2004). However, international trends and the growing debate around integration versus segregation have influenced significant change in Ireland in recent years (Lodge and Lynch 2004), and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2013) reports that “fewer than one percent of students in Ireland now attend a special school”. Organisations such as the Equality Authority (1998) try to ensure that no child will be discriminated against in terms of access to and participation in education. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN) provides a basis for individual education planning for

children with special educational needs to be educated in inclusive mainstream settings.

Despite improved educational provision for children with disabilities and positive advances in policy on inclusion in education, the reality is that schools have seen significant cuts to funding for special needs resources and special needs assistants in recent years. In addition, Egan (2004) cites class sizes, the happiness and protection of the child, curriculum issues, the attitude of the teachers, and social inclusion as other important considerations for parents when deciding on a school for their children with special educational needs.

Nevertheless, the NCSE (2013) report that mainstream school is the first choice for parents of children with special educational needs. Findings from 2013 show that one in four children in Irish primary schools had some form of Special educational need (Banks, McCoy and Shevlin 2013). It is important therefore, to consider the quality of education that is provided in mainstream schools and question whether children's needs are actually being met. This means questioning whether the needs of children who require additional support can be met in mainstream, but also, in terms of a child's right to education, it is reasonable to examine whether the needs of typically developing children in the class are also being met, as perhaps they experience interruption to lessons or receive less individual attention from the teacher. The needs of the class teacher must also be considered, as reductions in resources and larger class sizes for example, may make it very difficult for teachers to do their job effectively. This study focuses on primary school teachers as they are responsible for all aspects of a child's educational experience at this stage, unlike secondary school teachers. Exploring the perspectives and personal experiences of primary school teachers and parents of children with intellectual disabilities should give insight into the day to day reality of including children with disabilities into mainstream education.

## **1.2. Aim and objectives of this study**

This study aims to explore the concept of inclusive education, by paying particular attention to attitudes, experiences and perspectives of primary school teachers and parents of children with special educational needs. Uncovering whether the reality of

including children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms does in fact correspond with policy on inclusion is a principal objective of this research, as is the issue of the quality of educational provision for all pupils. Ultimately, both the advantages of inclusive education and the challenges and barriers to achieving inclusion will be identified and explored, with a view to providing an informative platform for teachers and for parents who may be unsure whether or not mainstream school is the correct choice for their child.

### **1.3. Research Questions**

- Are the needs of all children, with and without disabilities, being met in the classroom
- What are the positive implications of inclusive education for children with and without disabilities
- What challenges and barriers exist in relation to achieving inclusion for all children in mainstream education
- Are mainstream settings suitable for all children with intellectual disabilities, or do special schools still have a value in society
- What gaps are identified between the policy on inclusion and the day to day reality of achieving or accessing inclusive education for children with special educational needs, as experienced by teachers and parents

### **1.4. Delimitations of the study**

Banks et al (2013) maintain that insights into the experiences of children with special educational needs in mainstream primary schools are greatly needed. Although this study includes insight into the lives of five particular children, it must be noted that this is from the perspective of the children's parents. Therefore, the focus of this study is more so on the child's experience of mainstream as the parent sees it – in terms of the progress and development, or otherwise, that they have seen in the child as a result of attending mainstream school. It also focuses on the process of choosing a school and accessing adequate supports for children. From the teachers' perspective, the

study focuses on the positive and negative aspects of inclusion, as they see it in the classroom, for children with and without disabilities.

This research focuses on the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities. This is not to say that children with physical disabilities do not face challenges and barriers to inclusion, as for example, if an environment does not lend itself to access for wheelchair users, then this excludes individuals from a very basic level. For the purpose of this research however, it was decided to focus on children with intellectual disabilities as some studies imply that pupils with intellectual disabilities are more likely to experience social and educational exclusion in comparison to those with physical disabilities alone (Mousley 1993; Michailakis and Reich 2009; Banks et al 2013).

### **1.5. Outline of the study**

**Chapter One** introduces the topic of inclusive education within mainstream school, for children with disabilities. The context and rationale for this research project is discussed, and the main aims and objectives of the study are presented. This chapter also sets out the key research questions to be explored, and provides an outline of the entire study.

**Chapter Two** is a review of the literature pertaining to the education and inclusion of children with disabilities. International and national legislation and policy relating to the education of children with disabilities and special educational needs in an inclusive setting within mainstream is identified and discussed.

**Chapter Three** identifies and justifies the chosen research design and the methods employed by the researcher which were deemed most suitable in relation to the aims and objectives of this study. The chapter outlines the sampling procedure, data collection and analysis methods and also discusses ethical considerations and limitations to the study.

**Chapter Four** presents findings from the interviews carried out for the purpose of the study. The findings are set out under five broad themes, which are further categorised into sub-themes in order to highlight the main issues that emerged following analysis

of the data gathered by the researcher. Quotations from participants are used to support these findings.

**Chapter Five** discusses the findings that emerged, and determines its correlation to the literature reviewed in chapter two.

**Chapter Six** concludes the study. A summary of the complete research is presented, as well as the main conclusions that were drawn and recommendations for further research are also included.

## **Chapter Two**

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2.1. Introduction**

This chapter will review literature pertaining to the area of education of children with disabilities and special educational needs, with particular reference to inclusive education within the mainstream system. An examination of the historical context, in terms of defining disability and the evolution of international and national legislation and policies concerning education of children with disabilities will be presented. Definitions of the term inclusion will be investigated and debate surrounding the area of inclusive education for pupils with special educational needs will be discussed. Literature explaining issues and concerns that arise for parents of children with disabilities and for teachers who are responsible for implementing an inclusive environment will be highlighted. This chapter will also focus on the challenges and barriers that exist, which impact on successfully achieving an inclusive education system for all children.

#### **2.2. Historical and legal context to inclusion in education**

Traditionally, children with disabilities and learning difficulties would have been marginalised within or excluded from education due to their apparent incapacities (Minou, 2011). Lodge and Lynch (2004, p.79) acknowledge an international process whereby children were traditionally categorised within education as either 'handicapped' or 'normal', and separate educational provision was thus made for each group. This segregation of children within education was considered the most

appropriate and effective option for meeting the needs of a minority of children, deemed incapable of benefiting from ordinary methods of instruction (Thomas et al 1998, cited in NCSE, 2010) and for “safeguarding the efficient education of the majority” (Pijl and Meijer 1994, cited in NCSE 2010, p.5).

Criticism against the segregated nature of education for children with disabilities intensified during the 1960s and 1970s (Michailakis and Reich, 2009), and may be attributed to the rise of the world-wide civil rights movement of that era (NCSE 2010). Issues of equality of access and educational opportunity emerged as people with disabilities spoke out against the “stigmatising and limiting nature of segregated education” (NCSE 2010, p.5). For many of these people, such segregation served only to exaggerate their isolation and reinforce their invisibility in society, according to McDonnell (2002, cited in Lodge and Lynch, 2004). The National Council for Special Education (NCSE 2010) maintain that society’s values about disability began to change, and subsequently new legislation was brought about to reform education as a result of political pressure coming from disability and parental advocacy groups. Also at this time, the NCSE (2010) reports, research into the outcomes of segregated education for children revealed more and more evidence of the lack of success of segregated provision, and by the end of the twentieth century there was growing consensus that inclusion was “an appropriate philosophy and a relevant framework for restructuring education” (Thomas et al 1998, cited in NCSE, 2010, p.6). Consequently, ‘normalisation and integration’ became principal objectives for education policy in countries of the developed world (Michailakis and Reich, 2009).

Bines and Lei (2011) outline three main approaches to policy on disability and education; charity and welfare, rights and equity, and the utility approach. The latter is generally used to reinforce issues of rights and equity by demonstrating how it is in everyone’s best interest, in terms of societal benefit or educational efficiency for example, to make more provision for people with disabilities. Charity is the most traditional approach and was the basis for establishing many special schools in the past. The welfare approach replaced non-state charity with public service provision, but approaches based on rights and equity are more recent and can be linked to international declarations on rights of the child, people with disabilities and other groups, and to a resentment of the charity-welfare view of people with disabilities as

“passive recipients of benevolence and benefits” (Bines and Lei, 2011, p.420). The development of a rights-based response to disability challenges traditional charity-focused approaches to people with disabilities, say Quin and Redmond (2003, p.6), and this is reflective of the shift identified by many, in terms of the development of educational policy and practice in recent decades, from what is known as the ‘medical model of disability’ to a ‘social model of disability’ (Barnes and Mercer 2006; Bines and Lei 2011; Lodge and Lynch 2004; McDonnell 2003; Michailakis and Reich 2009; NCSE 2010).

Traditionally, segregated special education was supported by the medical model of disability. The medical model views disability from a ‘personal tragedy’ perspective, where the focus is on the individual, who is deemed unable to fulfil social roles and duties in life (Barnes and Mercer, 2006). Barnes and Mercer maintain that once identified as having a disability, individuals are stigmatised and social expectations about how they should behave or what they are capable of doing come to exist independent of their impairment. Similarly, McDonnell (2003) highlights a link between patterns of participation or exclusion and what he terms a psycho-medical model of disability. McDonnell argues that the marginalisation and exclusion experienced by people with disabilities results from a ‘deficit’ hypothesis, meaning that in education, this model places the problem within the child and focuses on “individual deficits rather than on inequitable social structures” (McDonnell, 2003, p.37).

Finkelstein and Stuart (1996, cited in Lodge and Lynch, 2004) however, identify a shift towards recognition that disability is often experienced in terms of the ‘disabling environment’, and acknowledge the impact of physical and attitudinal barriers on a disabled person’s ability to fully participate in society. This is indicative of what Oliver (1983, cited in Barnes and Mercer 2006) termed as the ‘social model of disability’, which refers to switching the focus away from the underlying medical condition or physical limitations of an individual toward the physical and social environments and how they may impose limitations upon certain groups of people. Similarly, Gordon (2013) states that it is the society which discriminates against people with impairments that is disabling, not the medical condition or impairment

itself. Barnes and Mercer (2006) assure that it is not to deny the importance of medical interventions in the individual's life, but to take care not to exaggerate it.

Change in definitions of disability and appropriate language and terminology is also reflective of this more recent social model. For example, Lodge and Lynch (2004, p.78) highlight the fact that insistence on terms such as 'people with disabilities', rather than 'the disabled', is a strategy that promotes inclusive policy and practice on a human rights basis, indicating that service users are 'agents rather than objects'. According to the National Disability Authority (NDA 2011), when writing or speaking about people with disabilities it is important to put the person first, as phrases such as 'the blind' or 'the disabled do not reflect the individuality, equality or dignity of people with disabilities. Adopting the social model of disability means that "emphasis shifted from charity to rights and from social exclusion to inclusion, with the replacement of a culture of dependence and pity by one based on acceptance and equal citizenship" (Barnes and Mercer 2006, p.37).

Of central importance to the concept of rights, say Quin and Redmond (2003, p.3), is the legislative provision underpinning policy provision. The fullest legal definition of children's rights is to be found in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). Within this document a child's right to education is outlined in Article 28, while Article 2 sets out one of the Convention's four main principles, stating that the rights of each child shall be respected and ensured "without discrimination of any kind" (UN, 1989). According to Minou (2011), the Convention implies that every child, irrespective of disability, has the right to inclusive education and it is the responsibility of governments to make education available and adaptable to each and every child. Freeman (2000) argues however, that the rights of the disabled child receive only limited recognition in this document and that emphasis is on non-discrimination rather than inclusion, and welfare rather than rights, thus legitimising segregation and making no requirement for inclusive education or social policies.

Through a rights-based approach, UNESCO, the United Nations agency for education, promotes inclusive education policies, programmes and practices in order to ensure equal education opportunities for persons with disabilities (UNESCO 2014). In June 1994 representatives of 92 governments and 25 international organisations formed the

World Conference on Special Needs Education, held in Salamanca, Spain, where a new Statement on education of all children with disabilities was agreed on. Ainscow (2013) cites UNESCO's Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education (1994) as a highly significant international document in the field of special needs. The key principle of the Statement's 'Framework for Action' is that ordinary schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions, and it proposes that "all educational policies should require disabled children to attend the neighbourhood school that would be attended if the child did not have a disability" (UNESCO 2014).

In 2006, one's human right to inclusive education was eventually supported by international law with the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (Gordon 2013). Gordon highlights that, although it is a human rights model, the CRPD does value the social model of disability by acknowledging that disability is socially constructed and not simply a matter of one's individual medical condition. Article 24 of the Convention, entitled 'Education', emphasises the roles and responsibility of state governments in providing an "inclusive education system at all levels and life long learning directed to...full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth" (UN 2006). This Article includes that persons with disabilities should be able to access education on the same basis as their peers and not be excluded from the mainstream of education due to their disability. Individualised support should be available to maximise social, emotional and academic progress which is consistent with the goal of full inclusion (NCSE 2010; UN 2006). According to Gordon, the human rights model of the CRPD goes beyond the social model approach by proclaiming that people with impairments do have enforceable human rights. They no longer rely on "discriminating alms, instead they have legal rights to things like appropriate welfare service and inclusive education" (Gordon 2013, p.756).

### **2.3. Irish legislation and policy on inclusion in education**

In Ireland, all children have a Constitutional right to free primary education (Government of Ireland, 1937), and education services have a number of duties under both the Education Act 1998 and The Equal Status Acts 2000-2011 to prohibit

discrimination of any child (Lodge and Lynch 2004). The Education Act 1998 recognises the “constitutional rights of children including children with disabilities and other special educational needs, as they relate to education”, and it requires “as far as is practicable and having regard to the resources available, a level and quality of education appropriate to the needs and abilities of the people of the country” (Government of Ireland 1998, cited in Citizens Information Board 2012). The Act also requires provision of funding, including funding for students with disabilities. The Equal Status Act 2000-2011 prohibits direct and indirect discrimination in all areas of life, particularly the provision of services including educational services, on a number of grounds; for example gender, religion, disability, race, and membership of the Traveller community. Regarding discrimination on grounds of disability, the Equal Status Act 2000-2011 states that,

“Schools will not be considered to discriminate against a student with a disability if compliance with the provision of legislation would have a seriously detrimental effect on or make impossible the provision of services to other students”

(Equal Status Act 2000-2011, cited in Citizens Information Board 2012)

In 2004, the Government launched the National Disability Strategy, with the aim of tying together existing and future law and policy in the area of disability. The Equal Status Act 2000-2011, The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 and the Disability Act 2005 are all elements of the strategy (Inclusion Ireland 2014). The Disability Act 2005, enacted by the Department of Justice, includes a statutory entitlement to an assessment of health and educational needs, which is carried out or arranged by independent ‘Assessment Officers’ of the Health Service Executive (HSE) (Inclusion Ireland 2014). The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN) provides for the education of children, under the age of 18 years, with special educational needs (Citizens Information Board 2012). It centres on “individual education planning, educating children in inclusive settings and the provision of a range of services, including assessments and educational support” (NCSE 2010). Section 2 of the EPSEN Act 2004 requires that:

“A child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with:

- The best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act
- The effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.”

(Department of Education and Skills 2014)

Inclusion Ireland (2014) note however, that while the ESPN Act 2004 has been passed, key sections of it, that give statutory rights to assessment, education plans and appeals processes are currently ‘on hold’ or deferred.

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2014) is responsible for the education of children with special educational needs through a number of support systems. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was established under the ESPN Act 2004 and provides planning, assessment and service delivery, for example resource teaching and special needs assistance to school-going children. It coordinates education services for students with special needs through Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) (Inclusion Ireland 2014; Citizens Information Board 2012; NCSE 2010). While the policy of the DES is to ensure the maximum possible integration of children with special needs into ordinary mainstream schools, as outlined in section 2 of the ESPN Act 2004, students who have been professionally assessed as having special educational needs have access to a range of special support services. These services consist of special schools, which are dedicated to particular disability groups; special classes or units that are attached to mainstream schools; and where placement in an integrated mainstream setting is considered appropriate, provision normally takes the form of resource teaching or special needs assistant support, or both, depending on the pupil’s assessed level of need (Department of Education and Skills 2014). The NCSE (2013) state that parents, as the “primary and natural educators of their children”, make the final decision on where a child goes to school.

## **2.4. Defining disability and special educational needs**

The language and terminology surrounding disability has changed over the course of time (National Disability Authority (NDA) 2011). Outdated terms such as ‘cripple’ or ‘handicapped’, have been replaced with ‘person with a disability’, for example. Individuals previously described as ‘mentally handicapped’, ‘schizo’ or ‘mad’ are now referred to as people with intellectual disabilities, a term recognised internationally, or mental health disabilities (NDA, 2011). The NDA (2011) also suggest that use of the term ‘non-disabled’ is more appropriate than describing individuals as ‘normal’.

‘Special needs education’ refers to the special educational arrangements which are in place for people with disabilities (Citizens Information Board, 2012). Griffin and Shelvin (2007) assert that any child may have special needs however, and that not all special needs are in relation to education. Therefore, not all children with special needs will require special educational support. Children with special educational needs are those who need extra help in the school system in comparison to their peers. Fredrickson and Cline (2002) cite ‘special educational needs’ (SEN) as a legal definition used in Britain and other countries, to define whether certain children qualify for special educational services. In Ireland, the EPSEN Act 2004 states that:

“Special Educational Needs means, in relation to a person, a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in, and benefit from, education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition”

(Government of Ireland, 2004, cited in NCSE, 2010)

Michailakis and Reich (2009) maintain that, while the majority of children with disabilities now take part in mainstream education, children with intellectual disabilities still remain an exception. Inclusion Ireland (2003) describe intellectual disability as involving a “greater than average difficulty in learning”, and state that “a person is considered to have an intellectual disability when the following factors are present: general intellectual functioning is significantly below average; significant deficits exist in adaptive skills and the condition is present from childhood”.

Bines and Lei (2011) identify a growing emphasis on a range of learning and other difficulties presented by children, which may not be obviously linked to physical, sensory or intellectual impairment - concerning limited or slow acquisition of reading or other skills, for example, and a range of other emotional and behavioural difficulties. For this reason, the UK and other countries have based recent policy on the assumption that up to one in five children may have a special educational need at some time in their education (Bines and Lei, 2011, p.420). Stakes and Hornby (2000, p.8) identify eight different types of special educational need, including: learning difficulties, specific learning difficulties, hearing difficulties, visual difficulties, physical difficulties, medical conditions, speech and language difficulties and emotional and behavioural difficulties.

## **2.5. Inclusion and inclusive education: Definitions and discourse**

The term 'inclusion' must be considered carefully, as a recurring theme in the literature surrounds a sense of confusion about the actual definition or meaning of inclusion and inclusive practice (Lodge and Lynch 2004; NCSE 2010; Ainscow 2013; Gordon 2013). Ainscow (2013, p.3) describes the field of inclusion as an elusive concept, 'riddled with uncertainties, disputes and contradictions'. Although its principles of tolerance, diversity and equity go uncontested, the challenge lies in how to achieve inclusive education (NCSE, 2010). Ainscow (2013) suggests that the confusion internationally arises, in part, from the fact that inclusive education is defined in a variety of ways. This point is echoed by Florian (1998, cited in NCSE, 2010), who says that while many definitions have been put forward, no single definition has been accepted universally.

In Ireland, The National Childcare Strategy (2006, p.46) defines inclusion as "a process involving a programme, curriculum, or educational environment where each child is welcomed and included on equal terms, can feel they belong and can progress to his/her potential in all areas of development". Inclusion is not about, for example, awarding all children who run a race a medal in order to "protect self-esteem, and foster the dogma of fairness" (Asma 2012). Nor should it be judged on whether a school simply admits a child with a disability and allows participation, without

adjusting curriculum and how the teachers work, argues Philips (2001). Nurse (2001) determines the meaning of inclusion to imply the meeting of children's needs within the mainstream system, so that children are part of their family's natural community and are socialised and educated alongside their peers. Nurse distinguishes the concept of inclusion from that of 'integration', which implies that children receive a 'parallel education', meaning within the mainstream physically, but not always given access to all the activities available to other children in the class. According to the NCSE (2010), the term integration, used during the 1980s, referred to the placement of children with special educational needs into mainstream education, but this definition, based solely on placement, says nothing about the quality of education received (Farrell and Ainscow 2002, cited in NCSE 2010). The term 'inclusion' however, moves the focus from the child to the school – it conveys the school's duty to welcome pupils with special educational needs and the pupil's right to full participation in school life and all aspects of education (NCSE 2010). Cumming and Wong (2010, p.4) understand inclusion to mean “the rights of children with disabilities to access, participate and be equally included, alongside their peers in shared education and care settings, as well as having access to broader community membership”.

UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (1994), assumes that human differences are normal, and that learning must be adapted to the needs of the child, rather than the child fitted to the process. However, Jones (2007) highlights the concern that the positive potential of diversity is unfortunately often lost through cultural normalisation and 'assimilation rather than inclusion'. Mousley, Rice and Tregenza (1993) echo this concern regarding assimilation to the majority, and raise the point that by continuously striving to provide additional resources for children with disabilities, education systems fail to adjust the curriculum itself to be inclusive of all abilities. Similarly, NCSE (2010) describes the model of assimilation as placing emphasis on providing supports to individuals to enable them to 'fit in' to a particular programme, without making any changes to the programme itself. Mousley et al (1993) found, in their study on teachers' perceptions of integration, that many participants stated they would be prepared to teach children with a physical disability rather than an intellectual disability. This, according to the researchers, implies a willingness among educators to adapt the physical environment “as opposed to undertaking the types of

curriculum innovations which make education more accessible to all” (Mousley et al, 1993, p.64).

Sparks and Edwards (2010) note an uncertainty among some adults, where they are not sure if they should encourage children to notice and learn about differences, worrying that it may cause prejudice, and instead teach how people are the same. Anti bias educators believe difference is not the problem, but rather how people respond to it that creates fear and bias. The early years are a good place to start fostering and strengthening children’s identities, and to raise awareness of diversities and promote positive attitudes in typically developing children from a young age, say Lee and Keulen (2007). Nussbaum (2007, p.15) echoes this view, believing one should not assume that young children are not interested in talking about compassion, and those as young as three or four can be engaged in conversations about how behaviour affects, and can hurt others. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) promotes inclusive schools as the 'most effective' means of combating discriminatory attitudes, and of building solidarity between children with special needs and their peers.

Studies and reports on inclusive education highlight the social value for both children with disabilities and non-disabled children (Briody and Martone 2010; Lodge and Lynch 2004; Mousley et al 1993; NCSE 2010). According to Cumming and Wong (2010), research suggests that inclusion provides children with disabilities with more challenging learning settings and the chance to watch, learn and interact with more competent peers. A study by Madden and Slavin (cited in Briody and Martone, 2010), found that students with special educational needs demonstrated higher self esteem and more appropriate behaviour when integrated into mainstream classrooms. Hanline and Murray (cited in Briody and Martone, 2010) identify social benefits for children even if they only spend a small portion of a school day with mainstream peers. Mousley et al (1993) report that every respondent in their study on ‘aspects of integration’ referred to development of social skills in children with disabilities, with two thirds of teachers mentioning the distinct advantages for other children in the school. Teachers commented that “working and playing with peers who have disabilities teaches children to accept differences” (Ibid., p.66). Shevlin and O’Moore (1999, cited in Lodge and Lynch 2004) found that many students may feel uneasy or distant around peers who have disabilities, particularly intellectual disabilities.

However, once young people come to know their peers personally, Lodge and Lynch (2004) maintain they are less likely to define a person by their disability or view them as someone to be 'pitied'. Cumming and Wong (2010) also acknowledge evidence that typically developing children in inclusive education settings demonstrate a high degree of accepting attitudes.

As Cumming and Wong (2010) point out, the benefits of inclusion are most commonly identified in the domains of 'social competence, play and peer engagement', but Mousley et al (1993, p.66) assert that placing focus on the social and attitudinal domain and little emphasis on academic possibilities reflects the "typical curricula of segregated settings" and the attitude and belief that children with disabilities belong to "a different pedagogical category from other children". Nevertheless, the NCSE (2010) report that mainstream school is the first choice for parents of children with special educational needs, and Egan (2004) found that for parents of children with Down Syndrome, those whose children attended mainstream education were much happier regarding educational outcomes.

Including children with special educational needs in mainstream rather than specialised educational settings is increasingly considered to be "both in their best interest and their right", according to Cumming and Wong (2010). Gordon (2013) however, questions the rights of non-disabled children in the classroom. Gordon proposes that some opponents to inclusive education could claim that the right of non-impaired students to the best available education may be infringed by permanent interference caused by students with particular impairments for example, and a general acquisition of knowledge that is slower. This, Gordon says, "amounts to a 'collision of rights'...the right to inclusive education of people with impairments and the right to the best education of non-impaired students" (Gordon, 2013, p.66). Ruijs and Peetsma (2009) also acknowledge this point and add that another conflict of rights may involve a parent who expresses their child's right to mainstream education whereas the child may in fact be better off in a special school. Farrell (2000, cited in Ruijs and Peetsma 2009) argues that the right to choose is important, and if special schools were to be abolished, the removal of them as an option would deny parents having choices for their child's education. For some children, there is still a need for special provision as children may benefit from occupational therapy, speech and

language therapy and/or nursing care that is not available in other schools (Sunday Business Post, 2012).

Ultimately, Ainscow (2013, p.8) maintains that inclusion involves the “active combating of exclusion”, and is seen as “a never-ending process, thus an inclusive school is one that is on the move, rather than one that has reached a perfect state”.

## **2.6. Achieving Inclusion: Policy and reality challenges**

Fulcher (1989, cited in Mousely et al, 1993, p.59) states that “implementation of policy does not automatically follow its creation”. In outlining challenges to the development of inclusive education systems, Vayrynen (2010, cited in NCSE 2010), suggests that all countries struggle with the management and implementation of an education system that ‘truly caters for diversity’, citing ‘funding mechanisms’ as key to setting up provision for the diversity of learning needs. Bines and Lei (2011) maintain that even in northern countries where it is considered to have addressed policy and provision for children with disabilities more extensively, many inequalities and ‘policy and resource dilemmas’ remain.

In Ireland, The Primary School Curriculum, 1999 adopts a ‘whole child’ perspective, and aims to recognise and respect diversity among pupils (INTO 2004). Siolta (2006), the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, and Aistear (2009), the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, highlight ‘Identity and Belonging’ as key principles relating to educating all young children. Meanwhile key legislation under the EPSEN Act 2004, stipulating the right of children with special educational needs to an individual education plan (IEP) and learning targets to be reviewed each year, remains postponed (Travers, 2013). In terms of international legislative support for inclusive education provision, Ireland has not yet ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (Quinn, 2010). The Centre for Independent Living (2012) obtained legal advice informing that there is ‘no legal impediment to ratifying the UNCRPD’. Ratification of the UNCRPD would cost the Government money, but would also involve amending current laws relating to Capacity, which restricts the decision-making rights of persons with

disabilities (Quinn 2010). Nevertheless, the NCSE (2013) maintain that Irish schools are very inclusive and can access a range of supports to address the needs of students with special educational needs. Lodge and Lynch (2004) on the other hand, argue that provision for children with special needs is relatively 'ad hoc' within the Irish education system. According to Lodge and Lynch, enrolment policies in some schools state that in certain circumstances they will postpone enrolment of the child until the appropriate supports and resources are put in place by the Department of Education, yet the department will only put supports in place once an individual is enrolled in a specific school. This can result in delays and difficulties for parents in enrolling their child. Furthermore, even when a child gains access to a mainstream school there can be difficulties with genuine inclusion, as schools often lack adequate support staff and resources (Lodge and Lynch, 2004).

A fundamental principle of The Salamanca Statement is that ordinary schools must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their students, "while also having a continuum of support and services to match these needs" (UNESCO, 2014). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2003, p.12) state that the "education of students with disabilities could not be achieved without additional resources being made available if they are to access the curriculum on anything like an equal basis with non-disabled children". Yet the reality in Ireland in recent years is that children with special educational needs have faced cuts in funding and reductions in resource hours and allocation of special needs assistants. This is of great concern to parents of children with disabilities and is widely reported both regionally and nationally (Faller 2010; RTE 2012; Sunday Business Post 2012; Leddin 2013; O'Brien 2013). Bang (cited in Woolnough, 2004) claims that government's inclusive policy is in conflict with many other targets that schools are supposed to meet and the conditions under which teachers are expected to work, stating that large class sizes, benchmarks and current curriculum all undermine inclusion. O'Brien (2013) cites the government's recent announcement of a reversal of planned cuts to supports for children with special needs, but according to a member of the Special Needs Parents' Association (as cited in O'Brien, 2013) there is no change in the number of special needs assistants being allocated, meaning shared access to special needs assistants will continue, despite an increase of 2,000 children assessed as needing special educational support. Kenny (2000, cited in Lodge and

Lynch, 2004) asserts that lack of appropriate support frequently results in isolation and “the dispersal of students with disabilities throughout the mainstream system in an uncoordinated manner”. Furthermore, Daly (2001, cited in Lodge and Lynch, 2004) states that integration without support can lead to negative educational experiences for students with disabilities. There is a risk that isolation of children with special educational needs, formally or informally, will result in their being viewed differently and negatively by their peers, according to Banks, McCoy and Shevlin (2013).

Deciding what is appropriate for each child is a challenge in itself. Along with class size, the happiness and protection of the student and social inclusion, Egan (2004) highlights the attitude of teachers as another important consideration cited by parents of children with special educational needs. The issue of appropriate training and preparation for teachers in mainstream classes is raised by a number of researchers (such as Cumming and Wong 2010; NCSE 2010; Purdy and McGuckin 2013). Many teachers report anticipation and apprehension and feelings of being ill-equipped, with low levels of knowledge about special education (Cumming and Wong 2010; Gokdere 2012; Mousley et al 1993; Swain, Nordness and Leader-Jansesen 2012; Van de Putte and De Schauwer 2013). Teachers reporting to Mousley et al (1993) admitted to doubting their own professional competencies when it came to teaching children with disabilities, particularly intellectual disabilities. Swain et al (2012) found that a lack of training and experience in special education within teacher preparation courses and programmes can have a profoundly negative effect on educators’ attitudes and on their perceived ability to support the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Bines and Lei (2011) maintain that there are many gaps between policy and provision regarding inclusive education, and that disability remains a significant factor in exclusion from schooling. According to Habib (2007), “Inclusion is the ‘last frontier’ of desegregation”.

## **2.7. Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the international and national literature pertaining to the education and inclusion of children with disabilities. Legislation, policies and the UN Convention on the rights of children in relation to the education of children with disabilities and special educational needs in an inclusive setting within mainstream education has also been presented and discussed. The complex nature of inclusion and its implementation has been examined throughout this chapter along with the gap between policy and provision both internationally and within the Irish education system. In order to gain further insight into the reality of implementing and accessing inclusive education for children with intellectual disabilities, this study will thus investigate the experiences and perspectives of primary school teachers and parents of children with special educational needs currently attending mainstream education.

# **Chapter Three**

# **Chapter Three**

## **Research Methodology**

### **3.1. Introduction**

The main aim of this study is to explore the reality of inclusive education of children with disabilities in mainstream primary school in Ireland, from the perspectives of primary school teachers and parents of children with disabilities. In particular, this study focuses on the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities, as the literature review suggests that children with intellectual disabilities are more likely to experience educational exclusion than those with physical disabilities (Michailakis and Reich 2009; Mousley et al 1993). This research involved participation of six primary school teachers and five parents of children with special educational needs currently attending primary school. Participants' attitudes and experiences of inclusion in education were investigated, in order to highlight the main issues, both positive and challenging, associated with actively achieving inclusive education for all children in mainstream settings.

This chapter describes the chosen research design and the methodology employed by the researcher in order to carry out the study. Details of the sampling procedure are outlined, as well as the data collection and data analysis techniques used. The chapter also discusses ethical considerations and limitations to the study.

### **3.2. Research design**

According to Hancock and Algozzine (2006), the selection of a research design is determined by how well it allows full investigation of a particular research question. For the purpose of this study, a qualitative research design was chosen. The main

goal of qualitative research is to understand the situation that is being investigated from the participant's perspective rather than the researcher's perspective - this is referred to as the 'emic', or insider's perspective (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006). Thus a qualitative approach was adopted as it best supports the aim of gaining greater understanding of inclusive education, from the perspectives and experiences of those involved, namely teachers and parents of children with particular intellectual disabilities. Hegarty (1989, as cited in Punch 2006, p.110), maintains that many topics in special education are best explored by means of qualitative methods of inquiry.

The qualitative methods employed in this study are primarily phenomenological in nature, whereby human 'lived experience' is examined, providing a deeper understanding of a particular way of life and how it is experienced by those being studied (Creswell, 2011). Hancock and Algozzine (2006) describe phenomenological studies as those which "explore the meaning of several people's lived experiences around a specific issue or phenomenon". The experiences of different people are analyzed to describe the essence or central meaning of a phenomenon, such as the essence of being a minority group in a demographic majority setting. Hence this study sets out to explore the essence of inclusive education for a minority group of children with intellectual disabilities in a demographic majority mainstream school.

### **3.3. Sampling Procedure**

A combination of sampling techniques was used for this study. Convenience sampling was used as the researcher selected two local schools, to which personal affiliation existed prior to the study. Purposive technique was also employed as the researcher wanted to gain insight from teachers who were (i) in a mainstream primary school and (ii) had experience of working with children with intellectual disabilities within their mainstream class groups. The study also required insight from parents who (i) had a child with special educational needs, who was (ii) attending a mainstream school setting. In order to invite candidates to take part in the study, contact was made initially with the principal or vice principal of the schools. Using a network sampling technique, they were asked to communicate the information and invitation to participate to members of teaching staff and to parents of pupils with

special educational needs attending the school. This technique was believed to be most appropriate for recruiting parent participants in particular as the school principal would be “known to potential respondents and trusted by them” (Lee 1993).

Contact was made with each school in person, whereby a letter from the researcher, along with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study and details of participation were provided for teaching staff to consider (Appendix E, Appendix H). Research consent forms (Appendix I) were distributed to the schools and the researcher stressed the voluntary nature of participation and assured confidentiality to all research participants. One of the schools chosen by the researcher incorporates a special unit within the building, offering specialised education for children with autism. Participation of the principal of this school was sought (Appendix F), as this was deemed as a potentially valuable source of insight into methods of inclusion and the organisation of educational provision for children with disabilities in mainstream school.

A small-scale sample of six parents was also selected by the researcher. The participants were contacted through the school principals and teachers. As with the school staff, a letter of introduction, along with an information sheet and consent form was provided for each parent (Appendix G, Appendix H, Appendix I). It was important to approach parent-participants in a sensitive manner and provide detailed information about the purpose and content of the research, as information about their children would be presented in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity of children, family and school was reiterated to all participants at this point.

### **3.4. The sample**

#### Sample One.

The sample of teaching staff for both the focus group and individual interviews consisted of primary school teachers, all of whom were female, and one school principal, a male, currently in his fifth year as acting principal. For the teachers, their number of years teaching experience varied from those very recently qualified to those with over twenty five years experience. All teachers had experience of working

with children with special educational needs within a mainstream classroom. In addition, one participant had trained and was currently working as a resource teacher. Another participant had previously taught in the special unit for children with autism within the school.

\*A more detailed profile of these participants is presented in Appendix A, and Appendix B.

### Sample Two.

The sample of parents consisted of four females and one male. For four parents, their children were already attending mainstream school. One parent was at the stage of preparing his daughter for junior infants, as she was due to begin at the start of the new school year. Children's ages ranged from four years to twelve years, and their abilities and needs varied greatly. For this reason, a more detailed profile of each parent and their child is presented in Appendix C. This allows more familiarity of participants for the reader, and a deeper understanding of their children's lives.

## **3.5. Data collection methods**

Data was gathered using the following methods, which were deemed to be most valid and viable for this study:

### Focus group

The focus group is considered a 'valuable tool of investigation' as it allows the researcher to explore group norms and dynamics around issues and topics they wish to investigate (May, 2001). As Bell (2010) suggests, "the intention is that participants will interact with each other, will be willing to listen to all views, perhaps to reach consensus about some aspects of the topic or to disagree about others and to give a good airing to the issues which seem to be interesting or important to them". For the purpose of this study, the focus group was the starting point of investigation, into the experiences and attitudes of teachers regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in the classroom. It was anticipated that themes or topics would arise from this group process which would in turn guide the focus of the research.

The focus group was held on school premises, during school hours. Although it was expected that five teachers would take part, three participants were present on the day (due to work commitments for those who were absent). The interview was limited to thirty minutes as this was the time frame put forward by the school upon agreeing to provide a suitable room and provide staff cover for the teachers taking part. The researcher began the interview by introducing the aims of the study and once again emphasized the importance of privacy and confidentiality of information within the group. Participants were invited to share their views and experiences on various themes relating to inclusion in education. The researcher based the themes for discussion on information gleaned from the literature review. These themes included; the meaning of inclusion, views on special schools, the primary school curriculum, teacher training, social and academic development, positive and negative effects of inclusive education on all children in the class, and government funding for special educational needs.

The focus group was helpful to the researcher, in terms of validating the importance of certain areas of inclusive education which should be explored further when planning and conducting individual interviews. Other themes also emerged from this group discussion - in particular, the demands placed on teachers and the vital role of SNA support in classrooms. It also became apparent to the researcher that in some cases, parents and teaching staff may differ in their view of where best suits a child's needs. Hence the topic of parental choice versus professional opinion was included for further exploration in individual interviews.

### Individual Interviews

In order to gain an honest and deep understanding of the reality of inclusive education, it is essential to obtain personal insight. "Interviews yield rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings" (May, 2001, p.120). More than just an interesting conversation, Dexter (1970, cited in Bell, 2010) describes an interview as 'a conversation with a purpose'. A semi-structured rather than structured interview was used by the researcher as it was thought to allow more freedom within the conversation, for both interviewer and interviewee, yet still allow for comparability when analysing the data.

Individual interviews were conducted with three primary school teachers, one school principal and five parents of children with special educational needs [eight interview participants in total]. The duration of individual interviews varied from thirty five minutes to fifty five minutes. Interviews with teachers and principal took place on school premises, after school hours. For parents, the researcher visited the homes of participants to conduct interviews. Again, confidentiality was reiterated to all participants before commencing the interview.

Conducting semi-structured interviews proved to be a valuable research tool. It allowed for detailed responses from participants, and afforded the researcher adaptability so as to clarify or expand on certain responses, or to change the order of questions if necessary. Themes and topics for discussion, consistent with the research objectives of this study, were similar to that of the focus group, but also included the themes that emerged as a result of the focus group discussion. Although the interviews followed a similar pattern, naturally the emphasis for teachers was on the demands of providing inclusive education within the school setting, from a professional point of view. For parents however, responses were more emotive in nature as participants discussed children's particular needs and their personal experiences of inclusive education, in terms of their progress and achievements, but also in terms of the challenges that having a disability can pose for individuals.

All interviews were voice recorded using a dictaphone, with permission to record sought from participants. Recordings were then carefully transcribed by the researcher for subsequent data analysis. The use of a recording device ensured accuracy of the data for analysis and allowed freedom for the researcher to focus on the interview (Biggam 2009).

### **3.6. Data analysis**

The data from transcripts of group and individual interviews was collated by the researcher and thematically analysed. To do so, the researcher began by reading the transcripts repeatedly, in order to gain greater understanding of the common themes that were emerging. The data was then coded by topic or question, as opposed to

coding by participant, as this allowed the researcher to identify common responses and themes as well as differences that arose between interviews (See Appendix D for data coding). The coded data was then grouped under five main themes deemed to be appropriate and consistent with the main aims and objectives of the study. These themes are; Perspectives on inclusion in education – which relates to the meaning of inclusion, and the options available to children with intellectual disabilities; Social aspects of an inclusive education system – which outlines the social effects of inclusive education on all children; Challenges and concerns – outlines the realities that exist for teachers and parents which challenge successful achievement of inclusive education; The role of SNA support – which relates to the vital support teachers and children receive from SNAs, and highlights the effects that cuts to SNA support has on the whole class; and finally, The matter of choice – which identifies issues that can affect or limit the possibility of enrolling children in certain schools, thus questioning the concept of parental choice. The main findings of the study, under each of these themes, are presented in chapter four and discussed further in chapter five, in line with the literature review.

### **3.7. Ethical considerations**

Social researchers must have a responsibility for drawing up and conforming to a set of ethical guidelines (May 2001). They should employ accurate methods of data gathering and analysis; make use of relevant research methodology; report data accurately; and avoid fabrication and falsification of data – which is misconduct (Sarantakos 2005). This study conforms to all research ethical guidelines as set out by Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). The researcher received ethical approval for this research study from DIT on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

Secondary data sources were carefully selected for review, identifying literature which displayed academic integrity, and the researcher was mindful to avoid plagiarism or ‘inappropriate use of data belonging to other researchers’ (May 2001) in presenting information.

With regard to social research, researchers must respect participants' rights to anonymity, confidentiality and privacy, and give participants clear information regarding the study. Concern for the welfare of participants is essential - their mental, physical health and safety, embarrassment, discomfort. Participants should not be deceived in any way (Sarantakos 2005). The researcher communicated openly and honestly with all participants in this study. Each participant received written information outlining the purpose, aim and structure of the study and what participation would entail (Appendix H). This information also stated that anonymity and confidentiality were paramount and that participation was voluntary, thus withdrawal from the study at any stage would be met with understanding and without prejudice. Contact details for the researcher were also included, for any further questions. Participants did avail of this and all questions were answered promptly and honestly. All information – written and recorded –was stored securely, with access available only to the researcher. Names have been changed and no information presented in this research allows participating individuals to be identified. Person's right to confidentiality has been conformed with and clearly communicated to all participants in the study.

Researching children's experiences demands a respect for each child as a 'unique and valued experiencer of his or her world' (Greene and Hogan 2005). No children were interviewed for this study. The researcher was very much aware however, that a respectful and sensitive approach was appropriate when approaching and speaking with parents, particularly where children may be in a vulnerable position. As interviews were conducted in the homes of parents, the researcher had the pleasure of meeting the children in question. However, conversations were informal and at no point were any children engaged in conversation for the purpose or benefit of this study.

### **3.8. Limitations**

Due to the small scale sample of this study, it cannot be assumed that the findings are representative of all school settings in the country, or representative of the attitude or experience of all teachers. It certainly cannot be said to be representative of the experience of all children with special educational needs. Even within this study,

disparity was found in relation to government funding to schools for special needs resources for example. Also, the needs and the abilities of the children under discussion in this research varied greatly, meaning their experiences of inclusion also varied (see Appendix C). It was not the intention of the researcher however, to make generalisations but rather to portray the reality of inclusive education as experienced by a chosen group of participants, in this way allowing the reader to explore more “subjective patterns of personal, group or organisational experience” (Davies 2007, p.148). The aim of this research was to gain teacher and parent perspectives on the concept of inclusive education, and gain personal insight into the reality of inclusive educational provision for children with intellectual disabilities within the mainstream primary school system. Despite the small scale sample therefore, and varying levels of ability of the children, the researcher is confident that this study adequately represents both the positive and challenging aspects of inclusive education as experienced by teachers and parents of children with disabilities.

### **3.9. Conclusion**

This chapter has detailed the chosen research design and provided justification for the methods employed by the researcher in order to carry out this study. The sampling procedure and data collection and analysis techniques were discussed and the reasons for their use was rationalised. The researcher also provided an ethical framework for the reader, and acknowledged the limitations of the study. The following chapter will present the findings from the group and individual interviews, using direct quotations from participants.

# **Chapter Four**

## **Chapter Four**

### **Findings**

#### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter outlines the predominant findings that emerged from data analysis of the focus group and individual interviews carried out with primary school teachers and parents of children with intellectual disabilities, currently in the primary school system. These findings are illustrated by the viewpoints of participants and are presented under five main themes, entitled; Perspectives on inclusion; Social aspects of an inclusive education system; Challenges and concerns; Role of SNA support; The matter of choice. Further sub-sections of exploration also exist within each theme, all of which correlate with the aims and objectives of this study.

#### **4.2. Perspectives on Inclusion in Education**

##### **4.2.1. Deciding on a school**

This study found that for parents of children with intellectual disabilities, the decision of where to send their child to school is a complex one. There is a lot to contemplate.

*“we always considered the other children as well... so we had to learn to adjust over the years and think about what was best, not just what we wanted for him but what was best for everybody”*

(Parent 4)

The process of decision making can be a difficult and emotional time for families as parents expressed that ideally, mainstream school is where people tend to picture sending their children. Ultimately however, the happiness of the child is paramount for parents when deciding on their education.

*“that was a difficult thing as a parent, what do we want versus what does he need...”*

*...you want them to be like, to use it loosely, like other children, but you have to accept that, y’know, they’re not diagnosed with this for nothing”*

(Parent 4)

*“I really wanted her to go to mainstream, I think we all have the idea of where we’d like our kids to go...”*

(Parent 3)

#### **4.2.2. The meaning of inclusion**

All participants, both parents and teachers, shared the same view of what the term inclusion meant, or certainly what it ought to mean for children with intellectual disabilities and special educational needs attending mainstream school.

*“Inclusion means being actively involved and participating in whatever the other children are participating in... That’s what inclusion is all about, it’s not just being here for maths, it’s about being part of this class, and socially, having his lunch with this class and doing the things that they were doing”*

(Teacher 5)

*“if there’s anything going on, he’s involved in it in some shape or form, and year in year out, the different things that have gone on, they’ve been pitched at his level, without, y’know, making huge exception of him”*

(Parent 2)

A number of participants made a distinction between the meaning of ‘inclusion’ and ‘integration’.

*“Say for example with the unit – there’s integration there because they’re in with the rest of the mainstream school. The inclusion happens when they go in to whatever class level they are at for particular subjects”*

(Teacher 4)

#### **4.2.3. A place for special schools in society**

The study found that participant’s attitudes towards the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities and special educational needs into mainstream settings were extremely positive. Parents were very satisfied with their children’s experiences of mainstream education, yet all participants, both parents and teaching staff, agreed that special schools are still important and necessary in society.

*“I don’t think the needs of ALL children can be met in mainstream school. And in some cases, I think that children, their needs would be best met in a special school”*

(Teacher 5)

*“We don’t have speech therapy, we don’t have physiotherapy, we don’t have occupational therapy and that can be part of a need for a child on a daily basis, depending on their disability”*

(Teacher 4)

Some mainstream primary school settings have special units within them, catering for children with special needs, for children with autism for example.

*“Over the years what’s clear is that parents of pupils with autism that are attending school, their greatest wish is that the children can integrate in so far as is possible with what’s seen as the average mainstream child... by having the classes here, that’s always there, it’s a possibility and it’s put into practice in many cases”*

(Principal)

*“I think every school should have one [a special unit within mainstream school]. And not just to push them into a box but to, to nurture them for the first few years, but ultimately, get them out of there”*

(Parent 4)

#### **4.2.4. Parents must have an option**

All participants in this study stressed the fact that every child is different and therefore there must be options available to parents when deciding where best suits the needs of their child. For some families the situation may need to change, but ultimately the important thing is to have that option.

*“It’s difficult for everyone – school, parents, professionals to know, is this going to work? And, I always would go with the attitude well we have to try it, no one will know until we get the child in here and see how he or she copes”*

(Principal)

*“To be very honest, I can’t see her there [in mainstream]the whole way through primary, so we’re basically just taking each year at a time...  
... I am 100% ready for special school because they are fabulous, absolutely fabulous. But, at the moment it wouldn’t work for her”*

(Parent 1)

*“There is very little movement from a special school to a mainstream. But if you try the mainstream.. if it works, great, if it doesn’t work, they’ve had a huge input and then perhaps, the special school may be more suitable. It’s also a time in which parents can grow in accepting the difficulties and challenges their children have”*

(Parent 2)

### **4.3. Social aspects of an Inclusive Education System**

#### **4.3.1. Intellectual disability and social development**

This study found that there was a definite emphasis and importance placed on the social development of children with intellectual disabilities. For parents, it was a key factor in their decision to send their children to mainstream settings.

*“I chose mainstream so that she’d learn from children, things that no therapist could ever teach her... I don’t care about the academics in the slightest. I sent her to learn the simple things, like play, copying, imitate, sit down, stand up, to do what kids do”*

(Parent 1)

*“For somebody with Down Syndrome, their best learning comes from their peers, and not necessarily their teachers. A lot of learning is done by copying, so I wanted him to copy somebody better than him... which is why the mainstream school was the obvious choice”*

(Parent 2)

#### **4.3.2. Social value of inclusion for children with and without special educational needs**

All participants identified social learning and social awareness as positive aspects of inclusive education settings. It is not only children with intellectual disabilities that benefit socially, but all children in the school.

*“Since he started school he spends more time with his peers than he does with his family. So they are his educators, they are his everything, they’re his world, and he’s not the only child with a disability in the school, so he himself would be helping others”*

(Parent 2)

*“It’s great for the child themselves but it’s also great for the other children in the class as well... it makes them understand that not everybody is the same, that people think differently, that people work at a different pace, and it gives them a greater empathy really y’know, with others”*  
(Teacher 4)

Participants felt that children now are far more aware and understanding of difference, and that this ought to have a positive impact for the future.

*“It can only be positive... there’s no units in real life, there’s no units in college, there’s no units in the workforce. Y’know, its when you think of the future, that’s the way it should be”*  
(Parent 4)

*“I think having someone with special needs in class really teaches them life skills, and about socialising with people with special needs, and I think when they go on after primary school and go into secondary school or whatever, they’ve had that experience with, y’know, living with somebody with special needs, they know how to talk to them, they know that they’re just like anybody else”*  
(Teacher 5)

### **4.3.3. Friendships**

From discussions on children’s social interaction, an emphasis on the caring nature exhibited by primary school children towards pupils with special educational needs became evident. Teachers identified this to be particularly so as children grow older and the gap widens socially between children with intellectual disabilities and their peers.

*“The gap is going to get bigger and bigger and bigger, between her and the rest of the class, but that happens with all children with disabilities”*  
(Teacher 6)

*“When they’re in their own groups, they’ll talk about soccer or they’ll talk about television programmes or whatever, but when [a child with special needs] is in the conversation, they’ll bring it down a level and talk about something different, or play a different game. So they are really adapting to help that child, and they are also looking after them as well”*  
(Teacher 4)

*“They’re brilliant with her but ...after a while, y’know when they’re growing up, its like they’re minding someone nearly... and I do feel that kids need to be exposed to difference, it brings out a lovely side in children, but the other*

*thing about it is, sometimes it does get to the stage where your class, you're kind of wondering are they benefiting from this"*  
(Teacher 2)

This tendency for children with disabilities to be 'looked after' by their peers gave rise to the question of friendship – are 'real friendships' likely to develop between children with intellectual disabilities and their peers? In response to this question the following findings emerged.

*"I suppose, the thing is, when they're younger the differences aren't as, maybe as obvious and they're more like real friendships. But as they get older their interests kind of vary and, y'know, the gap widens socially as well as academically"*  
(Teacher 5)

*"He'd be very well looked after in the class, and they would include him as much as possible... But for him, y'know, whether he'd class any of them as his 'real' friends, I don't know if he would. But yet he really enjoys being with them"*  
(Teacher 5)

*"I think that he's made good friends... the gap has started to happen now in socialising and that, so that he would probably socialise more with his friends with Down Syndrome than he would with his classmates, but it's like...it's like 2 paths, but they criss-cross over each other several times, and he's happy to walk in both"*  
(Parent 2)

## **4.4. Challenges and Concerns**

### **4.4.1. Demands placed on teachers in mainstream classrooms**

Attitudes towards the concept of inclusion in education were positive, but this study found that the reality of providing inclusive education to all pupils within a mainstream classroom places great demands on teachers.

*"The demands that are placed on the class teacher to run so many, in some cases, different programmes for the children is, it's really at this stage now it's just massive. So it demands a lot of skill, commitment, time, dedication, all those things"*  
(Principal)

*“There’s so much we have to do, and we’re under pressure to get those done - we’ve plans to keep up with, whole school plans and everything and I just find there’s so much, like you could have 10 more hours in the day”*  
(Teacher 2)

*“Class size is a massive issue. It just goes without saying, if you’ve a big class of thirty-odd children and you have somebody with special needs, either that child is going to lose out or the rest of the class are going to, y’know, someone’s losing out, because you can’t get to everything”*  
(Teacher 4)

#### **4.4.2. Training and preparation for primary school teachers**

Although teacher training courses have more recently incorporated modules on inclusion in education and students can avail of placement practice in special needs settings, this study found that teachers feel it is not enough to prepare them for the needs of all children attending mainstream education.

*“I got particular training, a certain type of training, for a classroom for, up to a certain level ... and it takes a lot of time out of the class if you’re trying to deal with children with special needs that are above and beyond what you’ve trained to do”*  
(Teacher 4)

*“We don’t have the training, to cover all disabilities, and so you’re learning, more or less on the hoof, you’re researching, you’re listening to parents, you’re at meetings, you’re more or less trying to draw information from everywhere”*  
(Teacher 5)

*“It’s one thing getting a leaflet or a few handouts, or looking at a power point... it’s completely different in the real world, when you actually get into the classroom like there’s no, I mean nothing can prepare you”*  
(Teacher 2)

Teachers admit to feeling overwhelmed or anxious in some cases.

*“I really felt at sea I have to say, in September, because [child with particular special needs] was coming into class. There’s no guidelines, there’s no... there’s nothing. You’re just, you’re just there and you’ve to figure it out yourself nearly”*  
(Teacher 6)

#### **4.4.3. Failure to adapt primary school curriculum**

This study found a lack of confidence in the current primary school curriculum in terms of it being inclusive of children with special educational needs.

*“It’s not really inclusive, like, all the aims and objectives in the curriculum book are for the mainstream child really. They haven’t supplied us with any alternatives for teaching the children with disabilities or any children with special needs or anything. There’s no other aims and objectives, there’s just one set”*

(Teacher 3)

*“I know every child is not going to fit into one curriculum but there should be some guidelines, a section in the curriculum – anything at all even, to say like, that if you have a child in 3<sup>rd</sup> class and they’ve a learning disability, that they can do, maybe they could make an easier programme even, rather than just going back to 1<sup>st</sup> class or senior infants objectives which doesn’t seem right”*

(Teacher 6)

#### **4.4.4. Government cuts to funding and resources for primary schools**

In response to the issue of government funding and allocation of resources for children with special educational needs attending mainstream school, the following findings emerged.

*“For the children that are currently enrolled in the special class for autism, there is a capitation which is the yearly grant to run the school, and that is well funded...”*

*...For others [in the mainstream setting], when there are resources called upon, as in a new seat or a weighted cushion or whatever it may be, once the report is there from the professional and is submitted to the department, they’re generally sanctioned”*

(Principal)

Other participants reported opposing experiences regarding sanctioning of resources.

*“We have to make everything for her, there’s nothing coming from the department. Like, we had to make a sensory room and, you could apply for funding but you just wouldn’t get it. So we end up doing all those things ourselves”*

(Teacher 6)

*“You’re frustrated, because you’re trying to get something in place and they say oh well she’s suitable for mainstream, and then they say that and they promise this and then they leave it there to us to just deal with basically”*

(Teacher 2)

#### **4.4.5. Cuts to SNA support for children with special educational needs**

In addition to cuts in funding and sanctioning of resources, participants cite changes in relation to SNA support for children with special needs as a major concern for both teachers and parents.

*“We’ve seen a 15% cut in resource teaching levels in the last 3 years, which is a kind of a corner stone for any child with a special need in school. And SNA cover has really, really tightened up”*

(Principal)

*“His sna support can be cut, if the SENO determines that he no longer needs the level of support he has. If that were to happen... he could not be here... I couldn’t sleep at night, because of the worry and concern [for his safety]”*

(Parent 2)

*“It’s definitely more difficult to get FULL access to an SNA now, certainly. And, what’s happening now a lot is you have access to an SNA, but it’s shared between a number of children in the school... The SNAs are assigned maybe to one child but they have to help out in different areas around the school as well”*

(Teacher 5)

*“The access is at the discretion of the school. No longer is a child, or parents or guardians told your child now will have full access to an SNA or half day access to an SNA, they’re just told access, and then it’s up to us then to look at staffing levels that are given to us and decide”*

(Principal)

### **4.5. The Role of Special Needs Assistant (SNA)**

#### **4.5.1 The job of an SNA**

When discussing the topic of SNA support for children with special needs within the mainstream classroom, the study found significant praise and gratitude expressed by both teachers and parents for the work carried out by the SNA in the findings.

*“...there’s never been anything but being enabled to be independent and to move on, and ...being pushed when a push was needed... and I put that down to the quality of SNA support he’s had, and the person behind them, that they didn’t just see it as a job”*

(Parent 2)

*“The particular SNA I had in my room. She is excellent... She nearly has things done before I’d even ask her to do something or think of doing something”* (Teacher 4)

*“They just do so much and they’re so good with them and so good with the kids, and they know them inside out”*.  
(Teacher 2)

It is very evident from the findings in this study that the work carried out by an SNA, in reality, goes far beyond the terms of the job description, where officially they are employed to look after a child’s physical care needs, such as feeding or toileting needs.

*“Like we try our best where we can, but only for the backup, again the SNA doing the work, the role of the teacher, which isn’t necessarily what she should be doing, but in reality it’s the only way...”*  
(Teacher 1)

#### **4.5.2. Consequences of cutting vital SNA support**

All teachers interviewed in this study placed vital importance on the availability of SNA support for children with special educational needs.

*“You need that backup. If you didn’t have that support it’d be very difficult”*  
(Teacher 4)

*“For children on the autism spectrum to be full time in the classroom without any SNA is a big challenge. Y’know, because typically their autism can present with sometimes disruptive or challenging behaviour”*  
(Principal)

Regarding the removal or reduction of SNA access for children with special educational needs, participants in this study expressed great concern for the impact this has for all members of the classroom.

*“I wouldn’t even like to think of it! I couldn’t manage, like there’s no...like I absolutely couldn’t manage, and it wouldn’t be fair on her either. And it wouldn’t be fair on the other children”*  
(Teacher 6)

*“Sure you’re going to have to send them to a special school then... That means the child’s future is completely different doesn’t it?”*

(Parent 5)

*“Without his SNA? Our choices would be gone .... It would not be feasible to do it [send child to mainstream], it wouldn’t be fair on a class teacher, it wouldn’t be fair on the pupils to become his buddy, his SNA., it’s not, it’s not their job”*

(Parent 2)

*“[Taking away a child’s SNA support] would reduce their access to the curriculum... It would also affect the other children in the classroom, where again because of a lack of support staff the class teacher has to give more time to a particular pupil. So that’s where it would have a, a certain domino effect”*

(Principal)

## **4.6. THE MATTER OF CHOICE**

### **4.6.1. The voice of the parent**

Although all participants confirmed that the final decision regarding a child’s education does lie with the parent, it is clear that they are very much guided by the advice or direction of the professional bodies – coming through therapists, psychologists, teachers, for example.

*“The CRC do advise you, and you kind of would go with them... So if CRC had of said to me ‘look, mainstream isn’t for her’, then I would’ve been heartbroken but I would have went with them and I would’ve had to send her where she belongs”*

(Parent 3)

The study also found feelings of frustration among parents and lack of confidence in the judgements made by professionals, determining the education of their children.

*“You also have to think, these people have studied right, but I’ve had 6 years, 24 hours a day. So in the end, the parents actually know way more than the therapists. Whereas the therapists don’t always tend to listen, and don’t always know best”*

(Parent 1)

Notably, the study found that in many instances the instincts and the wishes of parents appear to be overlooked in favour of professional opinion.

*“I hate the degrading way that so many therapists can say that [that special schools are better for a child]... like I was told a thousand times oh but special schools are wonderful - I KNOW they're wonderful, but at four years of age, they're not going to teach [my child] what I want her to learn. And I have proved my point a million trillion billion times over”*

(Parent 1)

*“We're probably seen as the emotion. They look at you almost like 'there there'. Y'know. Some day you'll thank us for all we have done...”*

(Parent 4)

*“Quite often the review [by the SENO] is done without any contact with me as the parent. In fact, almost always done...”*

*...I don't think it's fair that if the hours are cut or support is cut in any way and parents haven't been consulted or informed before the decision is written”*

(Parent 2)

#### **4.6.2. A 'tick-box' system and the fight for children's entitlements**

From the findings that emerged from this study, it appears that securing adequate levels of support for children's education can present parents with many battles and much frustration.

*“It's just down to sheer luck and persistence, We learned that over the years”*

(Parent 4)

*“It's just boxes, and if you don't fit in this box – and who does fit in all these boxes? And you just have to fight for everything”*

(Parent 5)

*“It's the system...the waiting times, the beaurocracy, the paperwork, y'know and if you don't tick this and if you don't fit into this, you're not entitled to it... So I think it's, the whole system is a tick-box exercise and it doesn't fit into family life”*

(Parent 4)

*“Because he went to school outside the area, we didn't know anyone really... so for a family, not just for [the child], for a family, we never felt part of the whole primary school experience, in the same way that we feel part of it down here [local school where child's sibling attends]”*

(Parent 4)

### 4.6.3. Contradictions to the concept of parental choice

The following findings illustrate instances where the parent's right to choose their child's school was compromised:

*“Back in the day, that [particular school] wouldn't have been a choice for us, coz it was six or seven miles away. Our school you could walk to - so don't tell me that was a choice for us, d'you know... .. parents, you might say we choose, but we don't really. The system dictates what we can do. It really does”*

(Parent 4)

*“If the department had said no you're not getting funding for the ramps then she couldn't have come here. So although they said it was parental choice, she couldn't have come here if there were no ramps”*

(Teacher 6)

*“So, to go to mainstream school, she had to go to mainstream pre-school, but my sister had to go with her, because you're not entitled to an SNA for playschool... so only really for my sister, she wouldn't have been able to go to mainstream school”*

(Parent 3)

*“The children are on [an autism] spectrum, so they could be from nought to 100 in range of severity, so all their needs are different. They could be living somewhere that have no school near them or they could have loads of schools on their doorstep that still wont take them..”*

(Parent 4)

*“Yes, as parents, we're entitled to choose the school for [our son], but the schools that we wanted him to go to for secondary...to match what he's had all along, is not available to us. So then we had to go and pick another school...*

*...And because we can't get him into a unit in sec school, he's now going to what the Department classes a mainstream school, with no special needs specific classroom or title attached to it, so he'll lose his entitlement for the school transport..”*

(Parent 4)

## 4.7. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the main findings that emerged from the data analysis of interviews with teacher and parent respondents, and highlighted the different themes and sub-themes that arose. The following chapter will discuss these findings pertaining to the literature reviewed in chapter two.

# **Chapter Five**

## Chapter Five

### Discussion

#### 5.1. Introduction

This study aimed to explore the concept of inclusion in education from the perspective of primary school teachers and parents of children with special educational needs. The main themes that emerged from the findings of the study will be discussed in this chapter and commonalities and contradictions will be drawn in relation to the literature reviewed in chapter two.

#### 5.1. Perspectives on inclusion in education

In terms of defining inclusion, all participants shared the same view of what inclusive education ought to mean for children with disabilities. As opposed to “*just being there for maths*” (Teacher 5), both teachers and parents believed that children should be actively involved in all aspects of school life – be it in the classroom, a school play, having lunch with friends - to generally be part of everything the other children are doing, at a level that can be adapted to the child’s ability. This corresponds with the definition of inclusion proposed by Cumming and Wong (2010), which suggests that children with disabilities have a right to access, participate and be equally included in education alongside their peers. The fact that participants differentiated between merely being present in the classroom and being actively involved is reflective of the literature in which Nurse (2001) draws a distinction between the terms inclusion, where children are socialised and educated alongside their peers, and integration, where children are placed in mainstream physically but are not necessarily given access to all activities available to other children in the class.

In addition to the literature pertaining to the meaning of inclusion, Philips (2001) maintains that in order to allow full participation, schools must adjust the curriculum and how teachers work. In contrast to this, findings of this study show that although

teachers are expected to adapt how they work with children of varying ability, the primary school curriculum itself has not been adapted and contains only one set of aims and objectives which teachers agree are aimed at the average mainstream child. It can be said therefore, that this failure to adapt the curriculum, or include guidelines for teachers to work with specific special educational needs, is not representative of a system which supports inclusion on all levels.

The findings clearly show that despite a preference towards including children in mainstream education, participants recognised that the needs of all children cannot be met in mainstream school. Special schools were praised for providing an important and necessary option for children with particular special educational needs, who may benefit from occupational therapy for example, or physiotherapy which are not provided in mainstream settings. Farrell (2000), cited in the literature by Ruijs and Petsma (2009), also maintains that special schools are important, as they offer a choice for parents. In relation to this point, the findings of this study highlight a general consensus that parents should avail of their options and try mainstream school first. If it is not a success, then the move to special school will be a more informed choice.

*“if you try the mainstream.. if it works, great, if it doesn't work, they've had a huge input and then perhaps, the special school may be more suitable. It's also a time in which parents can grow in accepting the difficulties and challenges their children have”* (Parent 2)

Ruijs and Petsma (2009) acknowledge that situations may occur where a parent expresses a child's right to be in mainstream education despite the best place for the child being in special school. This raises the issue however as to who decides where the best place is – the parents or the professionals? During the interview process, the researcher did come across an instance where teacher and parent differed in their view of where best suited a particular child, nevertheless both teacher and parent participants were in agreement that the mainstream option should certainly be tested first, if so desired. What emerged from the findings was the importance of listening to the parent in situations like the above mentioned, but some participants reported that in many instances the views of parents are overlooked.

*“I don't think the teachers and the therapists are always right... I think parents definitely have to be listened to”* (Parent 1)

### 5.3. Social aspect of Inclusion for children with and without disabilities

Consistent with a number of studies cited in the literature review, this study found that children with disabilities benefited greatly in terms of social development. Cumming and Wong (2010), for example, claim that children with disabilities benefit from inclusive settings as it provides a more challenging learning environment and a chance to “watch, learn and interact with more competent peers”. This was, in fact cited by two participants of this study as the key reason for choosing to send their children to mainstream. Parents also identified a growth in confidence and social skills in children with disabilities attending mainstream, which corresponds with findings of a study cited by Briody and Martone (2010) that found higher levels of self esteem and appropriate behaviour among children with special educational needs when included in mainstream classes.

In terms of how children with disabilities benefited from inclusion, this study found that the emphasis on social development far outweighed academic achievement. In fact there was little reference to academic development in interviews with participants. This is illustrative of the tendency noted by Cumming and Wong (2010) to identify benefits of inclusion solely within the domains of social competence, play and peer engagement. This, argues Mousley et al (1993), reflects the ‘typical curricula of segregated settings’. For parents in this study however, this did not appear to cause concern. The findings showed that while parents were very happy to see their child engage in academic learning (according to their level of ability), in some cases it was seen as a bonus, but in all cases the emphasis was on development of social skills, independence and confidence rather than academics.

*“If you weigh it up you think, I want them to be able to read and write and everything but what good is any of that if they can’t interact with somebody ... the whole social thing is so important, it really is” (Parent 4)*

Perhaps this finding is merely representative of the particular children in this study. It is possible that for children with milder educational needs the desire for academic progress is greater.

In a study by Mousley et al (1993), teachers reported development of social skills not only in children with disabilities but in all students. Again, this is consistent with the

findings of this study. Children exposed to others with varying needs and abilities were said to be more understanding and accepting of differences, and teachers identified that students who interacted with children with disabilities were very caring in nature and exhibited empathy and kindness towards their peers. Similarly, Lodge and Lynch (2004) and Cumming and Wong (2010), as cited in the literature review, identify high levels of accepting attitudes among children towards their peers with disabilities. This also correlates positively with the Salamanca Statement (1994), which promotes inclusive schools as being the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes and of building solidarity between children with disabilities and their peers.

While the social benefits for all children emerged as a theme in both the findings of this study and the literature review, the topic of friendship emerged more prominently from this study. Findings suggest that as children grow older a gap begins to form both academically and socially between children with disabilities and their peers. According to teachers in this study, as the gap widens the relationship becomes less like what participants consider 'real friendship', and children take on more of a caring role towards the child with special needs, with a tendency to 'look after' them. Some teachers wondered if this was fair, and suggested that sometimes children need a break, having taken on this caring role. On the other hand, all participants agree that these acts of kindness and empathy exhibited by typically developing children come from within the children, it is not something they are instructed to do.

#### **5.4. Challenges and concerns**

The findings in this study regarding the challenges and barriers to inclusion are evidence of Fulcher's (1989) statement, as cited in the literature review, that "implementation of policy does not automatically follow its creation".

##### **5.4.1. Cuts to funding and SNA support**

Findings regarding provision for children with special educational needs within the education system were consistent with Lodge and Lynch (2004), where they described it as relatively 'ad-hoc', explaining that genuine inclusion is often compromised due

to lack of adequate support staff and resources. Participants of this study had first hand experience of cuts to SNA support staff as well as funding for what they considered vital resources to aid children's development.

*“Even her mam would tell you like, it's like hitting your head off a brick wall... even things like trying to get a table for her, all of those things like even furniture, equipment, it's just, it's actually unbelievable”* (Teacher 6)

The above statement appears to illustrate a reality that is in contrast with the view of the OECD (2003), as cited in chapter two, which warns that the education of students with disabilities could not be achieved without additional resources being made available if they are to access the curriculum on an equal basis with non-disabled children.

The findings place great emphasis on the importance of SNA support in classrooms, yet participants highlight the fact that it has become very difficult for parents to access full SNA support for their children, and students are in fact sharing SNA hours. Daly (cited in Lodge and Lynch 2004) believes that such lack of appropriate support could lead to isolation of students with disabilities and negative experiences of school. The particular children in this study all had positive experiences in terms of support and inclusion, but if SNA hours were to be cut it would totally alter their school experience and most likely result in their removal from mainstream education.

Regarding the impact of such cuts, participants express concern for the effect it would have for children with disabilities being able to access the curriculum, and for the subsequent effect on the rest of the class if the teacher has to spend large amounts of time helping one child. This also places great demands on the teacher, who is responsible for ensuring the rights of all children to have their needs met in school.

#### **5.4.2. Demands placed on teachers in mainstream classrooms**

*“I find it's getting more difficult, to deal with the whole class, because you have so many different needs and so many, you're being pulled in so many different directions. It, it's very trying at times”* (Teacher 5)

Findings from this study corresponded with literature citing the growing demands placed on teachers as more and more children with special educational needs are

attending mainstream (Bines and Lei 2011). Teachers in this study reported feeling anxious about their ability to adequately support the education of some children with particular disabilities. The issue of preparation and appropriate training was cited in the literature review, and a study by Mousley (1993) found that many teachers tended to doubt their professional competency when it came to teaching children with intellectual disabilities in particular. According to the teachers interviewed for the purpose of this study however, the general opinion was that no course can adequately prepare teachers for the reality of the classroom, as each child and their needs are so different. Teachers stated that they sought help and support from other members of staff.

### **5.5. The matter of choice**

In accordance with NCSE literature (2013), participants explain that parents have the ultimate say in where their child goes to school. However, individual interviews produced some interesting findings that contradicted this right to choose, and highlighted the struggle that parents face when trying to access adequate supports for children with special educational needs.

*“It’s just boxes, and if you don’t fit in this box – and who does fit in all these boxes? And you just have to fight for everything”* (Parent 5)

This aspect was not evident in the literature review. Much of the literature focused on international and national policy and legislation and the rights of children to attend mainstream education. Therefore, to the reader it appears that inclusion in education is a positive advancement in education policy and disability policy, yet the findings of this study reveal real insight into the underlying challenges that compromise a child’s inclusion into mainstream settings. The Salamanca Statement (1994), as cited in chapter two, proposes that all educational policies should require that children with disabilities attend the “neighbourhood school that would be attended if the child did not have a disability” (UNESCO 2014). This very statement is in sharp contrast to the experience of one participant who, despite wishing her son to attend their local school, had no choice but to enrol him in a school six to seven miles from their home. Another participant simply states

*“They shouldn’t have brought in inclusion if they weren’t going to support it”*  
(Teacher 6)

## **5.6. Conclusion**

It is evident that a number of issues that emerged from the findings of this study correspond with literature reviewed in chapter two. Correlation exists in terms of the social benefits of an inclusive education system for all children for example, and the concept of what inclusion ought to mean for children with disabilities attending mainstream school. On the other hand, discrepancies can be identified in terms of the reality of its implementation and how it can be accessed.

The following chapter will set out the conclusions and recommendations of this research.

## **Chapter Six**

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### **6.1. Introduction**

This study set out to explore the subject of inclusive education. It sought to investigate personal experiences relating to the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education settings, from the perspectives of primary school teachers and parents of children with disabilities. Following analysis and discussion of the findings, the final conclusions and recommendations of the study will now be presented.

#### **6.2. Conclusions**

The main objective of this piece of research was to investigate personal experiences of primary school teachers and parents of children with intellectual disabilities in order to gauge whether the day to day reality of including children with disabilities in mainstream education conformed to contemporary policy on inclusion. The study aimed to investigate if the needs of children with and without disabilities can be met in an inclusive education system. Ultimately, the study aimed to identify the positive aspects of inclusive education for all children, but also highlight the challenges that exist for those involved in implementing it within the school setting and those who access it on behalf of children with special educational needs.

International and national literature pertaining to the inclusion and education of children with disabilities was reviewed. Also legislation, policies and the area of children's rights in relation to education of children with special educational needs in inclusive mainstream settings were examined. From a theoretical point of view, there was much agreement between the above literature and the findings of this study on the merits of inclusion, and indeed the social benefits for all children, with and without

disabilities, have been put forward in this and other studies cited within the literature review. Where the discrepancy lies is in the gap between policy and the reality of its implementation. Namely the supports put in place to allow genuine opportunities for inclusion of children with special educational needs into all aspects of education. In terms of a child's right to be educated in mainstream school, and where the choice lies with the parent, this study found much evidence where this right was fundamentally undermined by the existing system.

The rewards of an inclusive education setting can be high and the benefits are far reaching, and this cannot be denied. Nonetheless the area of inclusion is complex. As is stated by the NCSE (2010), "Its principles of tolerance, diversity and equity go uncontested, the challenge lies in how to achieve inclusive education".

Although the sample for this research was small in scale, the researcher is confident that the aims and objectives of the study have been successfully achieved, and that the findings presented to the reader are representative of the positive aspects of inclusive education, as experienced by primary school teachers and parents of children with disabilities, but also the challenges that threaten to undermine it.

### **6.3. Recommendations**

- The current system of SNA allocation needs to be reassessed. Sharing SNA hours among children is not acceptable. Parents need to be assured that the SNA support their child receives is centred on that child so he/she may progress to their full potential. A more individual, child-centred approach could be taken when determining the allocation of educational supports for children, as the current system of 'box-ticking' is criticised by all participants in this study, and it may result in children who would benefit from educational supports slipping through the system.
- Although it is virtually impossible to create a curriculum to suit every child, in order to address inclusive policy on a deeper level, it should be examined to see how the curriculum could be adapted to include guidelines or an adapted set of aims and objectives for children with special educational needs.

- “Of central importance to the concept of rights is the legislative provision underpinning policy provision” (Quin and Redmond 2003). Ireland is yet to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 (UNCRPD). Ratification of this convention would illustrate a dedication to meeting the needs of children with disabilities under a legal framework.
- More research is needed on the continuity of support for pupils with special educational needs. Findings from individual interviews with parents highlighted the issue of a child’s entitlement to SNA support in pre-school settings. Although this may be considered a separate area of research, it is one that directly affects the issue of inclusion into primary school, as a child’s enrolment in mainstream primary is determined by that child’s attendance of a mainstream pre-school setting. Yet, there is no entitlement to SNA support for children attending pre-school.
- Again in terms of continuity, while primary school offered one participant of this study the option of a special autism unit within mainstream school for her son, there was no similar option available for secondary school. Further exploration on the transition from primary to secondary school for pupils with special educational needs would therefore be valuable.

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## Appendix A

### Participant profile for Focus Group

<b>*Participant:</b>	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3
<b>*Teaching experience:*</b>	4 years ~ mainstream teaching	15 years in total, as follows: 9 yrs ~ mainstream 1 yr ~ Language support 5 yrs ~ Learning support	3 years ~ mainstream teaching
<b>*Current position:</b>	Teaching 5 <sup>th</sup> class	Learning support teacher	Teaching 2 <sup>nd</sup> class
<b>*School:</b>	Single-sex mainstream primary school	Single-sex mainstream primary school	Single-sex mainstream primary school

## Appendix B

### Participant profile for individual interviews – Teachers\*

<b>*Participant:</b>	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6	Principal
<b>*Teaching experience</b>	14 years ~ mainstream teaching & teaching in special autism unit	28 years	2 years ~ mainstream teaching	5 years ~ as principal  9 years ~ mainstream teaching
<b>*Current position</b>	Teaching 5 <sup>th</sup> class	Teaching 6 <sup>th</sup> class	Teaching 1 <sup>st</sup> class	Acting school principal
<b>*School:</b>	Mixed-sex mainstream school, incorporating special unit for children with autism	Mixed-sex mainstream school, incorporating special unit for children with autism	Single-sex mainstream primary school	Mixed-sex mainstream school, incorporating special unit for children with autism

## Appendix C

### Participant profile for individual interviews – Parents\*

The information below is based on content shared by parents during interview, and is presented to the reader for the purpose of gaining greater understanding of individuals' personal contexts.

**[\*\*Names have been changed to protect privacy]**

#### **Parent 1 – Anna & daughter Sophia:**

Anna's daughter, the eldest of two children, is six years old. She has a rare syndrome which affects both her intellectual ability and her physical ability – in that her fine motor skills are limited. She is also very small in size, and just recently started walking at age four. Sophia is non-verbal, and according to Anna may not have the mental capacity of more than five or six years of age. However, she understands everything and is well able to communicate, using hand signs and visual picture images. Anna opted for mainstream school for Sophia as she is an extremely sociable little girl, full of fun and mischief, and just loves to be around other children and do what they do. Anna felt she could learn so much more from her peers than any adult or therapist could teach her – that is, how to be a child and do the things that 'typical' children do. This was not a straightforward process however, as Anna and her husband were repeatedly advised against this decision. Nevertheless, Sophia now attends a mainstream school where she has access to speech therapy and partial SNA access, particularly for transition periods during the school day and needs such as feeding and toileting. The experience so far has exceeded Anna's hopes for Sophia's integration and inclusion into the class and indeed the whole school - "the children are just amazing with her, absolutely amazing... it's good for [Sophia] and it's good for the whole school". In the future it is most likely that Sophia will attend a special school, which Anna is happy to accept, however Anna states that the progress Sophia has made in all areas of development, could not have happened if she was in a special school at this early stage.

#### **Parent 2 – Susan & son John:**

Susan's son is the youngest of three children. He is eleven years old, currently in 5<sup>th</sup> class in mainstream school. John has Down Syndrome. Susan chose mainstream education for John,

believing that his best learning would come from copying his peers, and so she wanted him to copy “somebody better than him”. His care needs are significant – for example John needs help for toileting, for remembering to eat lunch, for accessing games socially in the playground, and there is also a possibility he may leave the school grounds. Enrolment into mainstream therefore was based on John being granted full SNA support. Without this, he could not attend mainstream school. Susan is extremely happy and grateful for the quality of support and encouragement John has received over the years from his SNA. He has made many friends and is very popular among his classmates and indeed with others in the school. John also receives five hours resource support in school. This is not based on the fact he has Down Syndrome however, as this does not guarantee resource time, but rather due to a hearing impairment and a sight difficulty. John had no resource hours until he reached 1<sup>st</sup> class, when an assessment required he be allocated five hours per week, which is the maximum. John will attend a mainstream secondary school after 6<sup>th</sup> class next year. He will remain in mainstream for as long as he is happy, and that is the measure his family goes by each year as they review his progress. John himself hopes to go to college and study art in Spain, or alternatively in Galway! Up until now, his inclusion in mainstream school has been extremely positive.

### **Parent 3 – Kate & daughter Emma:**

Kate’s daughter, the eldest of two children, is eight years old and is currently in 1<sup>st</sup> class in mainstream school. Emma has cerebral palsy type four, which affects all her limbs, so she has a wheelchair for mobility. Emma is also non-verbal, but she communicates using eye movements. Due to her limited mobility, she has significant care needs where she requires twenty four-hour care and in school a full-time SNA is absolutely essential and must do everything for her – for example, feeding, toileting, opening books... Without an SNA, Emma could not access mainstream school. Before starting in junior infants, the school had to apply for a grant to add ramps and other equipment such as a lift, for wheelchair accessibility. On a number of occasions it was suggested that Kate send Emma to another school, which was already wheelchair accessible, or delay her enrolment by a year, but Kate was determined that she go to her local school. The grant was finally sanctioned to make changes to the school to allow a wheelchair, and since Emma’s enrolment into mainstream, she has had a very positive experience. Emma did spend time in a pre-school specifically for children with special needs, but it was clear to Kate and the staff there, that she was very unhappy – “it just wasn’t the place for her”. In order to attend mainstream primary school, however, Emma had to go to a mainstream pre-school, but was not entitled to an SNA, so Kate’s sister took on the role and looked after Emma’s care needs while at pre-school, thus allowing her the chance to be enrolled in the primary school. Emma is a very happy child and her smile is infectious. Her classmates and other children in the school love her and take great care of her. There is a constant struggle, however, to get funding for resources for Emma’s educational

needs. The staff in school took it upon themselves to create a sensory room, but there are a lot more resources that Emma could benefit from, but are not being sanctioned. Kate intends that Emma will remain in her school until the end of 6<sup>th</sup> class, and after that she will reassess what is the best option at that time.

**Parent 4 – Jane & son Sam:**

Jane's son, the eldest of two children, is twelve years old and is currently in 6<sup>th</sup> class. Sam has autism, and has been educated in a special unit for children with autism located within a mainstream primary school. Since 5<sup>th</sup> class Sam has been integrated into a mainstream class for certain lessons during the school week, but this year he joined his peers in 6<sup>th</sup> class full-time. Sam has adapted very well to mainstream and really enjoys being with his classmates. Jane has seen a big improvement in his confidence and his ability to mix with "the lads", noting how he has even begun to take on the 'jargon' of the boys in his class. In the early years, Jane admits that life was not easy and was almost consumed with the autism, but as Sam is older now he has learned ways to control his emotions and he has developed keen interests in raising chickens, in reading and history, and he has a "real sense of justice and injustice" and interest in current affairs. Sam also has a great sense of humour. Seeing how well Sam has adapted and progressed, makes Jane feel that maybe she should have pushed harder for his integration into mainstream at an earlier age, or perhaps he could have gone to mainstream, with the support of an SNA, since the beginning. Naturally, Jane wanted him to go to their local primary school (as the family live six or seven miles from the city), but she recalls how at the time, she really was unsure of what to do. It was trial and error, and his experience of mainstream pre-school was not successful. His grandmother stayed with him, as he was not entitled to an SNA, but it became difficult for him to manage in that setting. His option then appeared to be special school. Then Jane heard about the unit in his current school and he was lucky to get a place. Despite contemplating her decisions for Sam, Jane expresses great satisfaction and gratitude for the excellent level of support he received in the unit and the preparation for integrating him into mainstream. Sam will attend a mainstream secondary school, as there are no options available similar to his primary school. This will be a very big step for him, and Jane's main hope for him is that he manages to settle in and feels confident and happy there. He will have SNA support, particularly for transition times – organising books, changing classes, etc. SNA support is also vital as there is the possibility of him running away from the school if he becomes upset. Unfortunately, as Sam will be attending what the department of education considers to be a mainstream school, he will lose his entitlement to the school transport system which he has availed of all along. This poses a problem for the family and when they appealed it, it was suggested that Sam could travel on the public service, as that bus stops at the school. This is totally unacceptable, particularly as Sam is considered to be a 'flight risk'. Jane adds, "that's a battle for another day...".

**Parent 5 – Paul & daughter Lilly:**

Paul's daughter, the youngest of two children, is four years old. She is currently in mainstream pre-school, and Paul is working to see that supports are put in place for her to begin mainstream primary school at the start of the new school year. It was thought originally that Lilly had autism, however this was ruled out and she is said to have a social and language delay. As there is no 'official' diagnosis for Lilly, when the report was submitted by the education psychologist, she did not qualify for SNA support. Fortunately, Paul had personal connections and contacted the SNA deciding officer to argue his daughter's case. Lilly would need full-time SNA support, as her attention span is low, and she may become distressed in certain situations or there may be a tendency for her to run away. She is predominantly non-verbal at the moment, but her use of words is increasing and she also communicates using actions and visual picture aids. Full-time SNA support has since been granted, but there would probably have been a different outcome if Paul had not successfully argued the case, or if he did not have personal connections, which would have resulted, possibly, in a different decision being made regarding the school Lilly attended. Lilly has attended both mainstream and special pre-school settings. While the specialised setting provided her with great support, in terms of emotional support and introducing the use of a picture exchange communication system (PECS), Lilly has made great strides in her social development since starting at her current mainstream pre-school. Paul was dissatisfied with her integration into a previous pre-school setting, but since moving to her current setting, Lilly is more settled and has improved her social skills and eye contact with people, and is using more and more words every week. Paul puts this down to successful management of her integration and inclusion into the group and says it is her peers who have a huge impact on her development. Despite their young age, her peers exhibit great understanding that she acts or communicates in a different way than they do. Lilly is a happy child, who enjoys her fun, and children and adults alike warm to her big smile and bright eyes. Paul intends that Lilly will remain in mainstream education, with full SNA support, certainly for her primary school cycle, and if she still needs support for secondary school, then he vows to secure that for her as well.

## Appendix D

### Sample Coding ~ by topic /question

#### Deciding on a school

*“Look, you’re always caught between a rock and a hard place, and you always want to do what’s right”*

(Parent 4)

*“that was a difficult thing as a parent, what do we want versus what does he need... ..you want them to be like, to use it loosely, like other children, but you have to accept that, y’know, they’re not diagnosed with this for nothing”*

(Parent 4)

*“Well we sat down as a family, to consider, y’know... we had to evaluate what was best for him”*

(Parent 2)

*“we always considered the other children as well... so we had to learn to adjust over the years and think about what was best, not just what we wanted for him but what was best for everybody”*

(Parent 4)

*“you know, you always have visions of your daughter with the uniform on going in in September starting school”*

(Parent 5)

*“I really wanted her to go to mainstream, I think we all have the idea of where we’d like our kids to go, but if it had of been the case where it didn’t suit her and she didn’t belong there, well look, she would have had to go where she belonged”*

(Parent 3)

#### Meaning of inclusion:

*“if there’s anything going on, he’s involved in it in some shape or form, and year in year out, the different things that have gone on, they’ve been pitched at his level, without, y’know, making huge exception of him”*

(Parent 2)

*“Inclusion to me is that he has the same opportunities, and the same expectations are there of him as any other typically developing child in the school. Not necessarily to reach the same heights, but all we ask of children is that they will do their best and reach their potential”*

(Parent 2)

*“Inclusion means for me, on a daily basis teaching [child’s name], it means that she is included into the majority, like as many lessons as I can include her into....she would do her own programme when we do maths.. But for the majority of things like art, PE, SCSE, all those things, drama, music... it just means that, allows her to access the lesson, which you’d do with every child, coz they’d have to differentiate for them all, and give them something, give them tasks that they’re able to do”*

(Teacher 6)

*“Inclusion means being actively involved and participating in whatever the other children are participating in... That’s what inclusion is all about, it’s not just being here for maths, it’s about being part of this class, and socially, having his lunch with this class and doing the things that they were doing”*

(Teacher 5)

*“Well my idea of inclusion and integrate would be that she’s included in all the activities, she’s included and thought about in everything. Integration is how, not only her but the other children are all integrating together. And it is just incredible, so not only does she learn from those other kids, they totally learn from her too”*

(Parent 1)

*“Say for example with the unit – there’s integration there because they’re in with the rest of the mainstream school. The inclusion happens when they go in to whatever class level they are at for particular subjects”*

(Teacher 4)

*“anything that’s happening in the class, as much as she can, to be involved. ...like if they’re doing something as a class or a group, that she’s not left in the corner, so to speak, and not part of it”*

(Parent 3)

#### **A place for special schools – are they still important?**

*“I don’t think the needs of ALL children can be met in mainstream school. And in some cases, I think that children, their needs would be best met in a special school”*

(Teacher 5)

*“I do think there should, absolutely be special schools, absolutely and I think they’re fantastic and I think the people that work in them are fantastic and, each kid is different and some kids you couldn’t possibly send them to a typical school because they wouldn’t do anything... If they’re not able to integrate, if they’re not able to.. [my child] is extremely social, that’s also why it works so well. It depends on the kids”*

(Parent 1)

*“I just feel the life skills they get from special school, you just can’t teach them that here in mainstream. And they need that when they leave school, to be able to function, or as part of the community”* (Teacher 1)

*“some of the special schools, they couldn’t provide what we can provide for the children, and then we can’t provide things that the special schools can provide... so, I think it’s just the parents, they know their own children, where’s best for them to go to... So I definitely think that they do have their place because some parents would say, oh I’d never send my child to mainstream, and then some parents would say then well she’s better off in mainstream... it’s the parents’ choice I suppose..”*

(Teacher 6)

*“When a child is going into the moderate range of general learning disability it’s questionable what we can provide here in mainstream. And if their autism is at a moderate/ severe level, it’s questionable, y’know, it’s difficult to provide [for such children] then as well”*

(Principal)

### **Schools with special units attached (e.g. for children with autism)**

*“They have their own specific classroom which is slightly bigger than the standard spec of a mainstream classroom, and ...depending on the ability and needs of the child, there is varying levels of integration. When I say that, there 1 or 2 children in the younger class that have limited integration into the mainstream, and there are some in the senior class that are actually this year giving the full day now at this stage in mainstream. ... .. 5 days a week, so ultimately that’s what we’re working towards”*

(Principal)

*“Over the years what’s clear is that parents of pupils with autism that are attending school, their greatest wish is that the children can integrate in so far as is possible with what’s seen as the average mainstream child... by having the classes here, that’s always there, it’s a possibility and it’s put into practice in many cases”*

(Principal)

### **Option to try both schools should be there for families...**

*“It’s difficult for everyone – school, parents, professionals to know, is this going to work? And, I always would go with the attitude well we have to try it, no one will know until we get the child in here and see how he or she copes”*

(Principal)

*“It is nice to have the option there like y’know..not all kids with disabilities...they need to be where they need to be like”*

(Parent 3)

*“To be very honest, I can’t see her there [in mainstream]the whole way through primary, so we’re basically just taking each year at a time...*

*... she’s not going to have the mentality to be any more than a five year old, so I can’t see it working and that’s why I am 100% ready for special school because they are fabulous, absolutely fabulous. But, at the moment it wouldn’t work for her”*

(Parent 1)

*“There is very little movement from a special school to a mainstream. But if you try the mainstream.. if it works, great, if it doesn’t work, they’ve had a huge input and then perhaps, the special school may be more suitable. It’s also a time in which parents can grow in accepting the difficulties and challenges their children have”*

(Parent 2)

### **Social development an important advantage of mainstream for children with intellectual disabilities..... is there emphasis on social rather than academic development?**

*“I suppose maybe the focus, maybe from a parent’s point of view social aspect is, it’s very important to parents I would say, y’know.. Em, and they would like them to be in a mainstream setting maybe, sometimes, primarily for that reason”*

(Teacher 5)

*“I chose mainstream so that she’d learn from children, things that no therapist could ever teach her... I don’t care about the academics in the slightest. I sent her to learn the simple things, like play, copying, imitate, sit down, stand up, to do what kids do”*

(Parent 1)

*“For somebody with Down Syndrome, their best learning comes from their peers, and not necessarily their teachers. A lot of learning is done by copying, so I wanted him to copy somebody better than him... which is why the mainstream school was the obvious choice”*  
(Parent 2)

*“If you weigh it up you think, I want them to be able to read and write and everything but what good is any of that if they can't interact with somebody ... the whole social thing is so important, it really is”*  
(Parent 4)

*“She's learnin' her little bits, but more social to be honest, just for her to fit in. That sounds terrible but...yea just for her to fit in like”*  
(Parent 3)

*“From speaking to parents down through the years of kids who have special needs and that, their biggest concern is nearly always social – how are getting on with their friends, y'know, what did they do in the yard, how did they play and y'know. It seems to be the biggest concern”*  
(Teacher 5)

### **Social value of inclusion for children with and without special educational needs**

*“It's great for the child themselves but it's also great for the other children in the class as well... it makes them understand that not everybody is the same, that people think differently, that people work at a different pace, and it gives them a greater empathy really y'know, with others”*  
(Teacher 4)

*“And having had the girls [daughters] in the school, and they had had a very positive experience throughout – both from themselves, and having had children with special needs in their classes – I had seen, from the outside, how it had enhanced their lives, we'll say when they were in school, and I didn't have a child with special needs, so I knew that for [my child], the school community, at large, was a positive one for him to be in, and I felt that he would bring something to it as well”*  
(Parent 2)

*“Since he started school he spends more time with his peers than he does with his family. So they are his educators, they are his everything, they're his world, and he's not the only child with a disability in the school, so he himself would be helping others”*  
(Parent 2)

*“This year in particular, he's spent a lot of time being integrated into mainstream school, and it did a great service to him for his confidence I think, mixing with his peers. He's really enjoyed being in 6<sup>th</sup> class with 'the lads' as he says”*  
(Parent 4)

*“I think it's great for other kids to be exposed to kids with special needs, whatever shape or form they are, and to be understanding, and to see outside of it, yknow not just see the disability, to see them as a person”*  
(Teacher 3)

*“I'd say they will always have such a respect for any child with disabilities, yknow like any child or any person they ever meet they're going to have automatic respect. Y'know, they have huge understanding and I think they nearly value their own ability and what they [can do] y'know”*  
(Teacher 1)

*“I think having someone with special needs in class really teaches them life skills, and about socialising with people with special needs, and I think when they go on after primary school and go into secondary school or whatever, they’ve had that experience with, y’know, living with somebody with special needs, they know how to talk to them, they know that they’re just like anybody else”*

(Teacher 5)

### **Do children form ‘real’ Friendships, or do they ‘look after’ children with special needs?**

*“For the other children I suppose the huge difficulty is in d’you know, initiating conversation with him and getting him chatting, and that’s, y’know you’d be trying to encourage that in them. But they are very good, he has been, he was with some of them in 5<sup>th</sup> class as well so I think they know him, and they know his ways as well, and they’d certainly be very welcoming. It’s to get him to be involved and actually doing things as well that would be kind of the challenge”*

(Teacher 5)

*“The gap is going to get bigger and bigger and bigger, between her and the rest of the class, but that happens with all children with disabilities”*

(Teacher 6)

*“I think, in early years, they’re more like real friendships. But as they get older I see the gap... Where, the children now, they’re 10, 11, they’re moving on. They’re not talking about, y’know kids games anymore, they’re talking about... soccer, they’re talking about the world cup, And, I see children with special needs or disabilities, they can’t make that jump, they’re still a few years behind, and they’re still talking about castles, and y’know, things like that... “*

(Teacher 4)

*“When they’re in their own groups, they’ll talk about soccer or they’ll talk about television programmes or whatever, but when [a child with special needs] is in the conversation, they’ll bring it down a level and talk about something different, or play a different game. So they are really adapting to help that child, and they are also looking after them as well”*

(Teacher 4)

*“They’re brilliant with her but a certain amount of it can start, after a while, y’know when they’re growing up, its like they’re minding someone nearly... and I do feel that kids need to be exposed to difference, it brings out a lovely side in children, but the other thing about it is, sometimes it does get to the stage where your class, you’re kind of wondering are they benefiting from this”*

(Teacher 2)

*“They’re sort of almost more looking after them and looking out for them rather than maybe necessarily, than real friendship... again it depends”*

(Teacher 5)

*“All the girls in her class, they all love her, but like, she has her little friends that stick nearly with her every day and there are some little girls, they’ll always walk down the ramp with her at home time or in the morning...”*

(Parent 3)

*“He’d be very well looked after in the class, and they would include him as much as possible... But for him, y’know, whether he’d class any of them as his ‘real’ friends, I don’t know if he would. But yet he really enjoys being with them...”*

*...I don’t think he would see any of them outside of school, I’m not sure but I don’t think so”*

(Teacher 5)

*“I suppose, the thing is, when they’re younger the differences aren’t as, maybe as obvious and they’re more like real friendships. But as they get older their interests kind of vary and, y’know, the gap widens socially as well as academically”*

(Teacher 5)

*“I think that he’s made good friends... the gap has started to happen now in socialising and that, so that he would probably socialise more with his friends with Down Syndrome than he would with his classmates, but it’s like...it’s like 2 paths, but they criss-cross over each other several times, and he’s happy to walk in both”*

(Parent 2)

## **CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS**

### **Demands placed on teachers in mainstream classrooms**

*“I think teaching is a lot more challenging than it was 20 or 30 years ago – well, it’s more challenging, in ways.. I suppose 20 or 30 yrs ago you didn’t have snas or you didn’t have em, diagnosis on kids, d’y’know, they were thought to be..y’know, difficult or whatever, whereas now, with the snas and everything, it makes life a little bit easier, but also we have a lot more to deal with as well. We’ve a lot more special needs in the school. But emm, it can be difficult to try and get around to everybody”*

(Teacher 4)

*“I mean it really depends on the child. Once the child isn’t disruptive in the class really, it is a positive thing I think for children. And once the child’s needs can be met.... But if the child happened to be disruptive in class and taking up an awful lot of time, we’ll say of the teacher’s time, well then the other children are going to suffer. Y’know, and it’s going to, well obviously it’s going to be more challenging for the teacher, and y’know, frustrating in ways I suppose as well”*

(Teacher 5)

*“I find it’s getting more difficult, to deal with the whole class, because you have so many different needs and so many, you’re being pulled in so many different directions. It, it’s very trying at times”*

(Teacher 5)

*“It’s becoming harder within the mainstream class because everybody wants the children with special needs to be integrated, naturally y’know, and within the mainstream setting, and yet the resources aren’t put in place and sna access is being cut back all the time, so it’s actually being, it’s being made more difficult for those children to access the curriculum really. Y’know, which is a huge challenge for teachers, it’s a huge challenge for the children in the class then – for the child themselves and for the other children in the class, because obviously if the support isn’t there for them well then it’s going to draw on the teacher’s time and that, y’know, that poses its own problems then for the other children in the class”*

(Teacher 5)

*“There’s so much we have to do, and we’re under pressure to get those done - we’ve plans to keep up with, whole school plans and everything and I just find there’s so much, like you could have 10 more hours in the day”*

(Teacher 2)

*“Class size is a massive issue. It just goes without saying, if you’ve a big class of thirty-odd children and you have somebody with special needs, either that child is going to lose out or the rest of the class are going to, y’know, someone’s losing out, because you can’t get to everything”*

(Teacher 4)

*“With the kids with disability, often the principal will approach the teacher and make sure for the following year that they’re willing to take them on board, yknow that the teacher is eager and they want to do their best for the child, coz other teachers maybe wouldn’t take the work load on”*

(Parent 1)

*“sometimes you’re nearly forcing inclusion, yknow...well I was doing my Dip this year, so I was tryin to nearly, yknow where it wasn’t even natural inclusion, I was really going out of my way, so it was definitely, y’know parts of lessons would suffer as a result ...but like, I don’t want her out of the classroom all of the time, you want her there doin work with the rest of the class, and she wants to be there with everyone doing it all...”*

(Teacher 3)

### **Training and preparation for primary school teachers**

*“I got particular training, a certain type of training, for a classroom for, up to a certain level ... and it takes a lot of time out of the class if you’re trying to deal with children with special needs that are above and beyond what you’ve trained to do. And if your time is taken away from the classroom, y’know, the rest of the class are going to miss out or going to lose out ”*

(Teacher 4)

*“We don’t have the training, to cover all disabilities, and so you’re learning, more or less on the hoof, you’re researching, you’re listening to parents, you’re at meetings, you’re more or less trying to draw information from everywhere”*

(Teacher 5)

*“We had lectures on different types of disabilities, but at no stage were we taught how to teach them. I suppose that’s just something you learn in the schools really”*

(Teacher 6)

*“It’s one thing getting a leaflet or a few handouts, or looking at a power point... it’s completely different in the real world, when you actually get into the classroom like there’s no, I mean nothing can prepare you”*

(Teacher 2)

*“it would appear to me from those that come in on school placement and those that start here having more recently qualified, have a much better understanding and appreciation of what an inclusive classroom should be or could potentially be. And... I would have noticed that more in the last, I’d say, 7 or 8 years. Where em, teachers have an understanding of the ethos behind that integration and are prepared to, or not even prepared to but see it as part of their role. Whereas that may not always be the case, for others...”*

(Principal)

*“[Teachers] can be really anxious about what’s going to happen and, what way somebody is going to be and what mood they’re going to be in that day and, are they going to be able to work. Will they cause trouble for the other kids and is it going to set somebody else off... It can be a very anxious time”*

(Teacher 4)

*“I really felt at sea I have to say, in September, because [child with particular special needs] was coming into class. There’s no guidelines, there’s no... there’s nothing. You’re just, you’re just there and you’ve to figure it out yourself nearly”*

(Teacher 6)

### **Is the primary school curriculum inclusive of all children?**

*“it’s not really inclusive. Em... like, it’s for the mainstream child really. The curriculum is just, and everything, when we have our, any special needs kids we have in the school, we have to adapt the curriculum to suit them. So, the curriculum as it is doesn’t, from my point of view now it doesn’t suit, y’know, the special needs kids. It has to be adapted by us each time”*

(Teacher 4)

*“certain lessons and subjects aren’t very inclusive, whereas other subjects..you can make them...”*

(Teacher 2)

*“It’s not really inclusive, like, all the aims and objectives in the curriculum book are for the mainstream child really. They haven’t supplied us with any alternatives for teaching the children with disabilities or any children with special needs or anything. There’s no other aims and objectives, there’s just one set”*

(Teacher 3)

*“I know every child is not going to fit into one curriculum but there should be some guidelines, a section in the curriculum – anything at all even, to say like, that if you have a child in 3<sup>rd</sup> class and they’ve a learning disability, that they can do, maybe they could make an easier programme even, rather than just going back to 1<sup>st</sup> class or senior infants objectives which doesn’t seem right”*

(Teacher 6)

*“even within a class, if you have a class of children and no special needs in the class, you’re still going to have some pushing on here, some falling behind, some... So, no matter what curriculum you’re going to have, it’s not going to suit everybody anyway”*

(Teacher 4)

### **Government cuts to funding and resources for primary schools.**

*“For the children that are currently enrolled in the special class for autism, there is a capitation which is the yearly grant to run the school, and that is well funded...”*

*...For others [in the mainstream setting], when there are resources called upon, as in a new seat or a weighted cushion or whatever it may be, once the report is there from the professional and is submitted to the department, they’re generally sanctioned”*

(Principal)

*“if we had money it’d be amazing what we could do”* (Teacher 2)

*“We have to make everything for her, there’s nothing coming from the department. Like, we had to make a sensory room and, you could apply for funding but you just wouldn’t get it. So we end up doing all those things ourselves”*

(Teacher 6)

*“Even her mam would tell you like, it’s like hitting your head off a brick wall, like even things like trying to get a table for her, all of those things like even furniture, equipment, it’s just, it’s actually unbelievable”*

(Teacher 6)

*“You’re frustrated, because you’re trying to get something in place and they say oh well she’s suitable for mainstream, and then they say that and they promise this and then they leave it there to us to just deal with basically”*

(Teacher 2)

*“We’re just fortunate that we have someone dedicated to work with us here. But I have been in schools where we had to apply separately and they eventually sanctioned funding through someone independent to come and do the assessment”*

(Principal)

### **Cuts to SNA support for children with special educational needs**

*“We’ve seen a 15% cut in resource teaching levels in the last 3 years, which is a kind of a corner stone for any child with a special need in school. And SNA cover has really, really tightened up”*

(Principal)

*“His sna support can be cut, if the SENO determines that he no longer needs the level of support he has. If that were to happen... I would have to consider [the child’s] placement in the school. If he didn’t have a full-time SNA, he could not be here... I couldn’t sleep at night, because of the worry and concern [for his safety]”*

(Parent 2)

*“It’s definitely more difficult to get FULL access to an SNA, certainly. And, what’s happening now a lot is you have access to an SNA, but it’s shared between a number of children in the school. Or access for toileting or access for eating, y’know, it’s at certain times during the day, and that’s happening here already. The SNAs are assigned maybe to one child but they have to help out in different areas around the school as well”*

(Teacher 5)

*“Unless the care needs are very specific, it’s difficult to get SNA access at all. So, that does pose problems then for the class, for the teacher and for the child”*

(Teacher 5)

*“VERY difficult in junior infants to get them. They want you to not be able to manage and to have the disruptions for the child – it’s CRAZY”*

(Teacher 6)

*“The access is at the discretion of the school. No longer is a child, or parents or guardians told your child now will have full access to an SNA or half day access to an SNA, they’re just told access, and then it’s up to us then to look at staffing levels that are given to us and decide”*

(Principal)

*“SNA hours are being cut all the time, and snas are being split between children. So, if you’re in a classroom and you’ve no sna, and you’re trying to deal with this, it’s... you feel like you don’t have any support. Because you have support within the school, there are plenty to try and help, but they can’t be there all the time either, d’y’know, within the school. Em, it’s getting harder and harder because sna hours are being cut and it’s just.. difficult. And now there’s a new system, I’m not 100% sure of it now but.. if an infant is coming in they can’t be assessed, you have to, the teacher has to see can you cope first... ..And then if the teacher can’t cope they have to go down another route, they have to apply here and apply... It just.... it makes life so much more difficult”*  
(Teacher 4)

### **Vital role of SNAs:**

#### **- SNAs do much more than their official role dictates...**

*“...there’s never been anything but being enabled to be independent and to move on, and sort of, y’know, being pushed when a push was needed... and I put that down to his SNA support, the quality of SNA support he’s had, and the person behind them, that they didn’t just see it as a job”*  
(Parent 2)

*“The particular SNA I had in my room. She is excellent... She nearly has things done before I’d even ask her to do something or think of doing something”* (Teacher 4)

*“They just do so much and they’re so good with them and so good with the kids, and they know them inside out”.*  
(Teacher 2)

*“I mean the primary job of the SNA is to look after their care needs, but in some cases they need to be supported in their academic work as well. And em, without the SNA access it would be really really difficult in a mainstream classroom setting. And the other children would suffer as well, because obviously you’d have to spend more time with that child which means less time for the bulk of the class”*  
(Teacher 5)

*“I’m just lucky I’ve an excellent SNA that went off and learned how to brail”*  
(Teacher 3)

*“Like we try our best where we can, but only for the backup, again the SNA doing the work, the role of the teacher, which isn’t necessarily what she should be doing, but in reality it’s the only way...”*  
(Teacher 1)

### **Consequences of cutting vital SNA support – for everybody**

*“You need that backup. If you didn’t have that support it’d be very difficult”*  
(Teacher 4)

*“For children on the autism spectrum to be full time in the classroom without any SNA is a big challenge. Y’know, because typically their autism can present with sometimes disruptive or challenging behaviour”*  
(Principal)

*“I wouldn’t even like to think of it! I couldn’t manage, like there’s no...like I absolutely couldn’t manage, and it wouldn’t be fair on her either. And it wouldn’t be fair on the other children”*

(Teacher 6)

*“If he didn’t have a full-time SNA, if he didn’t have the level of support he has, he could not be here. He couldn’t. I couldn’t sleep at night... because of the worry and concern”*

(Parent 2)

*“Sure you’re going to have to send them to a special school then. And y’know, once you’re in there, you’re there. They’re not going to take you out and put you into mainstream school. That means the child’s future is completely different doesn’t it?”*

(Parent 5)

*“Well if children with special needs have access to full SNA cover, they’ll definitely make better progress in school. So if their SNA access is cut, they are definitely going to suffer”*

(Teacher 5)

*“Without his SNA? Our choices would be gone .... It would not be feasible to do it [send child to mainstream], it wouldn’t be fair on a class teacher, it wouldn’t be fair on the pupils to become his buddy, his SNA., it’s not, it’s not their job”*

(Parent 2)

*“[Taking away a child’s SNA support] would reduce their access to the curriculum... It would also affect the other children in the classroom, where again because of a lack of support staff the class teacher has to give more time to a particular pupil. So that’s where it would have a, a certain domino effect”*

(Principal)

*“It’s completely unfair, because they told them they can come here, and if they’re telling them well you can bring your child to mainstream school, or you can bring them to special school, but then, when you get there well we’ll probably cut your resources or we’ll cut your SNA... I think they need to be fair to people”*

(Teacher 6)

### **Do parents really have choice all the time??**

**- The voice of the parent versus the system/ professional**

**- Parent’s voice and opinion often over-looked**

*“The CRC do advise you, and you kind of would go with them... So if CRC had of said to me ‘look, mainstream isn’t for her’, then I would’ve been heartbroken but I would have went with them and I would’ve had to send her where she belongs”*

(Parent 3)

*“You also have to think, these people have studied right, but I’ve had 6 years, 24 hours a day. So in the end, the parents actually know way more than the therapists. Whereas the therapists don’t always tend to listen, and don’t always know best”*

(Parent 1)

*“I hate the degrading way that so many therapists can say that [that special schools are better for a child] ... like I was told a thousand times oh but special schools are wonderful - I KNOW they’re wonderful, but at four years of age, they’re not going to teach [my*

*child] what I want her to learn. And I have proved my point a million trillion billion times over”*

(Parent 1)

*“We’re probably seen as the emotion. They look at you almost like ‘there there’. Y’know. Some day you’ll thank us for all we have done...”*

(Parent 4)

*“I think it totally depends on the child, but I think the parents should be listened to. I don’t think that teachers, who THINK they know their children should be the ones who decide where to send them. I don’t think the teachers and the therapists are always right, in their decisions that they make on kids and where they send them. I think the parents definitely have to be listened to. Because I was only lucky with (name?!), because no one else would listen to me”*

(Parent 1)

*“Quite often the review [by the SENO] is done without any contact with me as the parent. In fact, almost always done...”*

*...I don’t think it’s fair that if the hours are cut or support is cut in any way and parents haven’t been consulted or informed before the decision is written”*

(Parent 2)

*“I can honestly say we weren’t listened to... em, how could I put it a better way... we were listened to but they didn’t really hear what we needed”*

(Parent 2)

### **System of ‘box-ticking’ and parents faced with many battles for child’s needs**

*“You’re constantly fighting, all the time, whether it’s school, whether it’s something she needs at home... Now, the only fight I had with school was to get her in there, for the government to actually give the grant...and when she got in there then, the school made it as easy as possible”*

(Parent 3)

*“It’s just down to sheer luck and persistence, We learned that over the years”*

(Parent 4)

*“It’s just boxes, and if you don’t fit in this box – and who does fit in all these boxes? And you just have to fight for everything”*

(Parent 5)

*“It’s the system...the waiting times, the beaurocracy, the paperwork, y’know and if you don’t tick this and if you don’t fit into this, you’re not entitled to it... So I think it’s, the whole system is a tick-box exercise and it doesn’t fit into family life”*

(Parent 4)

*“it’s going to be a fight like, the whole time. Y’know. coz there’s probably be more cuts. And if [my daughter] progresses and she, well...she mightn’t need it in senior infants. But then I know from talking to the school that kids have regressed, over the.. that kids that had snas...and they take, coz they’re being used. So, if she does really well in the 1<sup>st</sup> year, we’ll give her half an sna and will she slip back instead? Don’t want that”*

(Parent 5)

*“There was no problem with him attending, provided the resources would be put in place for him, that he would need a special needs assistant... we were waiting on a SENO to make that decision.... ...That aspect of not having the final decision, or that there was a factor outside of us that could have pulled the rug out from under his opportunity here, that was unsettling. And I just sort of crossed my fingers and felt y’know, when he was born there were several battles with HSE, from services point of view, and I just didn’t want to face a battle for him in school as well”*  
(Parent 2)

*“because we can’t get him into a unit in sec school, he’s now going to what the Department classes a mainstream school, with no special needs specific classroom, or title attached to it, he’ll lose his entitlement for the school transport. So, they’re the kind of things that cause problems”*  
(Parent 4)

*“It’s a social thing. There you go, when you talk about inclusion. It’s a social thing. For us, because [our son] went to school outside the area, we didn’t know anyone really, .. ...d’y’know so, for a family, not just for [the child], for a family, we never felt part of the whole primary school experience, in the same way that we feel part of it down here”*  
(Parent 4)

### **Contradictions to the notion of parental choice**

*“they shouldn’t have brought in inclusion if they weren’t going to support it”*  
(Teacher 6)

*“Back in the day, that [particular school] wouldn’t have been a choice for us, coz it was 6 or 7 miles away, our school you could walk to - so don’t tell me that was a choice for us, d’you know... Look it’s a difficult job they have, but parents, you might say no we choose, but we don’t really. The system dictates what we can do. It really does”*  
(Parent 4)

*“When [child’s name] was coming here, they had to build all the ramps and everything. So if the department had said no you’re not getting funding for the ramps then she couldn’t have come here. So although they said it was parental choice, she couldn’t have come here if there were no ramps”*  
(Teacher 6)

*“So, to go to mainstream school, she had to go to mainstream pre-school, but my sister had to go with her, because you’re not entitled to an SNA for playschool... so only really for my sister, she wouldn’t have been able to go to mainstream school”*  
(Parent 3)

*“The children are on [an autism] spectrum, so they could be from nought to 100 in range of severity, so all their needs are different. They could be living somewhere that have no school near them or they could have loads of schools on their doorstep that still wont take them..”*  
(Parent 4)

*“we’re entitled to choose the school for [our son], but the schools that we wanted him to go to for secondary to match what he’s always had all along, is not available to us”*  
(Parent 4)

## **Appendix E**

### **Letter to teachers**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am currently conducting a research study, under supervision, in order to complete my Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies at Dublin Institute of Technology, Mountjoy Square, Dublin. The topic of my dissertation concerns children with intellectual disabilities and additional educational needs, and their integration and inclusion into mainstream education.

It is envisaged that the findings of the study will be of interest and benefit to educators who are required to provide inclusive education in their classroom, and to parents in deciding on their child's education, particularly for those whose children need additional aid and supports.

I would very much value your opinion, as a professional working in this area, in order to successfully investigate the rewards and challenges involved in inclusive education. I intend to facilitate a focus group interview (of approximately six participants), whereby I invite primary school teachers to share their views and experiences in a comfortable and safe environment. All information collected will be treated confidentially and no persons involved will be identifiable. The information gathered from the focus group will then be used as a guide for further investigation, as I intend to conduct individual interviews with both educators and parents of children with intellectual disabilities currently in mainstream education settings.

Please find enclosed an information sheet for your attention. Any further queries regarding the research topic or details of what the interview may entail will be answered openly and honestly and without delay. A consent form is also enclosed, should you wish to accept this invitation to participate in the study.

Kind regards,

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Gail Ferguson.

**Appendix F**  
**Letter to school principal**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am currently conducting a research study, under supervision, in order to complete my Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies at Dublin Institute of Technology, Mountjoy Square, Dublin. The topic of my dissertation concerns children with intellectual disabilities and additional educational needs, and their integration and inclusion into mainstream education.

It is envisaged that the findings of the study will be of interest and benefit to educators who are required to provide inclusive education, and to parents in deciding on their child's educational future, particularly for those whose children need additional aid and supports.

I would very much value your opinion, in order to successfully investigate the rewards and challenges involved in integrated education. As a professional working in this area, and particularly as principal of a primary school setting which incorporates a special education unit, your knowledge and insight would be greatly appreciated and very beneficial to my study. I intend to conduct individual interviews with both educators and parents of children with intellectual disabilities currently in mainstream education settings. All information collected will be treated confidentially and no persons involved, or indeed the school, will be identifiable.

Please find enclosed an information sheet for your attention. Any further queries regarding the research topic or details of what the interview may entail will be answered openly and honestly and without delay. A consent form is also enclosed, should you wish to accept this invitation to participate in the study.

Kind regards,

---

Gail Ferguson.

## **Appendix G**

### **Letter to parents**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am currently conducting a research study, under supervision, in order to complete my Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies at Dublin Institute of Technology, Mountjoy Square, Dublin. The topic of my dissertation concerns children with intellectual disabilities and additional educational needs, and their integration and inclusion into mainstream education.

It is envisaged that the findings of the study will be of interest and benefit to educators who are required to provide inclusive education in their classroom, and to parents in deciding on their child's education, particularly for those whose children need additional aid and supports.

In order to successfully investigate the rewards and challenges involved in an integrated education setting, I am conducting individual interviews with both teachers and parents of children with additional or special educational needs. I would very much value your opinion and appreciate if you would share your views and experiences of your child's primary school education. All information collected will be treated confidentially and no persons involved will be identifiable.

Please find enclosed an information sheet for your attention. Any further queries regarding the research topic or details of what the interview may entail will be answered openly and honestly and without delay. A consent form is also enclosed, should you wish to accept this invitation to participate in the study.

Kind regards,

---

Gail Ferguson.

## Appendix H

### Information for Participants

**Name of researcher:**

**Contact details:**

**Name of research supervisor:**

**Contact details for supervisor:**

\* \* \* \* \*

**Working title of dissertation:**

Including children with intellectual disabilities in mainstream education: challenges and considerations that arise for parents and primary school teachers.

**Aims of this study:**

This study aims to explore the concept of inclusive education, by paying particular attention to attitudes, experiences and perspectives of teachers and parents/guardians of children with intellectual disabilities. Uncovering whether the reality of inclusive classrooms does in fact correspond with policy is a principal objective of this research. As is the issue of quality educational provision for pupils – does it meet the needs of the child with additional needs; are the needs of all children in the class being met; is there less time for individual attention for pupils.

Ultimately, both the advantages and the obstacles that exist will be identified and explored, with a view to providing an informative platform for parents who may be unsure whether or not mainstream school is the correct choice for their child, and indeed for teachers who are required to provide inclusive education in their classrooms.

### **Focus Group and Individual Interviews:**

In order to gain an honest and deep understanding of the reality of inclusive education, it is essential to obtain personal insight. The focus group will be the starting point of investigation, for the purpose of this study, into the attitudes and experiences of teachers regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in the classroom. It is anticipated that issues will arise from this group process which will in turn guide the focus of the research, particularly relating to key themes to include when interviewing participants individually.

Following the focus group interview, I intend to carry out individual interviews with three primary school teachers in order to further investigate the reality, from a teacher's perspective, of providing inclusive education for all children in mainstream classrooms. I also hope to interview (approximately) three individual parents in order to gain insight and understanding into the lives of children with special educational needs and their families. I believe it is of valuable importance to obtain the perspectives of both teachers and parents in order to investigate the concept of inclusive education for children, and identify the positives and the challenges that it presents

- This study will conform to all research ethical guidelines as set out by Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). I have already received ethical approval for this research from the DIT Research Ethics Committee (proof of which can be obtained from above named supervisor).
- Both group and individual interviews are expected to last approximately thirty to forty minutes, and will take place in a location that is private and comfortable for participants. That may be on school premises or in a more informal environment if preferred.
- Interviews will be voice recorded. Recordings will then be transcribed for subsequent data analysis. Permission to record conversations will be sought from participants.
- Respect is given to participant's rights to anonymity, confidentiality and privacy. The researcher will communicate openly and honestly with all

participants in this study, and all information – written and recorded – will be stored securely, with access available only to the researcher. Names will be changed and no information will be presented which would identify any participating individuals.

- Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Thus participants are entitled to withdraw from this study at any time, without any prejudice or negative consequences.

Data from interviews will be collated by the researcher and thematically analysed. A discussion of this data will then be presented in line with a literature review. It is envisaged that the findings produced for this study will be of interest and benefit to educators and that it may be of support to parents, as deciding on a child's education is an important issue for all families, but particularly for those whose children need additional aid and supports.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Gail Ferguson.

# Appendix I

## Consent Form

**Researchers name:**

**Faculty/ School/ Department:**

**Title of Study:**

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**To be completed by the interviewee:**

Have you been fully informed/ read the information sheet about this study? YES/NO

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? YES/NO

Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? YES/NO

Have you received enough information about this study, and any associated health and safety implications if applicable? YES/NO

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study?

- At any time
- Without giving a reason for withdrawing
- Without affecting your future relationship with the Institute YES/NO

Do you agree to take part in this study, the results of which are likely to be published? YES/NO

Have you been informed that this consent form shall be kept in the confidence of the researcher? YES/NO

---

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name in block letters:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Researcher:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

