

‘Are pupils with disabilities being adequately supported in Gaeltacht primary schools: the professionals’ perspective?’

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Disclaimer

I declare that this research dissertation and the material within, is entirely the work of the author. Where the work of others has been used it has been fully acknowledged within the text and in the form of referencing.

Signature

Date 31 July 2020

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I would like to thank my research supervisor Úna Carty for her support, time, guidance and encouragement. It was very much appreciated.

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Finally, I would like to thank my children for their understanding, patience, cups of tea, hugs and support from the beginning.

Abstract

This study researched the adequacy of supports available to pupils with disabilities in Gaeltacht schools, from the perspectives of professionals working with them daily, SNAs, teachers and principals. Through a critical analysis of literature in the research area, the researcher hoped to gain more information and address the following questions:

- What are the social, emotional and academic benefits and challenges of inclusion in mainstream primary education and for pupils with disabilities?
- To identify what challenges students with disabilities, encounter when attending a mainstream school.
- To find out what impact and affect providing an inclusive education to students with disabilities has on the school and other students in the class.
- To examine and analyse benefits and challenges of providing an inclusive education system.
- To gain an insight into the challenges teachers and SNAs encounter when teaching children with disabilities in a mainstream primary Gaeltacht schools.

The researcher engaged in a qualitative research method using interview questionnaires. This approach enabled the researcher to gather data and gain a better insight into the views and perceptions of professionals' working with pupils with disabilities operating through the medium of the Irish language. There were social, emotional and academic benefits identified as a result of children being integrated and educated together in an inclusive learning environment. This concurs with the researcher's own personal experiences from attending a mainstream Gaeltacht school with a special class attached over thirty years ago.

There were however many shortcomings identified through the research mainly as a result of inadequacy's at a macro level in government ranging from lack of psychological assessments leading to a lack in supports being allocated to schools for pupils with disabilities. Other areas identified were long delays for speech and language and audiology services. There were many recommendations suggested in the research, from additional supports for pupils with disabilities who are struggling academically being at the forefront and the need for more SNAs and teaching assistants in schools to enable greater inclusion for all.

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List of Abbreviations/Acronyms

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder
AFK	Acting for Kids Charity
AS	Asperger Syndrome
ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
BERA	British Educational Research Association
DEIS	Delivering Education of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Science
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Education Needs
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HSE	Health Services Executive
ICT	Information Communications Technology
IEP	Individualised Educational Plan
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
IPPN	Irish National Principals Network
LST	Learning Support Teacher
LPD	Language Processing Disorder
LYIT	Letterkenny Institute of Technology
NBSS	National Behaviour Support Service
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service

NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NPF	National Principals Forum
REC	Research Ethics Committee
RT	Resource Teacher(s)
SEN	Special Education Needs
SEN(C)O	Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator
SERC	Special Educational Review Committee
SESS	Special Education Support Services
SET	Special Education Teacher
SNAs	Special Needs Assistants
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
TEACCH	Treatment & Education of Autistic & Communication Handicapped Children
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VTS	Visiting Teacher Service
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter One - Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study aims to explore if pupils with disabilities are being adequately supported in Gaeltacht primary schools from the perspectives of the professionals working with them daily. The focal point for this study has emerged from the researcher's personal experiences, knowledge and profession over time. The principal aim and motivation behind this study is to examine the views of school principals, teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) and outline the educational challenges and benefits that they perceive pupils with disabilities experience in Gaeltacht schools.

From the 1960s to mid-1980s in Ireland it was acknowledged that there was a need to educate children with disabilities (Flood, 2013, p. 6) It was not until the mid-1980's and early 1990's that the Irish State was forced to provide education for children with special educational needs. Up to the late 1990s, the State denied certain children with intellectual disabilities access to mainstream education stating that they were "uneducable" (Harris, 2017). The decision to undergo this research topic is mainly due to the increase in numbers of pupils with disabilities and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) attending mainstream schools in recent years.

A recent publication from the National Principals Forum (NPF, 2019, p. 16) stated that in a survey carried out on over nine hundred primary school principals, the findings indicated that they felt that there is an *'inclusion illusion'* currently taking place in primary schools in Ireland. In this dissertation, the opinions of professionals will be sought concerning whether pupils with disabilities are being adequately supported in Gaeltacht primary schools and comparisons made with literature. There is a limited amount of specific literature available or studies previously carried out concerning the education of pupils with disabilities attending Gaeltacht schools in Ireland. There were four pre-existing studies to date known to the researcher regarding providing for Special Educational Needs (SEN) in bilingual education and Irish medium education (IME) schools (Andrews, 2019; Barrett, 2016; Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Nic Gabhann, 2008).

1.2 Background to the investigation

The researcher divided the research question into three primary sections which are further broken down in subsections and correlate with the overall aim of this study, *see figure 1.2.1(a)*. The reasoning behind this is to provide the reader with an overview of the entire investigation in a logical and coherent sequence.



Figure 1.2.1(a) - Overview of the investigation

According to Lindsay (2007), the main policy objective of many countries is to guarantee that all children, no matter what their abilities, have an entitlement to access a proper education. The researcher believes that child should have an entitlement to feel supported and included in their local community school and gain a quality education regardless of their individual needs, this belief is also supported by the Salamanca statement (1994), which states that:

'A child with a disability should attend the neighbourhood school that would be attended if the child did not have a disability.'

(UNESCO, 1994)

In a Gaeltacht school, Irish is the primary language of instruction. Pupils are not spoken to or introduced to English or other languages until they enter first class. From first-class upward English is only used when studying the English language as part of the subject area in the curriculum. It is important to note that the majority, ninety per cent of children that attend Gaeltacht schools come from English-speaking homes (Harris et al., 2006; Parsons and Lyddy, 2009). The motivation to investigate this area stemmed from the researcher's personal experiences as a result of receiving primary education in a traditional Gaeltacht heritage-language school which had a special needs class attached. The primary school that the researcher attended as a child had already begun integrating children with disabilities into a mainstream learning environment over thirty years ago.

1.3 Aim of research

The principal aim of this study is to examine from the professionals' perspective if the social, emotional and educational needs of pupils with disabilities are adequately supported in Gaeltacht primary schools. Through the use of qualitative research, the author hopes to gain an insight into the perspectives of professionals on their experiences. The views of principals, teachers and SNAs at four Gaeltacht primary schools will be investigated. An analysis will be carried on the benefits and challenges, the professionals perceive, pupils with disabilities encounter in Gaeltacht schools. This research should help parents and guardians of children with disabilities, by providing information regarding the benefits and challenges of receiving an Irish-medium education. Research results will address any concerns of whether there are adequate supports available for pupils with disabilities in Gaeltacht mainstream schools. It is also hoped that this research will help parents and guardians when deciding which type of educational pathway would best suit their child's learning needs before they decide to travel a considerable distance each day to an English-medium primary school. This study could be of benefit to professionals interested in creating and providing an inclusive educational environment through immersion education.

1.4 Research site

This study involves four different research sites, *see table 1.4.1(a)* and explores the perspectives of principals, teachers and SNAs from four rural primary Gaeltacht schools

included in the DEIS programme for pupils from disadvantaged communities and have been identified by the Department of Education (DES) and Government of Ireland as having pupils at risk of educational disadvantage. All schools in this study engaged with multi-class teaching in classrooms. It is important to note that three of the schools involved in this study are operating out of buildings which were built over forty-five years ago. The research was carried out at each of the schools in which the research participants were employed before the Covid-19 restrictions, and via telephone and email after restrictions were put in place. School names have been omitted for anonymity.

Research Sites			
<p><u>School 1</u> Medium rural DEIS school This school has a sensory room, is in the Gaeltacht school recognition scheme 1 teaching principal, 5 teachers, 2 SNAs - 8 female staff Current enrolment of 102 pupils</p>	<p><u>School 2</u> Small rural DEIS school This school is in the Gaeltacht school recognition scheme 1 teaching principal, 1 full-time class teacher, 1 part-time class teacher and 2 SNAs – 1 male and 3 female staff Current enrolment of 44 pupil</p>	<p><u>School 3</u> Small rural DEIS school This school has an autism unit attached, is a Gaeltacht school 1 teaching principal, 4 full-time teachers, 1 part-time teacher and 7 SNAs – 3 males and 4 female staff Current enrolment of 82 pupils</p>	<p><u>School 4</u> Large rural DEIS school This school has recently joined the Gaeltacht school recognition scheme 1 teaching principal, 7 class teachers and 3 support teachers, 5 SNAs – 3 males and 8 female staff Current enrolment of 179 pupils</p>

Table 1.4.1(a) – Research sites

1.5 Conclusion

In conclusion this chapter provided an explanation to the research choice outlining relevant literature and personal experiences which influenced the researcher to want to investigate this area further. A background to the investigation was provided which maps out the structure for the upcoming chapters. The following chapter will review the literature studied and make connections to the research question.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the literature reviewed for this study will be examined and discussed. The literature review will involve an inductive reasoning approach, evaluating research in the area of inclusion and the adequacy of support for pupils with disabilities attending Gaeltacht schools. This will be examined concerning Gaeltacht schools and the history of how inclusion for primary school pupils with disabilities evolved and the various legislations enacted to achieve this. Definitions of the terms disability and inclusion will be presented. A brief outline will be given of a recent study by the NPF where the views of over nine hundred primary school principals were sought on inclusion. The Irish language aspect will also be discussed by examining prior studies highlighting the benefits and challenges of immersion education in a bilingual context in pupils' SEN. Literature about benefits and challenges currently impacting pupils with disabilities from accessing an inclusive education will also be highlighted.

2.2 Theory, policies and practices

2.2.1 Theories, history and legislation of inclusive education

In theory, inclusive education involves removing barriers to learning. Piaget (1972) believed that children develop intellectually through socialisation. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Russian psychologist well-known for his sociocultural theory (1978) and constructivist views of inclusion and learning. Sociocultural theory plays a critical role in the education of children with disabilities in Gaeltacht schools, through social and cultural interactions, collaborative learning, guided learning and positive reinforcement.

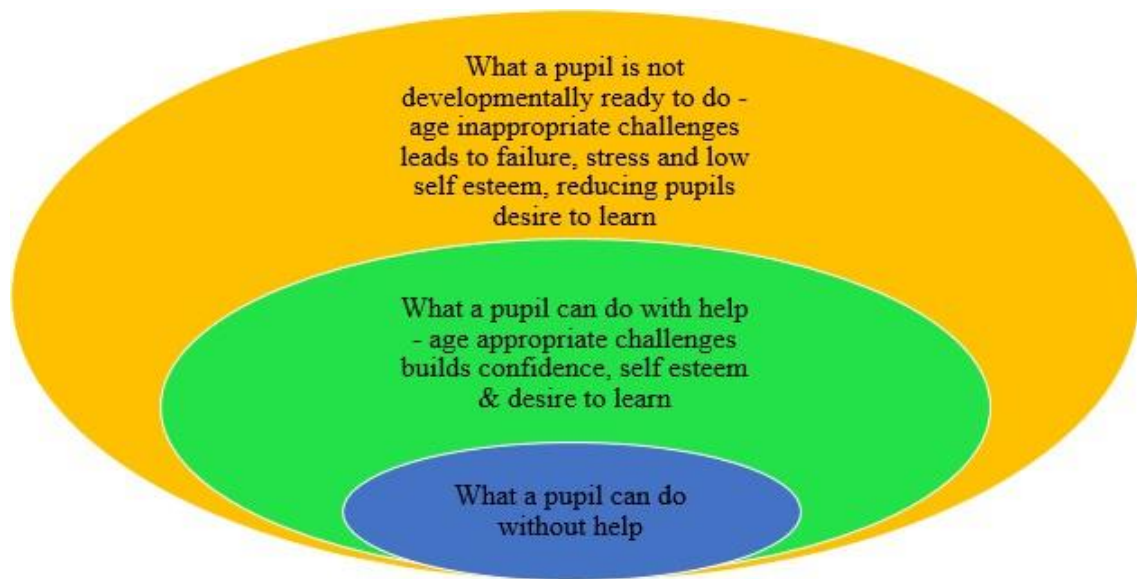


Figure 2.2.1(a) – Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Ciciora L. 2012)

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) provided the basis of where learning and development views and assessment of needs in an educational context originally derived from. Vygotsky (1978) foresaw a practice-orientated model of education for children with disabilities. His social constructivist epistemology provided a basis to develop a vision for future models of special education, of inclusion based on positive differentiation (Gindis, 2003).

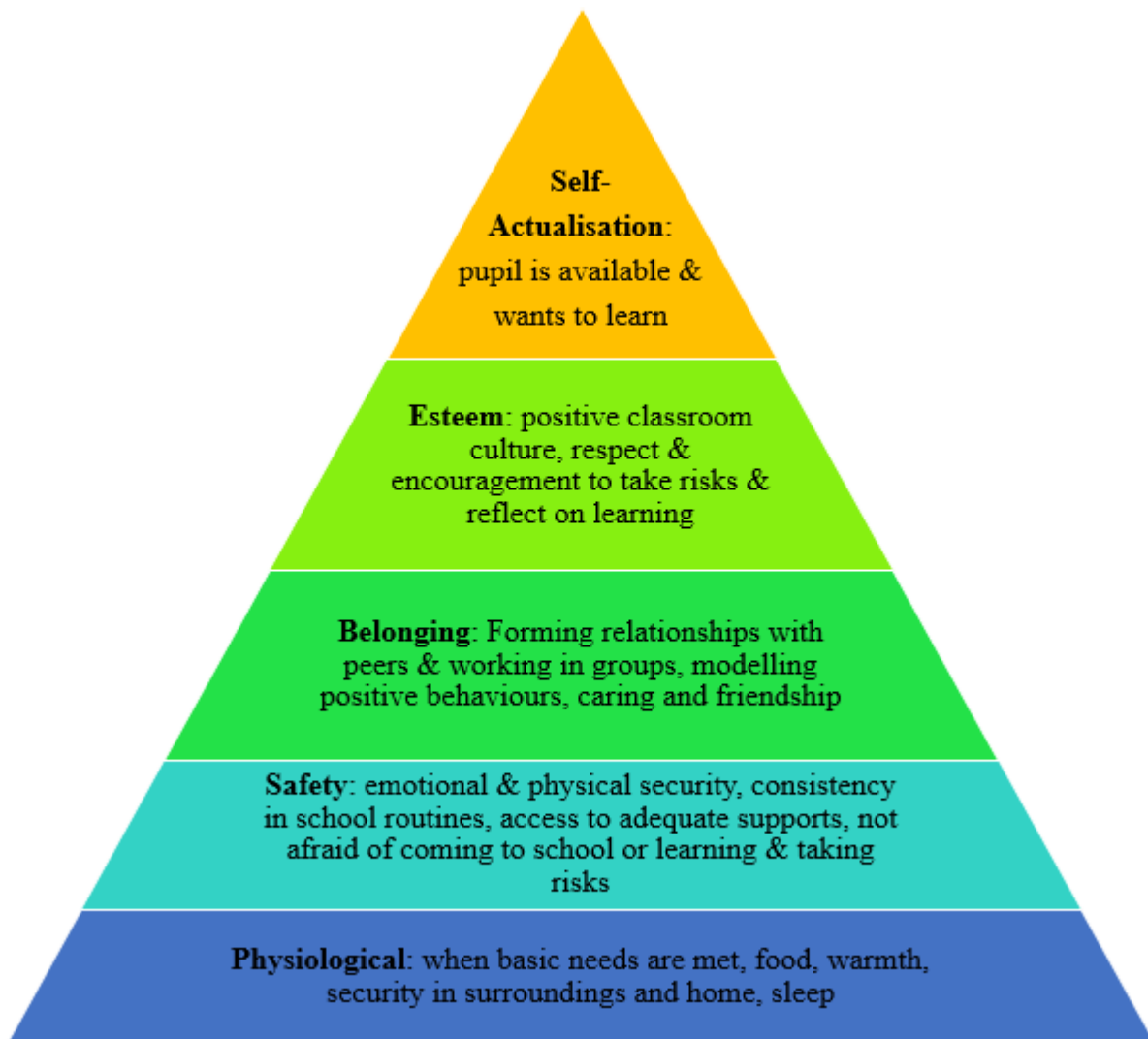


Figure 2.2.1(b) – Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1954) concerning education

In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the needs of children are arranged on different levels highlighting how all children have basic needs and that this basic level of needs must be achieved for learning to occur and enable children to move onto the next levels of needs (Lutz 2016; McLeod 2007). The more needs that are achieved, the more pupils learn.

In the past, pupils with disabilities were judged by their disability and impairment instead of their strengths and abilities (Swaine 2011). Over the past three decades, there has been a major shift in an educational context in the Irish education system (*Appendix A*). Until the early 1990s, the Catholic Church in Ireland was primarily responsible for the education of all children in the Irish State. However, since the introduction of the Education Act 1998 the publication of the Ferns Report (O’Donnell, 2005), religious institutions began reducing their

level of control, due to an increase in State intervention and pressure from parents and teachers alike (Flood 2013; Raftery 2002). The educational landscape has changed from segregation to integration of pupils with disabilities in schools. This led to the creation of Government legislation on best practice for pupils with disabilities ensuring that they have the same rights to an education as their peers without disabilities (Cameron 2014).

In 1991 the then Minister for Education, Mary O'Rourke set up the Special Education Review Committee (SERC). SERC was then responsible for reporting and making recommendations with regard to four main areas involving the provision of education for children with special educational needs:

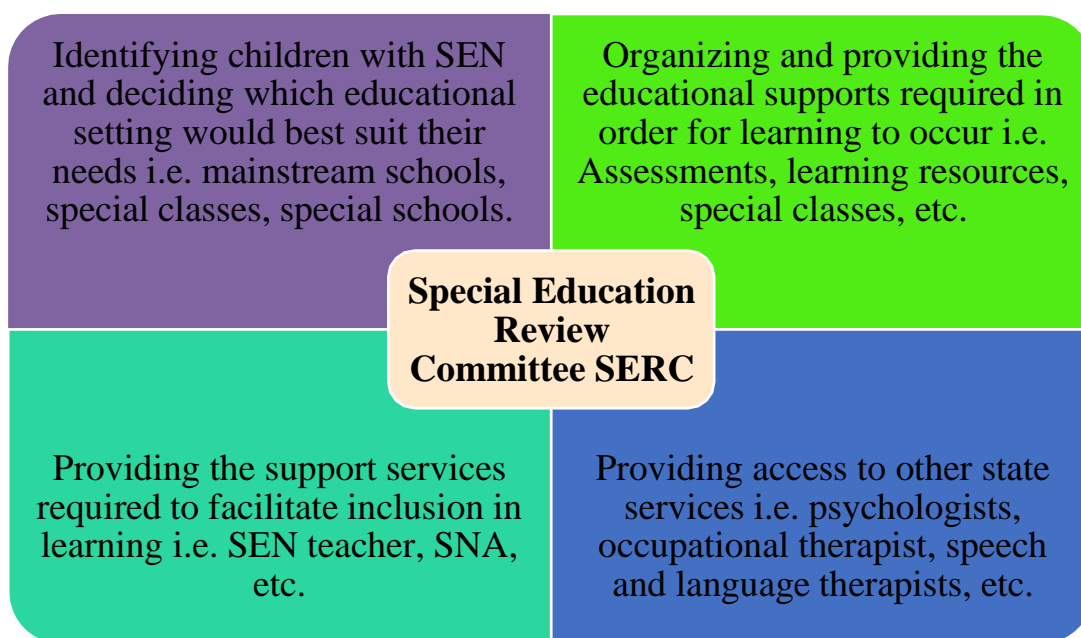


Table 2.2.1(c) – SERC (1991) area for the provision of education for children with SEN

2.2.2 Principles and policies of an inclusive educational system

An “*inclusive educational system*” is defined as a system which includes a broad diversity of pupils and which transforms its educational teaching styles and practices to create a student-centred learning environment (Pijl et al, 1997). The 1998 Education Act states that it is the responsibility of the DES to ensure that all Irish residents are entitled to support services and quality education in line with their educational abilities and needs. In recent years’ emphasis has been put on providing all students with disabilities access to inclusive education through

legislation, to ensure that all schools are promoting an inclusive educational environment. The DES promotes maximum integration and makes provision for children with disabilities and SEN through educational supports which are provided depending on assessed needs in education. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 provides,

‘that people with special educational needs shall have the same right to avail of, and benefit from, appropriate education as do their peers who do not have such needs’.

For children with disabilities that do attend mainstream school, there is help provided for SEN such as learning support, resources teachers and SNAs. The level of support given is dependent on professional opinion and assessment of the pupils’ level of need i.e. decided by clinical psychologist, occupational therapist, etc.

‘States shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels so that persons with disabilities receive the support required within the general education system to facilitate their effective education.’ United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006).

According to Sebba (1996), inclusion is a process whereby educational settings treat all students equally as individuals. This was further underpinned with the EPSEN Act in 2004 which provides for the educational rights of pupils with disabilities and led to the establishment of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). The NCSE (2011) state that various legislations such as the Education Act and the EPSEN Act advise that children with disabilities should be educated in an inclusive educational setting unless it is contrary to the needs of the child with the disability or with other children that the child with the disability would be educated (Irish Government, 2004). The NCSE have taken over services previously provided by the Special Education Support Service (SESS), the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) and the Visiting Teacher Service (VTS) *“to improve the delivery of Education Services to persons with special educational needs.” (Sess.ie)*

2.2.3 Definitions of disability from an educational context

In the EPSEN Act, 2004 disability is defined as:

‘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.’

It is important to state that not all pupils with disabilities require additional support at school. According to the NCSE (2014), ‘a child with a disability’ includes children with intellectual disabilities and/or learning disabilities in addition to other health impairments.

The NCSE categorises disabilities as follows:

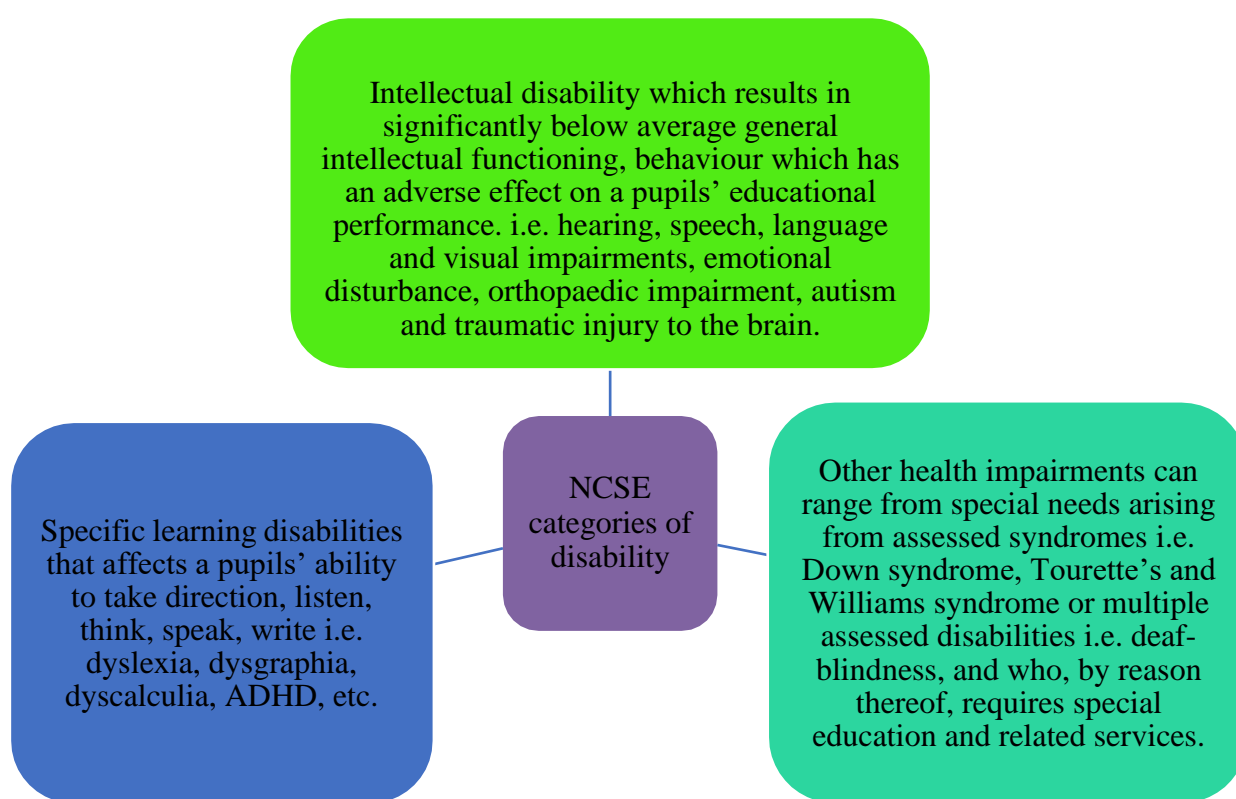


Figure 2.2.3(a) – NCSE (2014) categories of disability in education

There is a social model for disability as defined by the Acting for Kids Charity (AFK), they believe that *“disability is caused by the way society is organised, not the individual's impairment.”* The researcher feels that the difference between the medical and social model of disability and the challenges faced from a teaching and learning context is captured explicitly in the following picture.

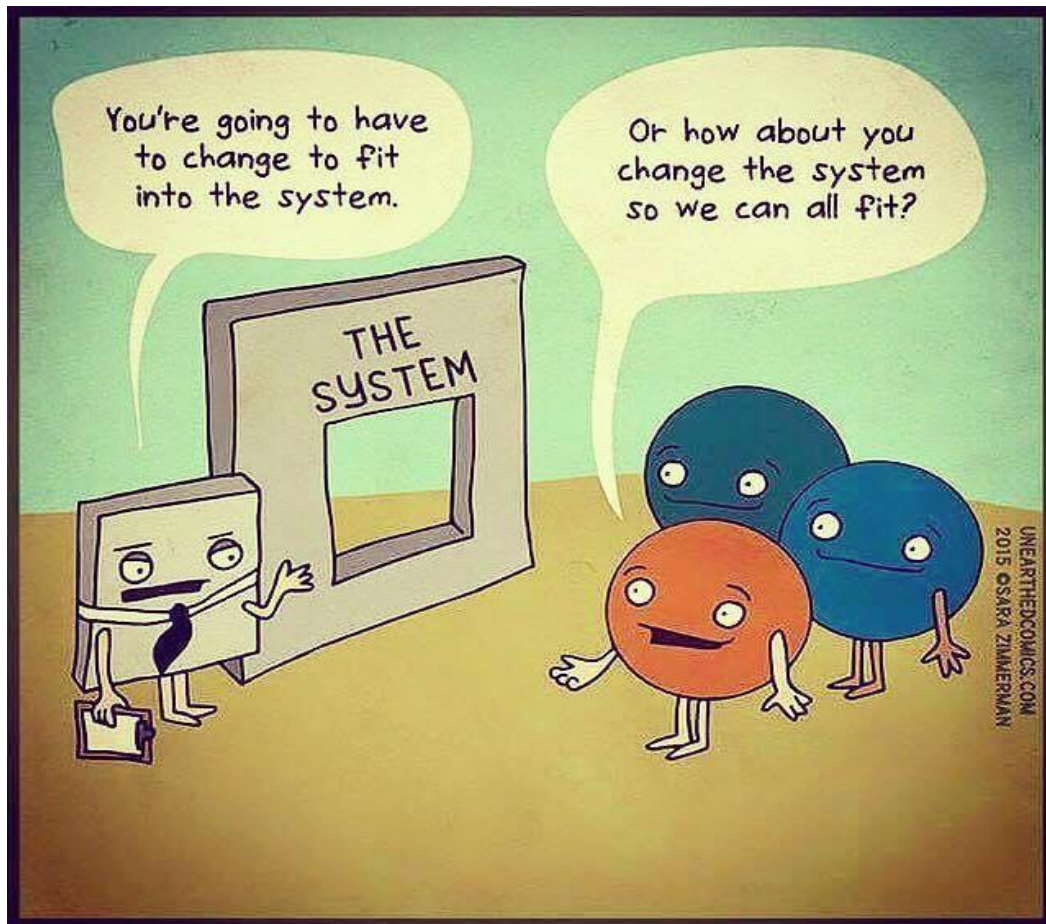


Figure 2.2.4.(b) – Medical v's Social Disability (Zimmermann 2015)

The medical model identifies the child as the problem and requires them to change, where the social model accepts that the school needs to adapt to meet the needs of all children. The researcher concurs with (Mittler, 2000, p. vii), “*inclusion is not about placing children in mainstream schools. It is about changing schools to make them more responsive to the needs of all children.*”

2.3 Benefits and challenges of inclusion for all

2.3.1 Supports in place for schools with children with disabilities

Research carried out by Gilmour (2018) shows the growing prevalence of inclusion in mainstream schools over the past decade, highlighting the fact that at the time of this study more than sixty per cent of all pupils with disabilities spent over eighty per cent of their school day in mainstream classes, alongside their peers without disabilities. An outline of the supports that are currently in place to promote inclusion, see Figure 2.3.1(a).

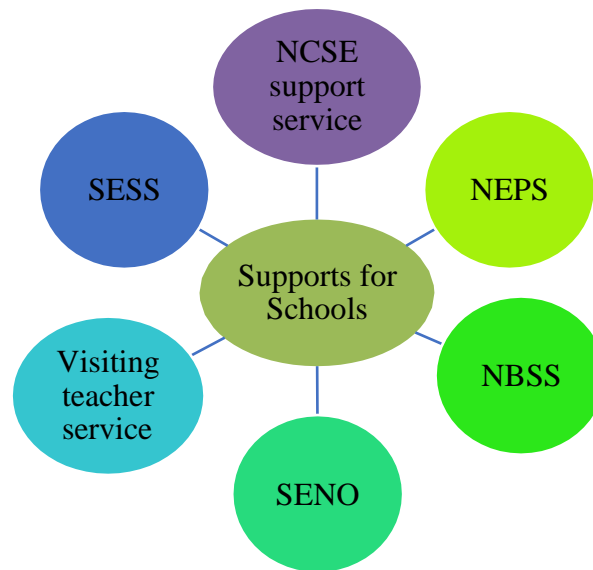


Figure 2.3.1(a) – Support currently in place for primary schools

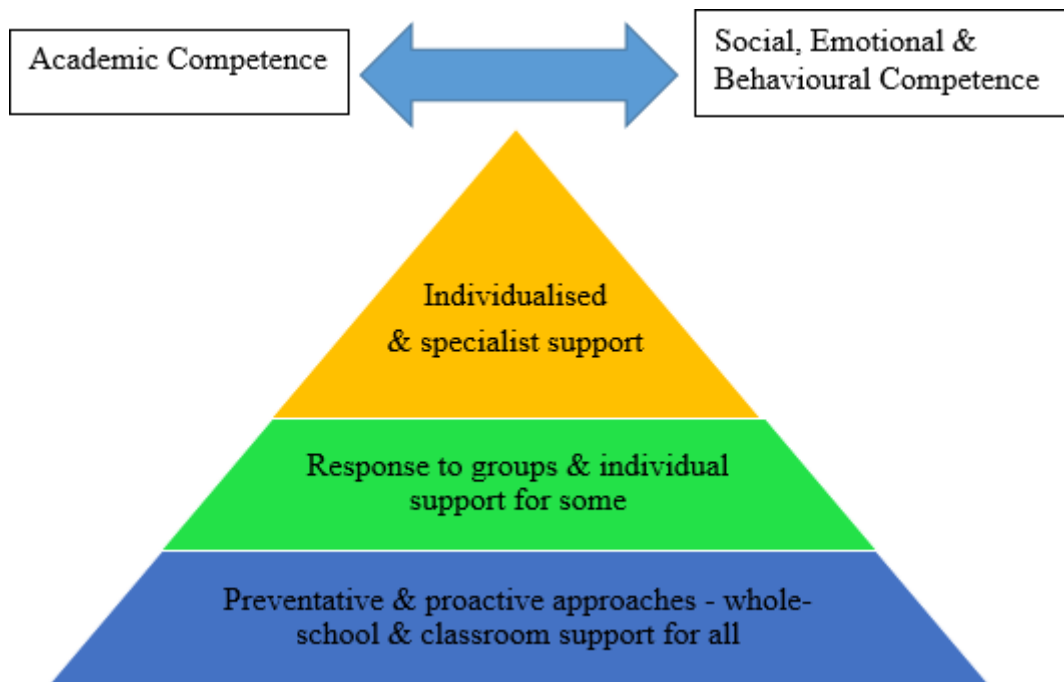


Figure 2.3.1(b) – Inclusion in Primary School Continuum of Support Structure NCSE (2011)

There are three stages to the support mechanisms available to schools for pupils with disabilities i.e. classroom supports, school supports and school plus supports (*Appendix B*). The NCSE (2017) established a new model which allocates special education teaching (SET) support in mainstream schools based on a number of factors as follows:

It is based on school size, the number of pupils with disabilities/SEN and the social context of the school i.e. DEIS, etc.

Standardised test results, supports are allocated based on a child's identified needs i.e. learning, social, emotional and behavioural etc.

Schools need to use the Continuum of Support framework (*Appendix B*) so that children with the most needs get the most support i.e. SNA, resource teaching, special education teaching, small group teaching, or one to one support teaching.

Levels of support vary depending on the child's individual needs. A diagnosis is no longer required in order to get extra help at school as children with the similar diagnosis might have different needs requiring different supports.

Table 2.3.1(c) – Factors influencing SET support in schools (NCSE, 2017)

2.3.2 Benefits and challenges of inclusion

Studies carried out on the effect of inclusion on pupils with disabilities in mainstream classes, have shown that inclusion has a positive effect on pupils overall (Maras and Brown, 2000; Kalambouka et al, 2007). It has been found that pupils who are exposed to inclusion in mainstream education have a greater awareness and acceptance of personal differences (Staub and Peck, 1994). In contrast to the positive constructive outcomes described, recent studies carried out by (Gottfried and Harven 2015; Gottfried et al. 2016) have found that there are also direct negative affects of inclusion on pupils without disabilities being educated in the same classroom as pupils with emotional and behavioural disabilities. Findings of the study highlighted that teachers have seen a rise in pupils without disabilities emulating disruptive behaviours and acting aggressively in reaction to the actions of some pupils with specific learning disabilities i.e. if a child gets hit, they hit back. Research by Dyson et al, (2004) also highlighted that on average pupils being educated in inclusive settings achieved lower assessment results than children attending non-inclusive settings.

2.3.3 Current barriers to providing an inclusive education

Current challenges that exist can be linked to the shortage of places in schools for children with SEN and is the provision of special needs places in mainstream primary schools. Forcing McHugh (2019) to invoke legal powers to direct South Dublin schools to open eighty-two additional school places in the coming year (Donnelly, 2019). John Boyle,

Chairperson of the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO, 2019), highlighted the issues that exist stating that unless schools are given the adequate resources, they will not be able to make the necessary provisions to create suitable inclusive educational environments for pupils due to lack of staffing, physical space, professional training of staff and shortage of services i.e. psychologist, therapists, etc.

There is a lack of research providing evidence as to the effectiveness of inclusive practices for pupils with disabilities which has led to a major debate on whether “*the one size fits all*” approach concerning traditional education for children with disabilities is working (Hornby 1999; 2003). Besides, it is still unknown to what extent children with disabilities in mainstream classes are being tested, in “*a sink or swim approach*” to achieve an inclusive education system (NCSE 2011). Universal design for learning (UDL) was first identified by Mace (1998) and is a relatively new approach to inclusive learning environments, which involves removing barriers to inclusion similar to the social model for a disability as described in *Figure 2.2.3(b)*. “*Universal design is not just about access for some, but it is about usability and inclusion for all.*” (Sanford, 2012, p. xiii)

In this current study, the researcher aims to identify if UDL approaches are being implemented and facilitated in Gaeltacht primary schools and the extent that teaching and learning approaches are being adapted and differentiated to cater to the needs of all pupils. A study carried out on over nine hundred principals by the NPF (2019, p.6) on special education provision in mainstream primary schools in Ireland stated that over ninety percent of principals (that’s one in every four schools in Ireland) believed that supports received for children from the NCSE was inadequate thus creating an “*inclusion illusion*”. The findings of this study included:

There has been cuts to supports for children with additional learning needs in 90% of the schools surveyed, yet the number of pupils in need of special education has risen.

In three out of four schools, the SEN teacher or resource teacher has regularly had to cover staff absences due to the shortage of substitute teachers available.

Just over half of principals have reported seeing an increase in physical aggression in school children in recent years.

64% of the principals admitting that they had no option but to physical restrain a child from doing harm to themselves or others.

Table 2.3.3(a) – Inclusion Illusion report findings (Clifford, 2019)

2.4 Immersion education and bilingualism

2.4.1 Gaeltacht immersion education

Gaeltacht education involves the provision of Irish medium education (IME) for pupils from a ‘linguistic minority’ in the native language (COGG, 2015). Gaeltacht schools operate through the use of the new primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2015) (Appendix C) meaning that the Irish language is the primary language of instruction in schools. This is as a result of the decline in native Irish language speakers as it is now considered a minority language. It is hoped that the immersion education programme will create a revival of the Irish language in rural areas. In Gaeltacht IME school’s pupils are totally immersed in the Irish language for the first two years of schooling and are not introduced to the English language curriculum until pupils are in first class. Therefore, pupils in Gaeltacht schools become bilingual in the Irish and English languages. Depending on which language is considered the majority language (*Níc Cionnaith, 2008, p.62*) it’s referred to as ‘additive’ bilingualism if English is the first language and ‘subtractive’ bilingualism if Irish is the first language (COGG, 2015; Baker and Jones, 1998).

2.4.2 Bilingual education

There is a vast amount of studies highlighting the advantages of bilingualism (Barac et al., 2017; Hamers, 2000; Nicoladis, 2016). Children with learning difficulties, cognitive problems and language problems can benefit positively from a bilingual learning

environment providing schools provide adequate support to do so (Bialystok 2017). Bialystok (2017) advises that for decades there has been worldwide debate regarding the effect that bilingualism has on cognitive development. Canadian studies carried out by Bialystok (2003, 2005, 2012) involving second language acquisition (e.g. English and French), linguistic abilities and phonological awareness highlight educational benefits that bilingual children have over monolingual children. In recent years there has been a great emphasis on learning phonics and it has been seen as an effective and successful way to learn languages for most children with language learning disabilities and language processing difficulties (Schwartz and Sparks, 2019). Edwards (2010) states, that immersion education has been identified as being the most successful method in the provision of bilingual education. To enable a conclusion to be drawn from these previous studies the researcher aims to examine the experiences and perceptions of the interview participants regarding the impact of the Irish language on pupils with disabilities concerning second language acquisition and bilingualism. According to Hakuta (1986) this, in turn, has created concern amongst parents/guardians, creating the perception that second language acquisition and bilingualism could confuse children and impede their normal cognitive ability to succeed in education.

2. 5 Conclusion

This section provided a synopsis of relevant literature in the area of inclusive education and mainstreaming children with disabilities. Various studies in literature support the movement in mainstream schools toward inclusive education in line with relevant Government legislation and policies. An increase in awareness of individual rights and equality with or without disabilities is at the forefront of all educational policies in schools. Valuable knowledge and information from credited researchers have given the author the basis for this study. The literature also presented some barriers to inclusivity in mainstream educational settings from lack of spaces available, to challenges derived from the literature regarding the negative aspects of inclusion and challenging behaviours.

There is a vast amount of studies and literature carried out on inclusion and education globally, yet there is a very limited amount of studies carried out in an Irish context concerning primary Gaeltacht immersion education and inclusion of children with disabilities. Despite a plethora of research about ASD, it remains unknown why the incidence

rate of autism spectrum disorders continues to increase year on year (Lui et al., 2010). It could be as a result of increased public awareness, changes in methods used for diagnosis or social acceptance surrounding the stigma attached to an ASD diagnosis. The researcher feels that future research in this area is required taking the level of severity of a child's disability and background into consideration. Furthermore, the level of support available to schools and pupils would need to be reassessed, by carrying out a thorough investigation of what additional support systems could be implemented to improve the outcomes for everyone.

While there is evidence of past research in the area of inclusion of pupils with special education needs in primary schools it is very limited concerning studies carried out in schools which operate through the IME. There was a limited amount of specific literature available or studies carried out concerning the education of pupils with disabilities attending Gaeltacht schools in Ireland.

Chapter Three - Research design and methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the methodology that was used for this study will be explained to give the reader an insight as to how the research was conducted. This section will discuss the research purpose, aims, objectives, including research participants, the type of methodology used to collect data for the study and justifying it using literature. The rationale for the study will be provided and for the choice of method used explaining how the data analysis was carried out. The validity and reliability of methodology will be outlined highlighting any limitations.

3.2 Research purpose

Creswell (2013) outlines five qualitative approaches to research, narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. The research method used involves a context-based, inductive case study approach. A case study research approach involves researching within a real-life, modern-day environment (Yin, 2009).

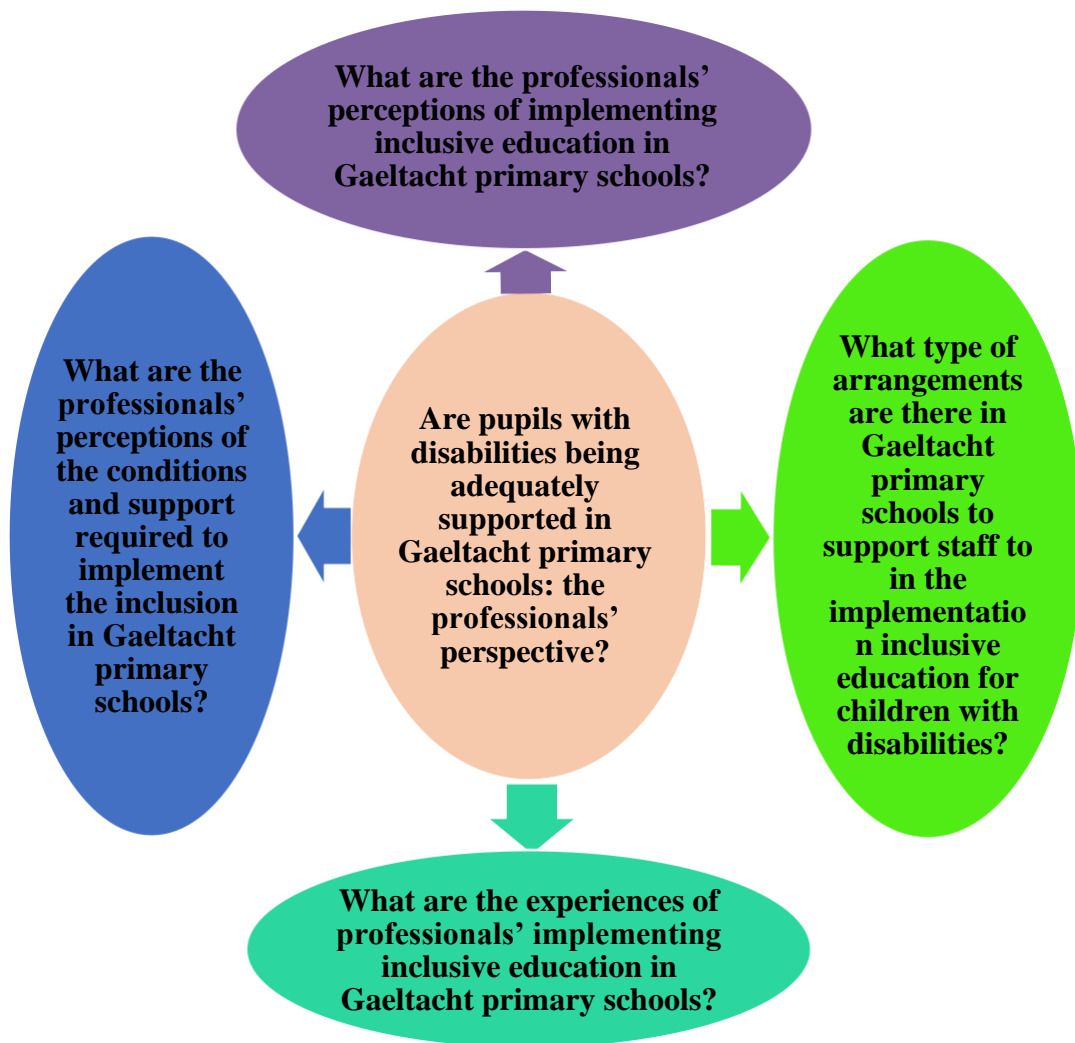


Figure 3.2.1(a) – Research question and sub-questions

The main purpose of the study was to obtain answers to the research question *Figure 3.2.1(a)* from the point of view of the principals, teachers and SNAs working with and providing inclusive education to pupils with disabilities. To get an answer to the research question, research objectives (*Table 3.2.2*) and to fulfil the requirements of this dissertation. For this study the researcher engaged in the use of a qualitative research method.

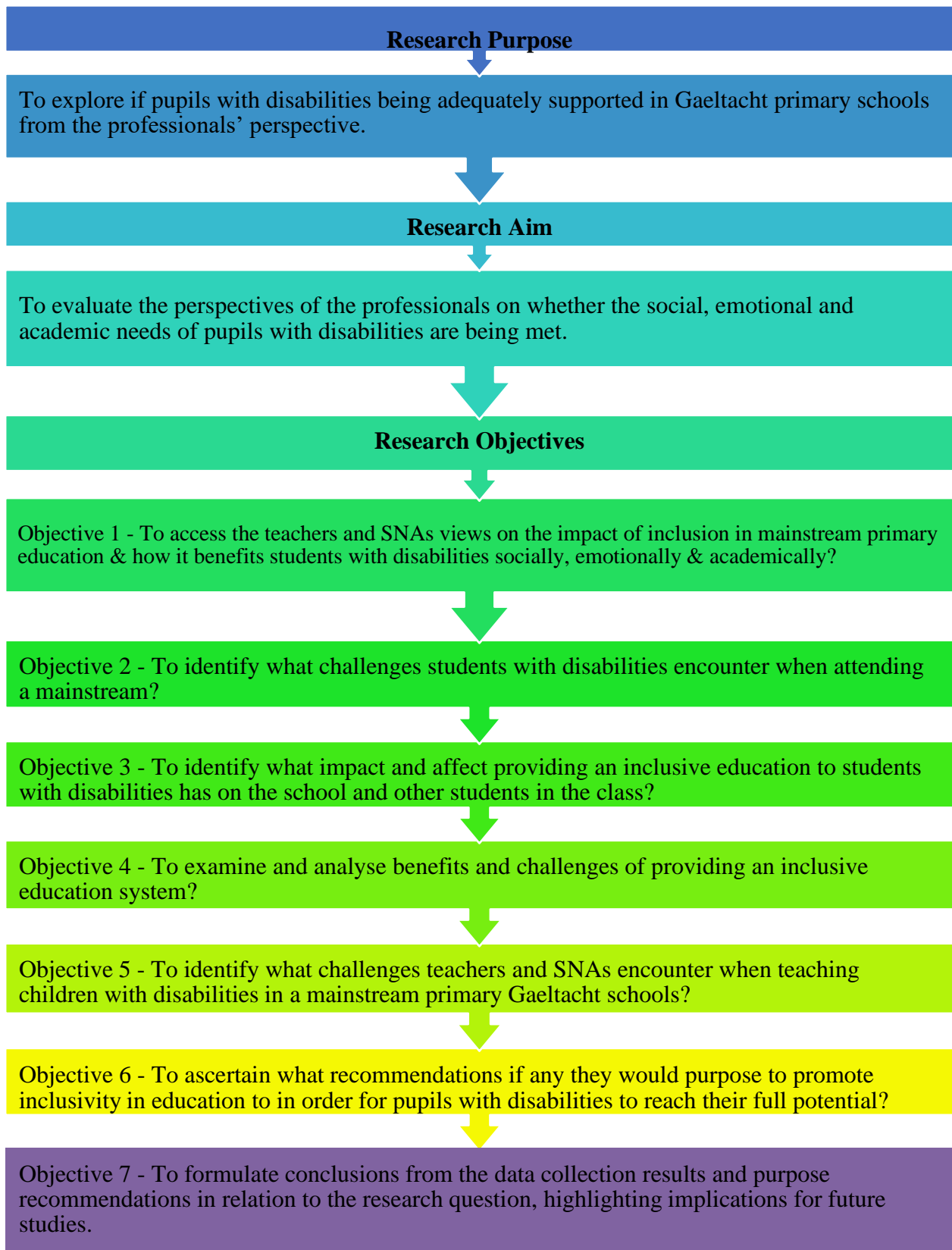


Table 3.2.1(b) – Research purpose, aim and objectives

3.3 Qualitative research method

The term qualitative research or field research refers to several different research strategies i.e. narrative research, case studies, phenomenology, etc. Researchers using qualitative research methods try to draw out the personal aspect of topics through viewpoints, perspectives and opinions (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). Data collected via qualitative research is not quantifiable in statistical terms. Researchers use the natural environment and settings to make observations in an attempt to interpret experiences, views and behaviours through interactions with others (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Research data can be gathered by meeting with the individuals being researched in their natural setting i.e. where they normally work or spend their time, the research site. The interview questionnaires used in this study were developed by the researcher as a qualitative method of gathering information and data for the current study. Due to the layout of the interview questionnaire, it was possible for the researcher to draw both qualitative and quantitative data from the participants' responses to the interview questionnaires on their perceptions about the research question.

3.4 Interviews

Interviews are a common way to gather research data and information from persons with knowledge of the subject matter and provide a valuable method to contribute to research (Denzin et al, 1994). The primary focus of this study was to get the professionals perspectives on whether pupils with disabilities are being adequately supported in Gaeltacht primary schools. The researcher adopted an unbiased view and examined the professionals' opinions on their experiences of the challenges and benefits of inclusion in four rural Gaeltacht primary schools through qualitative research interviews and questionnaires. Qualitative research interviews are used to study the experiences, views and beliefs of an individual on a particular topic (Bhasin, 2019).

According to Gillham (2000), interviews are utilised as a valuable strategy to gather information from participants and to collect data and gain knowledge on a particular area of interest or to gain a deeper understanding of the research topic. Hennink et al, (2010) advise that by interviewing participants it allows for a deeper understanding of social trends in contrast with quantitative methods i.e. questionnaires do not get a deeper understanding (Bhasin, 2019). Interviews allow for an in-depth analysis of perspectives and provide greater detail on which an individual's thoughts and opinions are analysed rather than stated.

There are three main types of interview layouts i.e. structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Bhasin, 2019). For this study, the researcher adopted a semi-structured interview approach which included a combination of both structured and unstructured open-ended questioning. By adding a semi-structured aspect to create flexibility in the interview it allowed the interviewer to deviate from the structured list of questions, depending on the responses received from participants. This enabled the interviewer to ask follow-up questions in order to get a deeper explanation from the interviewee and created an opportunity for the interviewer to gain more valuable information on the topic that might not have been thought before the interview (Cassell, 2015, p. 4).

The interview questions were developed from research studied during the literature review, the questions are open-ended, non-leading, understandable and sensitive (Kumar, 2014; Cohen et al., 2007). The research was achieved through the use of six face to face semi-structured interviews before the Covid-19 health crisis announcement on 16 March 2020, and via three telephone interviews and three emailed interview questionnaires following the introduction of the Covid-19 emergency restrictive period. The participants who took part in the study consisted of nine fully qualified teachers', two of whom are teaching principals and three qualified SNAs. Interview times ranged between 20-30 minutes and semi-structured questionnaire schemas were used to guide the discussions and subsequently emailed to the three participants who it was not possible to face-to-face or phone interviews with, due to Covid-19 restrictions and mobile network connectivity issues. The views of twelve participants were sought to gain multiple perspectives on the research question. Two different questionnaires were used, both contained questions of common interest and specific relevance to the participant's professions, there was one for teachers (Appendix E) and one for SNAs (Appendix F). Questions concerning teaching and the benefits of SNAs in schools were omitted from the SNA questionnaires to ensure the provision of an unbiased viewpoint.

3.5 Pilot interviews

There are two main types of pilot studies, exploratory and complete. For this study, two complete pilot interviews were carried out in advance upon receiving ethical clearance to aid

the design of the research and to test the intended layout for the interview schedule. This helped to establish whether interview questions were clear and understandable and that the research questions investigated what they were intended to (Harvey, 2019). By carrying out a pilot interview before full-scale research, it helps to eliminate problems with wording and the layout of the questions, reinforcing the validity and reliability of the information being gathered (Morse et al, 2002). There were no changes made to the questionnaires as a result of the pilot interviews.

3.6 Sampling, Validity and Reliability

Interviews were used as the primary research data collection method and the researcher interviewed teachers and SNAs over eighteen years of age with their prior permission and consent. As a result of the time limit involved to commence interviews and data collection, the researcher decided from reviewing previous studies and dissertations that twelve interview participants would provide enough information to form a logical analysis of the research question. The researcher felt that in order to gain a well-rounded view it would be appropriate to interview three SNAs and nine teachers two of whom were teaching principals. Interview participants were selected through two forms of sampling convenience and purposive sampling. Convenience sampling involves getting interviewees who are convenient and available to participate (Saunders et al. 2012).

According to Merriam (2009), purposive sampling involves the identification of a clear research criterion to identify appropriate participants. For the researcher convenience sampling involved the willingness of participants to participate in the study. Whereas, purposive sampling was based on the researcher's knowledge of the participant's experience and length of time working in Gaeltacht schools. Given the nature of the study, it was necessary for all interviewees to be fluent in the Irish language and to have experience of working in a Gaeltacht primary school for over five years. Experience of educating and supporting pupils with disabilities was also a necessary element pertaining to the study (Patton, 2002). Upon receipt of ethical clearance on the 23 December 2019. The researcher approached participants nine in person and three by phone and invited them to participate in this research dissertation. All participants strongly expressed their intent to take part in the study when asked. The validity of the findings was verified by requesting assistance from a

fellow academic to review the interview voice recordings and emailed questionnaires received, and to read the typed transcripts of participant's responses, verify the contents therein.

3.7 Data collection and analysis

The researcher was permitted to record seven of the nine interviews for data collection and three participants submitted responses to the interview questionnaire via email. A Sony digital voice recorder, a Dictaphone and two lapel microphones were used to record the six face-to-face interviews this was to ensure that voice recordings were clear and to block out any unwanted background sounds. This was used to ensure the smooth running of the interview and in case one recording device failed there was a backup. The audio file was then securely uploaded and saved onto a password-protected laptop, in a password encrypted file which is exclusively used by the researcher. The researcher requested permission to take notes during the interviews from the interviewees all participants agreed. Telephone interviews were carried out with three participants however it was only possible to record one due to issues with sound and mobile network connections the signal was very weak and lagging, therefore, the researcher took notes of participants' responses to interview questions. The final three interview/questionnaire responses were submitted via email as the areas participants resided in did not have good internet connectivity and there were issues surrounding times and availability to be interviewed.

Each of the participants was given a hard copy of the interview questionnaire, research study information letter (*Appendix G*), interview information sheet (*Appendix H*) and consent form (*Appendix I*) in advance of the interviews and the return dates for all including the emailed interview questionnaire was the 31st of March 2020. The interviews and interview questionnaires were used as the primary method to collect data for the qualitative research required for this study. Transcribed recorded interview notes were forwarded to participants for their approval and agreement before the anonymisation of transcripts and data analysis. The analysis was carried out from typed transcripts of interview recordings and interview notes and through the review of emailed responses received from three participants to interview questionnaires.

A thematic analysis of the data was then carried out to examine patterns of meanings and themes within the data (Caulfield, 2019). There are several approaches to thematic analysis inductive, deductive, semantic and latent. Inductive involves planning and developing a framework based on findings and deductive involves having some preconceived themes based on prior knowledge. The semantic approach involves analysing the data collected and the latent approach involves reading into their statements and making underlying assumptions. Using the thematic analysis approach method (Mortensen 2020; Braun and Clarke 2006), common themes were extracted during the data analysis. Further sub-sections of exploration exist within themes, all of which correlate with the overall aim of this study. The researcher used the most common form for conducting a thematic analysis which follows a six-step process, *see Figure 3.7(a)*.

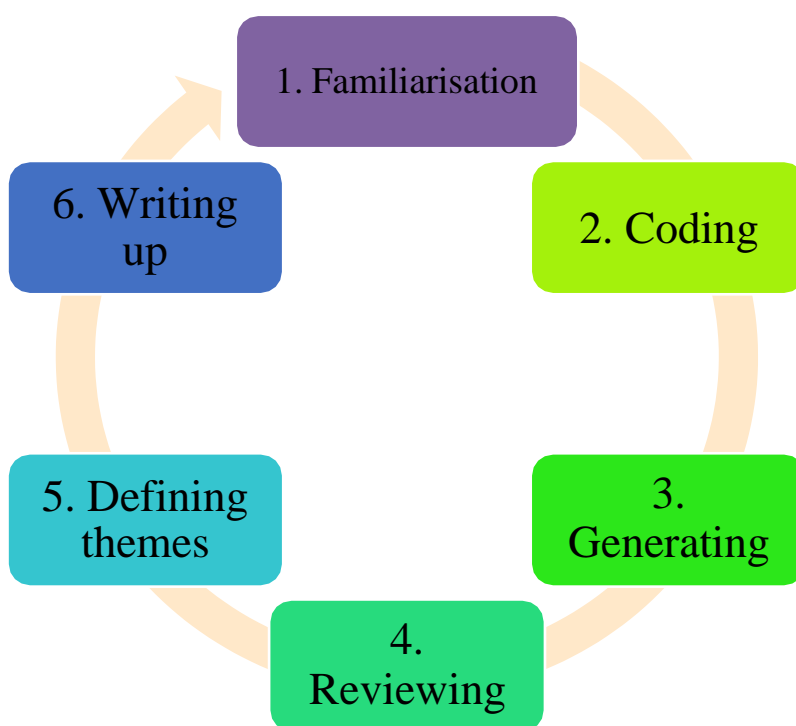


Figure 3.7.1(a) - Process of thematic analysis (Caulfield, 2019)

3.8 Limitations of the study

Limitations of the study involved time constraints to complete the field research. The timing of this research should be borne in mind by the reader as the fieldwork was carried out between the 26 February and the 31 March 2020, interview timetable (*Appendix D*). Since

then there have been major changes in the educational landscape in schools due to Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the relatively small sample size of research participants and the limited number of schools involved, the scale of the study depicts a relatively small portion of the Gaeltacht schools which already limits the representation of the findings. The fact that this study is limited to one research method made it harder to validate as the use of a triangulation approach might have added to the reliability of the study. A total of six face to face interviews had been carried out before the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and due to issues surrounding mobile phone connectivity and network coverage, it was only possible to carry out a further three interviews over the phone. This resulted in three of the interview participants providing written/typed responses to the interview questionnaires via email. Typed transcripts from all twelve participants' interview/questionnaire responses can be viewed in order of sequence P1 to P12 (*see Appendix J*).

3.9 Ethical considerations

The research carried out in this study is in line with the ethical policy, procedures and guidelines of Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT) and keeping with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018. Ethical clearance for this study was received from LYIT on 23 December 2019, 'Ethical Approval Application form' (Appendix K). According to Bryman and Bell (2007) when conducting research, the study should not bring harm to any of the participants involved. Consent was gained from the principals at the four schools involved and interview participants before commencing the study, at the interview stage and data retention, respecting their dignity by offering full anonymity and confidentiality. All data collected for research or findings represented in this study was done so ensuring complete honesty and transparency throughout.

'Researchers must desist immediately from any actions, ensuing from the research process, that causes participants emotional or other harm.' (BERA 2018)

The ethical considerations involved in this study required receiving agreement and ethical clearance from the LYIT School of Business. It was the researchers' responsibility to inform the principals and board of management of the schools involved about the research study and request permission this was done in person. Permission was granted by all four school

principals to involve their school in the study providing that the names of the schools would remain anonymous. Following this, the interviewer asked participants in person if they were willing to take part in the study and they were provided with a copy of the information letter interview questions and consent form to sign to confirm their acceptance to participate in advance of the interviews. Pseudonyms are used throughout this study to ensure the anonymity of the identity of the participants and schools involved.

To maintain ethical standards copies of the information letter and document and consent form containing information explaining the purpose of the research study was signed and agreed with participants in advance of the interviews and data collection process. All participants were assured of complete anonymity and confidentiality of interview responses throughout the study and in the dissertation. Cohen et al. (2000) highlight that it is important to ensure that participants are given the right to withdraw from the interview process at any stage or refrain from answering interview questions that may make them feel uncomfortable. All participants were given the right to withdraw from the interview, refrain from answering questions and pull out from the study up until the commencement of the data analysis process.

The researcher and supervisor are the only people with access to the data and all participants were advised of their right to anonymity. All information gathered from the participants during interviews and documents produced in printed copy are locked securely in a drawer with the identities of participants redacted. Any data held on the researcher's laptop which is used solely by the researcher will be password protected. In line with LYIT's ethical procedures the data will be stored securely for five years following the completion of the dissertation when the hardcopy will be shredded and softcopy deleted.

Any notes taken and transcribed following interviews have been anonymized and participants were given copies of their interview transcripts to ensure that they concurred with the content and allowed to make amendments or deletions. Any information received from interview participants was not altered or changed and participants were permitted to view transcriptions before analyses commenced. Data collection was in line with the Data Protection Acts Ireland

(1988, 2003, 2018), GDPR legislation (2018) and accordance with the BERA ethical standards 2018. The researcher concurs with the importance of taking an inclusive approach to research acknowledging that *'ethics is a reflection of the respect for those who take part in research'* (TCD REC 2019). This study is based solely on the perceptions of the participants concerning the adequacy of support available to pupils with disabilities attending Gaeltacht primary schools. The possibility of ethical considerations arising from false expectations of participants concerning this study must be acknowledged. The researcher clearly stated to participants that the recommendations of this study may not have any impact on future legislative policies or educational outcomes.

3.10 Conclusion

In this chapter the approach taken to carry out study was identified, discussed and explained in a coherent sequence. The qualitative research method selected to gather information from the research participants was clearly justified and explained, providing reasoning for other methods of research and data collection. The process taken to get ethical approval was outlined insuring the provision of ethical standards throughout. The researcher employed the use of pilot studies to ensure the interview questionnaires would achieve their objective. The validity and reliability of the study and the data analysis process was also discussed in this chapter. In the next chapter the findings from the data analysis and examination of findings will be presented and discussed.

Chapter Four - Research Findings and Discussions

4.1 Introduction

This study aimed to establish, if pupils with disabilities are being adequately supported in Gaeltacht primary schools, from the predominant perspectives of the professional's working with them daily. While there is evidence of past research in the area of inclusion of pupils with special education needs in primary schools it is very limited concerning studies carried out in schools which operate through the medium of the native Irish language in Gaeltacht areas. It was believed that there was a need for research regarding the adequacy of supports available for pupils with disabilities in Gaeltacht schools. Several factors which can both positively and negatively impact on inclusion in Gaeltacht schools are presented in this chapter.

The findings in connection with the literature reviewed in chapter two will also be discussed in this chapter, using the thematic analysis approach method (Mortensen, 2020; Braun and Clarke, 2006). The findings presented in this study represent the views of SNAs and primary school teachers from Gaeltacht primary schools. Common themes were extracted during the data analysis. There were three key themes identified, the strengths and weaknesses of supports in place for pupils with disabilities, the benefits and challenges of inclusion in Gaeltacht schools and barriers to inclusion in education. Further sub-sections of exploration exist within themes, all of which correlate with the overall aim of this study (*see Figure 4.1(a)*).

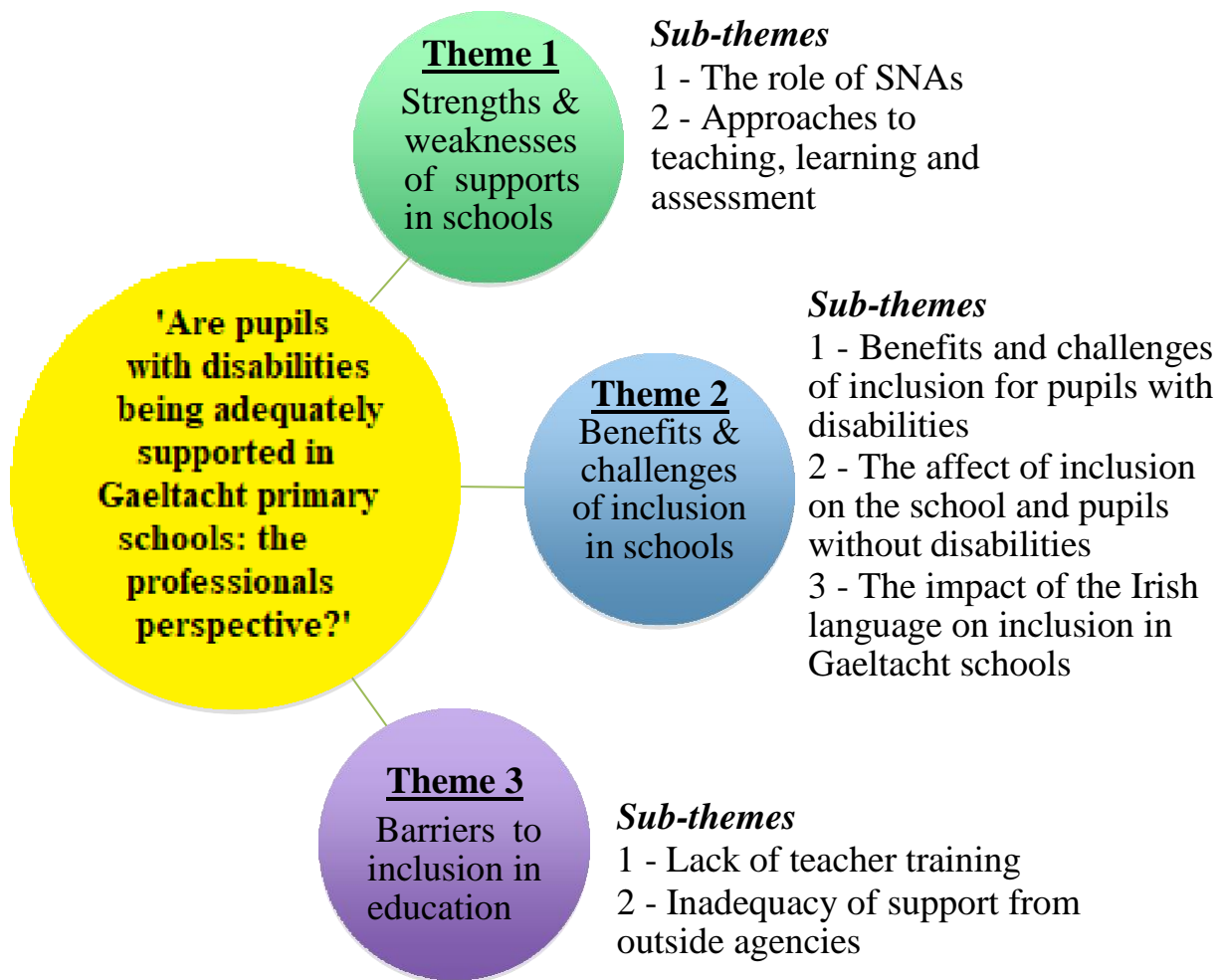


Figure 4.1.1(a) - Overview of research question, themes and sub-themes

4.2 Interview participants

All of the professionals interviewed worked or taught pupils with disabilities in Gaeltacht schools for five years or more. This was a necessary element of the data collected for this study. The length of experience, high levels of educational qualifications and experience of working with pupils with disabilities and special educational needs, meant that the interview participants possessed a comprehensive, in-depth knowledge and understanding of the levels of inclusion in schools. It is their professional perspectives about the adequacy of support being provided for pupils with disabilities and special education needs that forms the basis for this study. Pseudonyms are used throughout the report to ensure the anonymity of the identity of the participants and schools involved. Numbers were randomly assigned to the participants for clarity and teachers are referred to as P1 to P9, and SNAs P10 to P12. All quotations from participants involved in the study which were used for comparing and contrasting themes

were taken verbatim from the interview questionnaire transcriptions (*Appendix J*). The profiles and details of participants who took part in the study are listed see table 4.2(a).

Table 4.2(a) Breakdown of Participants Profiles

Code	Current position	Current mainstream class	NQF Level of professional qualification	Areas of education worked in	Length of time in	
					Education	Gaeltacht
P1	School Principal	5 th & 6 th	Level 9	Mainstream	19 years	18 years
P2	School Principal	Special Education	Level 7	MS & Special Unit	33 years	26 years
P3	Class Teacher	Junior/Senior Infants	Level 8	Mainstream	14 years	14 years
P4	Class Teacher	1 st & 2 nd	Level 9	Mainstream	15 years	15 years
P5	Special Education	Special Education	Level 8	Mainstream, SET & LS	11 years	11 years
P6	Learning Support	Learning Support	Level 9	Mainstream	21 years	13 years
P7	Class Teacher	3 rd & 4 th	Level 9	Mainstream & SET	5 years	5 years
P8	Special Education	ASD Unit 1 st , 2 nd & 3 rd	Level 9	Mainstream & ASD Unit	15 years	6 years
P9	Language Teacher	Irish Language	Level 9	MS & LS Teacher	8 years	8 years
P10	SNA	1 st & 2 nd	Level 6	Mainstream, Early Years	24 years	5 years
P11	SNA	1 st , 2 nd & 6 th	Level 7	Mainstream	15 years	15 years
P12	SNA	ASD Unit 1 st , 2 nd & 3 rd	Level 7	Mainstream, Special Unit	15 years	9 years

4.3 Theme One - Strengths and weaknesses of the supports in schools for pupils with disabilities.

4.3.1 Sub-theme one: The role of SNAs

In this first section, the findings concerning the benefits and limitations of the role of SNAs in Gaeltacht schools to support pupils with disabilities will be presented and discussed.

Benefits of the role of SNAs:

All teachers who participated in the study stated that having access to an SNA can impact positively on creating an inclusive learning environment for pupils with disabilities. Examples of their responses included:

'The SNA is vitally important to cater for the health and safety of children as it would be impossible for the teacher to have eyes on all the children at the same time. If a pupil with a disability needs a sensory break the SNA facilitates this.'

(P8 - Question 10)

'The SNA is somebody that understands the needs of the child specifically..... the work they do is incredible with making sure the child is included in the classroom environment, and that they are accessing the curriculum, keeping them on task, making sure that their needs are being met.'

(P3 - Question 10)

'The SNA helps to reduce the child's anxiety and instill confidence in the child'.

(P1 - Question 10)

Limitations of the role of SNAs:

How a SNAs job role is defined can differ depending on the school, the needs of the pupils with disabilities, and the level of assistance the teacher requires. Responses received included:

The SNA supports, 'one to one learning, most children with disabilities need this.'

(P1 - Question 10)

'They also ensure that the needs of the other students are being met as well, even though that might be outside of their remit.'

(P3 - Question 10)

It is evident from the data analysis that the role of the SNA can at times go far beyond their job description. There were contradictory factors identified in the data analysis concerning to the role of the SNA, an example of response includes:

'The shortfall of having an SNA is that they end up doing the work for the child. I have seen this happen several times.... the SNA should not be used as somebody that should explain work to the child and do work for them or tell them what to do.... I know that this is happening.'

(P6 - Question 11)

All teachers described the challenges that occur due to pupils not having SNA access. Describing pupils suffering from frustration, behaviour and sensory overload issues which lead to “*frequent aggressive outbursts*” and “*meltdowns*”. Stating that this results in lost class time create a negative affect on other pupils and class teachers alike. Examples of responses received from teachers highlighting the negative effect of not having access to an SNA include:

'We face a lot of challenges as teachers when a child who requires an SNA does not receive access and the support they require; as a teacher, we can only do so much. This affects the child's learning and they are not achieving the highest level of education they could as a result.'

(P5 - Question 11)

'Depending on the level of need within one classroom the SNA may have to prioritise children.... delays in diagnosis and subsequent resource allocations can cause challenging behaviour as a result the teacher is working with very limited resources.'

(P9 - Question

11)

Six teachers stated that the current method of SNA allocation was inadequate. These teachers also felt that there were major delays in the assessment and diagnosis of

children requiring SNA support, which subsequently led to a lack of SNA access being allocated to schools. In addition to this, seven teachers from three of the four schools involved in this study responded that they felt that this was as a result of not having a NEPS psychologist appointed to their schools for over two years.

'It is extremely hard when one SNA is shared between two pupils in different classrooms, and perhaps the classes are at either end of the school. Pupils have been allocated an SNA because they may run away from school or there's a possibility of them harming themselves or others. It is physically impossible for the SNA to make two halves of themselves.'

(P4 - Question 10)

Teachers stated several times that access to an SNA was only allocated on the basis that the pupil has a physical disability that requires the need for an SNA, a flight risk i.e. may run away, or a danger to themselves or others. Three teachers (P4, P5 and P8, Question 11) highlighted that they felt that the '*academic needs*' of the pupils with disabilities are not being considered under the current model of SNA allocation.

Discussion:

It was communicated by all participants that they felt that the role of the SNAs was of the utmost importance to enable the inclusion of pupils with disabilities in Gaeltacht schools. As discussed in literature review the EPSEN Act (2004) and the establishment of the NCSE who are responsible for the provision of SNA support to schools at present. The findings from the data analysis and literature review concur with the NPF (2019) regarding the inadequacy of support from the NCSE. The reoccurring praise and appreciation provided by teachers regarding the work being carried out by SNAs signify a view that inclusive education would not be possible without them. This is in agreement with the opinion of Harris (2020) as he described his views of having an SNA at school, stating that, '*SNAs are a vital resource and promote independence and enable pupils with disabilities to access the curriculum.*' The findings indicate that an SNA is perceived as having a key role in creating an inclusive learning environment (Horne and Timmons, 2009).

The DES 2014 circular indicates that *'the role of the SNA is not to provide additional tuition'*, and refers to the role of an SNA in a non-teaching capacity. Similarities were identified between the findings and a report commissioned by the Houses of the Oireachtas (2016) on the role of the SNA, signifying that there is a need for further definition and clarification within schools regarding the role of the SNA. To ensure that all involved (principals, teachers and SNAs) are clear of the specific job remit and what the role entails (Lindsay, 2007). Three teachers felt that there should be an expansion in the application of the role of SNAs to include teaching duties and help with the academic needs of pupils with disabilities, which would be similar to that of their counterparts in the United Kingdom normally referred to as teaching assistants (O'Brien, 2010).

It was also stated that SNA access was being shared between pupils in different classes indicating that pupils who were assigned SNAs are not receiving full access. Changes to the current allocation model for SNA access which was due to be implemented in September 2020 but it has now been postponed until the 2021/2022 school year due to the impact of the Covid-19 public health crisis (DES, 2020).

4.3.2 Subtheme two: The strengths and weaknesses of approaches to teaching, learning and assessment

In this subtheme, the most frequently used teaching methodologies used in Gaeltacht schools to create an inclusive learning environment are discussed. Issues raised concerning the challenges of differentiation of the curriculum to cater for inclusion and the needs of pupils with disabilities are described. Including the methods used to assess pupils with learning disabilities.

Strengths of approaches to teaching, learning and assessment:

All teachers provided examples of teaching methodologies and strategies they use in their class to create an inclusive educational environment for all pupils. In order of preference, the most common teaching methods identified included team teaching, sensory breaks, group teaching, visual learning, station teaching, differentiation, blended learning, ICT, IEPs and assessment.

Team teaching was identified by seven of the nine teachers involved in the study and described as the most preferred approach to teaching in an inclusive learning environment. Teachers explained how team-based approaches such as team teaching and station teaching enable pupils to achieve greater learning outcomes. The benefits of sensory breaks were identified by six teachers as a very important strategy in providing for the needs of pupils with sensory issues. The SNA normally facilitates sensory breaks for pupils with disabilities who are taken out of class to self-regulate their emotions, use up excess energy and settle any sensory overload issues they may have. The following comments illustrate the teacher's perceptions of the benefits of these teaching methods.

'We use a lot of station teaching. It's good for children with disabilities to get them involved in the class. Station teaching is great, the children love it, they may not have the attention span for it but that is where the SNA comes in to take the child out for a sensory break.'

(P2 - Question 13)

'I find team teaching and station teaching amazing because you have smaller groups and you have more time to focus on the children if they are grouped according to ability.'

(P1 - Question 13)

The analysis revealed positive responses from six of the nine teachers regarding the benefits of group teaching and how it enables the inclusion of pupils with disabilities to be able to engage in learning activities that promote positive peer learning opportunities. P6 described how group learning activities are arranged to ensure that pupils with disabilities are grouped with other children in the class that they can learn from.

'I would always be aware of what group a child with a disability is in and put them into a group they will be supported by their peers and not left out.'

(P6 - Question 13)

All teachers described how they differentiate the curriculum through the UDL framework to suit the learning capabilities of pupils with disabilities in their class. By differentiating the curriculum teachers enable pupils to learn at their own pace ensuring that they can access the curriculum.

'We use a lot of station teaching. It's good for children with disabilities to get them involved in the class. Station teaching is great, the children love it, they may not have the attention span for it but that is where the SNA comes in to take the child out for a sensory break.'

(P2 - Question 13)

'I find team teaching and station teaching amazing because you have smaller groups and you have more time to focus on the children if they are grouped according to ability.'

(P1 - Question 13)

All teachers identified ways of thinking about teaching and learning that involved creating equal opportunities for pupils to succeed in learning highlighting the benefits of blended, online and visual learning. This was a focal point for five of the teachers and examples of their responses included:

'I use SeeSaw at the moment when I am teaching from home, I use both online and blended learning methods'

(P7 - Question 13)

'Every child with special needs in the school receives either an iPad or laptop, the child is encouraged to engage in blended learning with a maths game app and this can help in facilitating an inclusive learning environment.'

(P4 - Question 13)

'Since Covid-19 arrived I am using blended learning and email homework to the parents at the start of the week, I also use Google classroom but it's early days.'

(P8 - Question 13)

'If you had a child who is non-verbal, you would use an iPad to communicate.... if somebody does not understand the language, you would use a lot of visual aids.'

(P1 - Question 13)

IEPs were identified by eight of the twelve participants, and examples of their responses included:

'Learning is assessed against the targets set out in the IEP.'

(P8 - Question 14)

'We are always assessing their work against the IEP and deciding and planning what learning needs to be achieved throughout the year with their parents, the occupational therapist and through the advice given in the psychologist report as well as working with other teachers in the class or school.'

(P5 - Question 14)

Teachers and SNAs who participated in the study discussed how they work in collaboration with parents on IEPs to assess the levels of learning of pupils with disabilities and to evaluate how they are progressing academically.

Teachers also discussed other methods of assessment highlighting the positive benefits of observational assessments. Five of the nine teachers involved in the study stated that they thought that observational assessments should be introduced as an official method of assessment. An example of responses included:

'I think each child learns differently therefore they should be assessed differently more observational assessment techniques should be adopted.'

(P8 - Question 14)

Weaknesses of approaches to teaching, learning and assessment:

Responses from P2 and P6 describe the difficulties they experienced with differentiating activities for pupils with disabilities explaining that it can be a time-consuming task for the class teacher.

'Academically the curriculum needs to be adjusted to meet their needs and work has to be differentiated to their level, it certainly makes the work of the classroom teacher a lot more difficult.'

(P2 - Question 6)

Contrary to positive earlier comments, P6 described the demands placed on teachers trying to provide an inclusive education system:

'A lot of a teachers' classroom time can be taken up with teaching children with different needs..... You spend a lot of time trying to help them and support them in their learning, so therefore it does take up a lot more time, with one individual case and the rest of the class is losing out.'

(P6 - Question 8)

A lack of time to provide one-to-one support was highlighted as a challenge in the responses from five of the nine teachers, which indicates that some teachers are finding it difficult trying to respond to the specific needs of all pupils. As described by P12 extra classroom support is required for teachers to assist with teaching duties in class.

'There is a need for extra support in schools to provide for learning needs and academic progress of children with disabilities to enable them to be on a level playing field with their peers academically'

(P12 - Question 13)

Teachers felt that the current method of standardised assessment is not always practical or possible when assessing pupils with disabilities. Five teachers discussed their views on the appropriateness of standardised tests as an approach to assessment for pupils with disabilities. Examples of responses included:

'Assessment can be extremely difficult especially the state assessments as they can make children get extremely frustrated as they are too hard for them to comprehend.'

(P8 - Question 14)

'The child that I am thinking about with Down's Syndrome comes from a home where they only speak Gaeilge.....this child is getting on great however they have hardly any English and then at the end of second class they were expected to sit a Micra T-test which did not reflect the child's ability.'

(P6- Question 14)

A great deal of time and planning is involved in pupil assessment procedures and all interview participants described the assessment of some pupils with disabilities as particularly difficult and challenging especially if the Irish language is not the first or home language. Standardised tests are a formal method of assessment used nationally, and all pupils are graded against the national average of pupils in the same age categories. The stress involved in assessment for both the pupils with disabilities and the teacher was stated by six participants. An example of response includes:

'Standardised and regular testing can be difficult for children with special education needs, especially due to time restriction on testing.... the whole experience can be quite stressful.'

(P9 - Question 14)

Discussion:

The findings from the data analysis and literature review is consistent with views of Pijl et al. (1997), which states the importance of transforming teaching styles and practices to create a “Student centred learning” environment. Teachers identified a variety of diverse learning approaches, strategies and tools used to create an inclusive learning atmosphere, they described how they differentiated and adapted the curriculum to the level required to provide and facilitate for the needs of all pupils. The findings demonstrate that methodologies being used by teachers cater well for the learning needs of pupils with disabilities and promote the creation of a positive learning environment. This concurs with the UNESCO (1999) statement that certain processes are necessary to succeed in the promotion of an inclusive learning environment for all pupils. Team teaching, group work, station teaching and peer learning are all aspects of Vygotsky's social constructivist epistemology theory and they allow for positive differentiation to occur (Gindis, 2003)

Information and communications technology (ICT) use in schools helps to enable differentiation, enhance creative learning environments, and promote inclusion. There was a consensus among the responses from teachers that there was a lack of ICT resources in the Irish language. However, throughout the current Covid-19 health crisis, teachers have adapted to the UDL approach to teaching and learning which allows greater flexibility for pupils to engage in different learning methods to show what they know (Dickinson and Gronseth, 2020). It was evident from responses received, that seventy-eight percent of teachers who participated in this study were already engaging in UDL approaches before Covid-19 as they identified numerous teaching and learning strategies that cater to the needs of all pupils and all learning abilities. The findings indicate that teachers are successfully implementing methods similar to the UDL principles involving '*multi-tiered UDL approaches to teaching, learning and assessment*' (Sanford, 2011; McGuire, 2011, p. 38-54 and Quirke et al, 2018 p. 18).

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning and for teaching and learning approaches to be successful, assessment for and of learning must occur (Lysaght et al., 2019). One of the main modes of assessment that all participants highlighted concerning the assessment of pupils with disabilities was the use of Individual Education Plans (IEP). Teachers identified IEPs as an important part of organising and planning for the educational goals for pupils with learning disabilities and they are used to facilitate in the assessment of learning outcomes (Tennant, 2007; p. 206). They provide pupils with disabilities with realistic learning goals of needs that enable them to learn at their level of ability, over an agreed period to improve their skills and meet those needs.

These findings indicate that existing DES standardised testing methods of assessment, does not cater adequately to the needs of all pupils with disabilities. Irish literacy and mathematics are the only formal standardised assessment available in the Irish language (Andrews; 2019; p. 227). This suggests that a disadvantage exists in the current method of standardised assessment of pupils with disabilities. It also signifies an inequality about the testing of native Irish language speakers with disabilities, as appropriate assessment tools are not available. Similar findings concerning inequalities to native Irish language speakers and standardised assessments were

reported in research carried out by Ní Chinnéide (2009, p. 149), and Barns (2017; p. 44).

4.4 Theme Two: The perceived benefits and challenges of inclusion for pupils with disabilities

In this section the benefits and challenges currently impacting pupils with disabilities from accessing an inclusive education will be discussed.

4.4.1. Sub-theme One: The perceived benefits and challenges of inclusion for pupils with disabilities

The benefits and challenges concerning the social, emotional and intellectual aspects of inclusion of pupils with disabilities will be discussed in this first sub-section.

“Inclusion involves keeping pupils with disabilities in mainstream classrooms and bringing the support services they require to them.”

(Smelter, Rasch, and Yudewitz, 1994).

Benefits of inclusion for pupils with disabilities:

Nine of the twelve participants involved in the study described how they felt it benefitted pupils with disabilities socially, emotionally and academically to attend mainstream schools in their local communities. Examples of the responses included:

‘Socially it prepares them for life.’

(P2 - Question 6)

‘The social aspect of the mainstream setting, the communication skills they develop, language, group learning, and friendships.’

(P9 - Question 6)

‘Pupils learn at a pace that suits them, they make lifelong friends and are almost always accepted by their peers.’

(P11 - Question 6)

'It provides pupils with a sense of equality being surrounded by children their age.'

(P10 - Question 6)

Participants (P1 and P12, Question 6) described social and emotional lifelong benefits for inclusion in the mainstream as, making friends, taking turns, showing feelings of caring, and empathy toward others. P6 stated that,

'Pupils need to be part of a mainstream setting and this experience early in their lives makes it easier for them to integrate into society as they get older and to be more independent, socially aware of the way others act and behave....it can also be a good lesson for positive behaviour modelling'

(P6 - Question 6)

The advantages and disadvantages of mainstream education in comparison specialised education for pupils with disabilities was described by P4 and P6, their responses included:

'It benefits children with disabilities to be part of the mainstream educational environment. I feel that children with disabilities in specialised units do not receive the same level of social inclusion or the life and coping skills that they can achieve when they're in a mainstream educational setting.'

(P4 - Question 6)

'I think it helps prepare them for life because if they were in an immersive environment with only pupils who have special needs they would never learn to become fully independent. A specialised setting tends to cushion children with disabilities away from the reality of the world. I think it's very important for them to get this experience very early on in their lives to enable them to integrate into society and to be more socially aware of the way others act and behave, it can also be a good lesson for positive behaviour modelling.'

(P6- Question 6)

There was a consensus among all participants' that there are social benefits to inclusion in mainstream schools more so than in specialised units for pupils with disabilities and it is believed that they do develop better socially, emotionally and

academically because they feel the same as other children. One teacher described an experience where a pupil was transferred from a specialised unit into their mainstream classroom, the pupil had a physical disability and was sent to a specialised unit at the beginning of their education.

'It was soon established that this pupil's physical disability was not impacting their academic learning ability; the pupil was subsequently sent to mainstream and has SNA and is very able academically.'

(P4 - Question 4)

Challenges of inclusion for pupils with disabilities:

Four teachers had mixed feelings about whether it was beneficial for every pupil with a disability to be part of an inclusive learning environment. Examples of responses included:

'...it depends on the needs of the child or what the disability is....in most cases, yes, it is beneficial but in some, you'd have to question would they be better off in a specialised unit.'

(P1 - Question 6)

'Depending on the level of needs some children with mild/moderate needs do benefit from the mainstream setting and will thrive. Other children will be distracted, overwhelmed and find it nearly impossible to thrive in this setting, each child is different.'

(P 9 - Question 6)

The main factors identified concerning the challenges of inclusion in mainstream school was the child's level of need and disability. This was a focal point concerning the suitability of pupils with disabilities for inclusion in mainstream schools for four of the twelve participants. Other challenges to the inclusion identified were as a result of pupils commencing school without a diagnosis of a disability. Delays in receiving a diagnosis, subsequently led to delays in resources being allocated e.g. SNA access, resource teaching or learning support. Examples of the responses received from participants of why the mainstream classroom does not suit all pupils with disabilities, included:

'The mainstream classroom does not suit all children. Some children need an SNA and we have to fight to get an SNA for them. A lot of children maybe do not have toileting skills, children who could do with an SNA are not entitled to one unless they are of danger to themselves or others or a flight risk. I feel that this can create a challenge in mainstream primary education.

(P2 - Question 6)

'Children who came to the school who were undiagnosed faced a lot of challenges.'

(P2 - Question 7)

'Children with ASD can struggle with sensory overload due to the noise in the class. At times they may struggle to understand instructions due to processing delays.'

(P8 - Question 7)

The primary factor seen to have a negative impact on the inclusion of pupils with disabilities was the level of support available to provide for their holistic development in education. Other factors included pupils being withdrawn from schools due to the learning gap in becoming too wide between the pupils with disabilities and their peers, sensory challenges and the level of noise or distractions in mainstream classrooms. Eight of the twelve interview participants had experiences of pupils being withdrawn from mainstream schools and transferred to a special education unit due to academic challenges.

Other examples of experiences included how pupils had been withdrawn from schools as the parents were afraid that the children were falling behind academically, due to difficulties with the Irish language. As a result of advice received from a psychologist they moved the child to a specialised unit. It subsequently turned out that this child had reverted inwards in their social, emotional, and academic learning as a result of being withdrawn from a mainstream class into a specialised unit. Two separate cases of misguided professional advice concerning difficulties with learning the language and disabilities were described by P4 (Question 4). P11 described how some children

with whom she worked in the past started their education in the mainstream. However, by the time these pupils reached third and the fourth class they were moved to special schools or units because

'parents felt that they were not able for the curriculum and the learning gap was becoming too wide and more evident as they moved up in classes.'

(P11 - Question 4)

It was highlighted by four participants that if pupils are moved from a mainstream class to a special class, it is generally as a result of the difference between the academic progress of a pupil with a disability and what they were expected to know by a particular class and the learning gap becoming too wide.

Discussion:

The findings of the data analysis and the literature review indicate a general perception among the participants who took part in the study regarding the value of inclusion, as positive. This is in agreement with studies from Maras and Brown, (2000) and Kalambouka et al., (2007). Inclusion has been seen to promote caring, empathy, friendships, and understanding which are all important life skills to have for future independent living. Being part of an inclusive learning environment was seen to benefit pupils with disabilities physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually. Inclusion is perceived to promote equality and teach pupils valuable life skills for future independent living as it creates more *'challenging learning opportunities to interact with and learn from more competent peers'* (Cumming and Wong 2010). The DES (2007) stated that pupils with disabilities benefit from inclusion as it reduces isolation and negative labelling of children with additional needs. Creating friendships with peers through social interaction was highlighted as an important benefit of inclusion by increasing self-esteem and promoting positive behaviours (Briody and Martone 2010).

From the responses received from participants, the researcher felt that there was a greater benefit associated with the social and emotional development of inclusion of pupils with disabilities in mainstream Gaeltacht schools than there was on academic achievement. It was established from the findings that pupil withdrawal from

inclusive settings to special education units is mainly as a result of misguided professional advice from psychologists or the level of a pupils' academic progress and the learning gap becoming too wide. This illustrates that advice should be sought from more than one professional and parents should talk to principals and teachers before they make any final decisions withdrawing a child from a mainstream setting into a specialised unit. It also highlights the need for more academic support or teaching assistants for some pupils with disabilities who are struggling academically.

4.4.2 Subtheme Two: The affect of inclusion on the school and pupils without disabilities

In this subtheme, the findings concerning the affect of inclusion on the school and pupils without disabilities will be presented and discussed. All twelve participants felt that inclusion in education was moving in the right direction toward an equal and diverse learning environment. Participants felt that their school was providing inclusive education to all pupils regardless of their needs to the best of their abilities.

Benefits of inclusion on the school and pupils without disabilities:

The participants' perceptions about the benefits of inclusion for pupils without disabilities were similar to the social benefits identified for pupils with disabilities. Ten of the twelve participants provided positive responses concerning the affect of inclusion in schools. Examples of their responses concerning inclusion in schools included:

'The positive side is that other children learn about inclusion and how important it is and they learn to accept other children despite their disabilities and they show more empathy, and learn to switch off and ignore challenging behaviour which is a good thing to learn because of the world we live in today.'

(P1 - Question 8)

'There's a very positive side of having a student with disabilities in a classroom with other students. It creates huge respect and tremendous support and caring towards others and total understanding of the different abilities of others.'

(P4 - Question 8)

'The benefits of it are that all children are mixed no matter what they're abilities or disabilities are.'

(P2 - Question 6)

'It learns children that not everyone's the same, to appreciate each other for their uniqueness and individuality and respect each other.'

(P6 - Question 8)

All participants described the positive aspects of inclusion in schools for pupils without disabilities describing how it learns children to be more resilient to challenging behaviours, empathic, understanding, caring, supportive and respectful toward others with diverse abilities.

'I do feel our school is providing an inclusive educational environment because children are included in all areas of the curriculum, music, art, physical education. And the curriculum is adapted to meet their needs if need be.'

(P2 - Question 15)

Challenges to inclusion on the school and other pupils without disabilities:

One of the main topics under this theme that participants highlighted was the need for more support and training to enable them to deal effectively with managing behavioural issues. This was a focal point for eighty-three percent participants, an example of a response included:

'The negative side is how it could affect the others; it all depends on the individual child with a disability as well. If the child tends to lash out and shout all the time and scare other children that may be sensitive to noise as well. If it's challenging behaviour and becomes a danger to the other children the whole class may have to be removed. That can affect their education also because the teacher may have to leave the class to calm the child down and this can take time.'

(T1 - Question 8)

'Where children with autism have outbursts or tantrums this creates challenges and impacts on other children in the class and their learning. I have witnessed some children in class show fear and are afraid sometimes when they witness temper tantrums or outbursts especially in the younger classes. The younger children would be very scared.'

(T4 - Question 9)

The reoccurring focus by participants concerning managing anxiety and challenging and disruptive behaviours demonstrates that it can cause major interferences in class and can negatively affect the teacher's ability to teach effectively. This can also take up a lot of teachers' time trying to address issues which in turn takes away from valuable teaching and learning time of other pupils.

Five of the twelve participants described how they felt that the school buildings and the facilities within were creating obstacles to inclusion in schools. It was mentioned that three of the schools cannot facilitate some recommendations and specifications recommended by the NEPS psychologist. Only one school with the special education unit attached was able to facilitate the recommendations as it was built in 2006.

Examples of responses about school facilities included:

'We have a sensory room since last year and it helps so that children with sensory needs can have a break and be taken out of the class if needs be..... At present we do not have any children with physical disabilities or in a wheelchair however if we did have this would create a huge issue as our school would not be suitable and major adaptations would have to be made to classes and entrances as they are too small the doorways wouldn't be wide enough for wheelchair access and the classroom size would not be big enough.'

(P2 - Question 9)

Other issues highlighted were depending on the pupil: teacher ratio and teaching in multi-class settings. It was stated by four participants (P1, P2, P6 and P11) that overcrowding and small classrooms are creating challenges for teachers and directly impacting the level of learning achieved in the class, especially for pupils with disabilities as teachers may not have the time to differentiate the curriculum or cater to each pupil's needs. Examples of responses include:

'There is a lack of space in the classrooms for some of the recommendations, for children with ASD, it's recommended that they may be facing a wall or something to avoid distraction. But if you have a class of thirty or more pupils it is not always possible or feasible. Also, the lack of resources if someone is privately assessed for ASD their not entitled to any extra help outside school they have to go through NEPS to get this help which at present is not possible.'

(P1-Question 5)

The NCSE (2016) advised teachers to review the layout of their classrooms and to make reasonable adjustments where necessary to remove barriers to learning.

'The large teacher-pupil ratio does not help in class when you have a large class of children and a small room and then you have children with disabilities that is very challenging to try and provide inclusive education for all the children.'

Discussion:

The majority of participants felt that the positives of inclusion outweigh the negatives. This concurs with Maras and Brown (2000) and Kalambouka (2007) regarding the positive effect of inclusion.

Several teachers have discussed the negative sides of inclusiveness which correlates with studies carried out by (Gottfried and Harven 2015; Gottfried et. al. 2016). Situations where pupils with challenging behaviour issues were described as an infringement of the rights of the other pupils in the class including that of the class teacher and could have adverse affects on an inclusive learning environment. Some teachers described how they felt that the other pupils in their class were losing out on valuable learning and suffering as a result of providing inclusion to pupils with behavioural issues, research carried out by Dyson et al, (2004) concurs with this viewpoint. Circumstances which led to these types of situations need to be better managed in schools through the provision of additional resources and education to provide teachers and SNAs with the required skill sets to handle pupils with challenging behaviours in schools in a responsible, safe and non-harmful manner.

4.4.3 Sub-theme Three: The impact of the Irish Language on inclusion in Gaeltacht schools

In the third sub-theme, the findings concerning attitudes towards the Irish language and additive and simultaneous bilingualism are presented and discussed. All participants were asked their views on what impact they felt the Irish language had on the inclusion of pupils with disabilities as a result of it being the primary language of the schools. Several positive and negative experiences were described. The findings indicate that all participants felt that the success of pupils learning the Irish language was dependent on attitudes towards the Irish language in the home.

Benefits of the Irish Language on inclusion in Gaeltacht schools:

The benefits of additive bilingualism were described by five teachers as a positive aspect of inclusion in Gaeltacht schools for pupils with disabilities. Examples of experiences by P3 and P6 were described concerning pupils with disabilities learning the Irish language, include:

'I think it's positive because I had a child with Downs Syndrome Many children with Downs Syndrome are bilingual and I will be able to learn a second language easily. Bilingual children tend to learn more efficiently. It might be difficult at the beginning with young children starting school but they tend to learn quickly because of all the different types of teaching strategies we use at present.

(P3 - Question 16)

'Being bilingual has great benefits for children with special needs as it increases cognitive development, confidence and self-esteem and improves memory if they want to learn other languages in secondary school.... I had two children with autism in the past whose parents only spoke Polish at home, yet they both learned to speak the Irish and English languages reasonably well. It depends on whether the child has a language processing difficulty and if they do they will struggle.'

(P8- Question 16)

Disadvantages of the Irish Language for inclusion in Gaeltacht schools:

There were negative aspects described by teachers concerning the language for some pupils with autism, an example includes:

'I had a child with ASD in my class and I know from experience that second language acquisition was a huge issue and they did not respond well to it. The child did not like the Irish Language at all. Where other children have gone through the school system with ASD and second language learning and managed to learn the Irish language well.'

(P3 - Question 16)

A similar experience was described by P6 with a pupil with ASD who did not like the Irish language and refused to speak it at school even though the pupil understood the language. P3 described an experience of a pupil with ASD who had huge issues with second language acquisition, whereas other children with ASD managed to learn the language well. P6 describes a situation that teachers face while trying to facilitate the inclusion of all pupils and at the same time abide by the Irish language ethos of the school, it can create uncertainty at times.

'.... a child with autism in one of the schools I work in is completely anti-Gaeilge altogether we all speak Gaeilge. However, nobody gives out to this child for speaking English and we always answer the child back in the Irish language. We don't berate the child for speaking English because their condition probably dictates that they can only communicate in the English language.'

(P6 - Question 15)

The first language and language being used in the home was perceived by eight participants as a challenge to inclusion for pupils attending Gaeltacht schools.

Examples of responses included:

'If a child has processing difficulties. They will have the same difficulties whether they are taught in Irish or English. So yes, I do think it can be difficult for children with special educational needs if Irish is not the first language or the language of the home it does create a challenge in my opinion.'

(P2 - Question 16)

The lack of available resources in the Irish language was described by seven teachers as creating a challenge, responses include:

'There's a shortage of suitable books and online resources for teaching through the Irish language, this area needs more investment.'

(P8 - Question 17)

'I think that there should be more resources available to teachers for teaching, more funding should be made available for resources for teaching Irish.'

(P3 - Question 17)

The attitudes of outside agencies toward the Irish language and the services being provided in Gaeltacht schools were also identified as discrediting the work of teachers and school staff in the promotion of the Irish language. For example:

'Some of the psychologists and occupational therapists and other specialists who come out to the schools do not speak the Irish language.....speech and language therapists come out and they do not speak Irish to the children either. As teachers, we are trying your best to teach through the Irish language and make sure that the Gaeilge is the first language of the school but then when we get people coming in from the outside and they don't speak the language that can be difficult at times and sends out the wrong message to children with learning disabilities about the language.'

(P6 - Question 18)

Discussion:

The academic benefits of bilingualism and being proficient in the Irish language were identified by five participants as benefiting factors of inclusion of pupils with disabilities in Gaeltacht schools. As stated in the literature review there is a vast amount of advantages to bilingualism (Barac et al., 2017; Hamers, 2000; Nicoladis, 2016) language learning interventions allow pupils to gain greater attainment and retention of the Irish language when they progress to post-primary education and learn additional languages. (Bialystok, 2017; 2012; 2005; and 2003)

The Gaeltacht schools involved in this study are operating under the immersion education programme and all children except those who are exempt from the Irish language under the DES circular (0052/2019) are expected to communicate through

the Irish language throughout their primary education. In agreement with Edwards (2010) participants confirmed that immersion education is successful in the provision of bilingual education. It was stated by ten of the twelve participants involved in the study that not all pupils with disabilities such as ASD struggle with second language acquisition. These findings would concur with international research (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2016) confirming that it is possible for pupils with ASD to learn additional languages. There was a consensus among participants regarding challenges for pupils with LPD stating that the language being used in the home was a hindering factor. Including the lack of parental assistance due as a result of them not being proficient in the Irish language (Kavanagh, 2013; Andrews 2019, p. 232).

Participants had conflicting views on the impact of the Irish language on pupils with disabilities with eighty-three percent of participants indicating that it was dependent on the types of disabilities pupils had. Four of the twelve participants felt that the language could result in the pupils having negative experiences depending on their disability. They explained that if a pupil had a language processing disorder (LPD) or oppositional language characteristics it would cause them to have problems with the Irish language and they would struggle with second language acquisition particularly if English is their first language. Similar results concerning LPD and learning additional languages were identified in previous studies concerning difficulties with language processing for some bilinguals (Beaver, 2017, p. 35). This is also in agreement with issues identified by Hakuta (1986) who highlighted the concerns of parents surrounding the debate of cognitive ability and second language acquisition. Similar discoveries were identified by Schwarz (1997) which suggested that pupils who had difficulties with their mother tongue may experience difficulties learning an additional language. It is however, stated in the research and was suggested by seven of the nine teachers that with the appropriate phonological instruction most pupils can overcome this disability and experience success learning an additional language (Schwartz and Sparks, 2019).

The lack of educational resources in the Irish language was discussed by seven teachers. This concurs with a study carried out by the NPF (2019) and statements from Boyle (2019), stating that it would not be possible to educate pupils with disabilities to enable them to access the curriculum on an equal basis as peers without

disabilities unless additional resources are made available to them. Previous studies carried out by the NCCA (2006) and Mac Donnacha (2005) identified similar results. This indicates that additional funding should be made available for the development of additional affordable resources in the Irish language which are age-appropriate and easily accessible to ensure that the needs of all pupils including those with disabilities are adequately supported.

The lack of availability of bilingual support services was highlighted and it was stated that the majority of the educational support specialists do not speak or communicate in the Irish language when they visit the schools. It was felt that it is sending mixed messages to pupils about the language of the school and discrediting the work of teacher and school staff through the Irish language immersion programme. This also has implications for pupils with disabilities whose only means of communication is through the Irish language, it could affect the allocation of essential resources. Similar results were identified in previous studies highlighting the need for professionals to develop their Irish language proficiency (Ní Chinnéide 2009; O'Toole and Hickey 2013; Andrews 2019, p.242)

4.5 Theme Three: Barriers to inclusion

Under the final theme, the main barriers to inclusion identified from the data analysis will be presented and discussed in this section as sub-themes highlighting suggestions by participants involved in the study to provide for greater inclusion in Gaeltacht schools.

4.5.1 Sub-theme One: The lack of teacher training

The first sub-theme identified was about the lack of pre-qualification training teachers received in the areas of special education and behaviour management in a mainstream setting. All teachers who participated in the study felt that the level of teacher training that they received in College was insufficient and that it did not provide adequately for the needs of pupils with disabilities and ASD in mainstream classrooms. Examples of responses included:

'I received no training whatsoever in college about ASD autism or any other learning disabilities.'

(P4 - Question 5)

'When I graduated there was no training at all given to us to prepare us for teaching children with disabilities or ASD. That time if a child had a learning disability or special educational needs they went and into a special school setting.'

(P2 - Question 5)

'No not at college we just touched on it but we didn't learn anything about ASD. Whatever I learned it was through courses I did of my own free will. Through Middletown for ASD and Incredible YearsI kind of self-taught myself through attending courses. At college, there were no real resources given or adequate training in the field of special needs. Any training I did receive was very limited and would not have been adequate.'

(P1- Question 5)

It was suggested that it was only as a result of self-education and practical experience on the job that teachers felt more sufficiently equipped to teach pupils with disabilities and ASD. It was also highlighted by P2 that,

'it is not compulsory for qualified teachers to attend training regarding special education or educating children with disabilities. It is up to the teacher and it is at their discretion if they want to attend for training to further their education.'

(P2 - Question 5)

Teachers responded that it is because of incidents in class and practical work experience on the job, that enabled them to gain any knowledge they have about teaching pupils with disabilities. All teachers felt that practical experience and training in teaching pupils with disabilities was very important as there are many pupils in mainstream classrooms with varying disabilities.

Discussion:

Findings from the data analysis and the literature research in chapter two showed a consensus that a teachers' knowledge, experience, and understanding of how to teach have a major influence on the implementation of inclusive practices. The NCSE (2013 and 2015) stated the importance of how teachers are trained to be able to teach pupils with disabilities and additional learning needs. They also made recommendations regarding mandatory CPD of teaching professionals, however, this recommendation has not yet been enacted by the DES or the Teaching Council.

Many of the teachers interviewed described the training they received in college concerning teaching pupils with diverse needs as being either inadequate, insufficient or non-existent. Teachers described how they lacked confidence and doubted their professional competencies in teaching pupils with disabilities. Some teachers felt any special education training received did not provide a knowledge-based approach to prepare them for the type of teaching required in an inclusive classroom setting. The level of initial training received by teachers were found to be inadequate and concur with similar studies carried out by McGregor and Campbell (2001) and Humphrey and Lewis (2008) about the competency of teachers to teach pupils with disabilities and diverse learning needs. These findings are in agreement with literature from Mousley (1993) highlighting that some teachers doubt their professional ability to teach when it comes to teaching pupils with certain intellectual disabilities namely ASD.

Current teacher training courses do incorporate a specific special education module and compulsory placement in a specialised educational setting and special needs teaching. The Special Education Support Service (SESS) in conjunction with the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication-related Handicapped Children (TEACCH) provides educational courses for post-qualification teachers currently teaching pupils with autism however they are only available for teachers who are working in specialized educational settings to attend. It was identified that there is a need to support teachers' knowledge and understanding of the specific needs of pupils with certain disabilities such as ASD, sensory processing disorders including other spectrum disorders in initial teacher training, and continuous professional development (CPD) courses for serving teachers.

4.5.2 Sub-theme Two: The lack of support from outside agencies

The second sub-theme identified was concerning the lack of provision of support from outside agencies namely the NEPS psychologist's services which comes under the NCSE and DES. It is the role of the NEPS psychologist to work with teachers, parents and pupils to identify disabilities and to provide assistance by way of support for the needs identified. Concern was conveyed by seven of the nine teachers' regarding not having a NEPS school psychologist appointed for over two years. Teachers described issues concerning the lack of provision of the NEPS psychological services. Examples of responses included:

'There is no school NEPS psychologist. There's the financial burden on parents, it costs about €350 to get an assessment and the length of time a child has to wait to get a diagnosis.....it would be better for the child if all these things were allocated together.....without a NEPS psychologist how can you be supported, many parents either can't afford or are being forced to pay for a private assessment, yet without the NEPS psychologist report to confirm their diagnosis they do not get additional resources e.g. resource hours, SEN or SNA that may be required and should be entitled to.'

(P1 - Question 7 and Question 18)

'If you were trying to get a NEPS psychologist it is impossible.... We do have phone help where you can speak to somebody and ask them questions but the position of the psychologist for our area still has not been filled in over two years and they are finding it difficult to fill the position. There is a great expense to getting an educational assessment as well and some parents cannot afford to get their child assessed.'

(P2 - Question 18)

'Sometimes it can be hard to get a psychologist to assess a child and there can be a delay of a year and a half to get a diagnosis of ASD or if there are a few assessments required it can be delayed longer.'

(P5 - Question 18)

As stated by the teachers the delays in receiving a diagnosis subsequently led to delays in the submission of applications for early learning interventions and additional resources required to create an inclusive learning environment for pupils with disabilities. Limited access to services or delays in the assessment of pupils requiring a diagnosis has a direct impact on the adequacy of support for pupils with disabilities received in schools.

Other issues with external agencies were described by P4 and P11 stating that there are long delays and waiting lists for pupils who require hearing tests, speech and language therapy, counselling, play therapy, early intervention support. It was highlighted that some pupils are on waiting lists for over eighteen months to get seen by a speech therapist or audiologist. Frustration concerning the length of time a child in their school is on a waiting list for audiology services was described by P4, the response included:

'This child has been delayed with their learning as a result of a hearing disability and is currently on an eighteen-month waiting list to be assessed by an auditory specialist.....The HSE waiting list is delaying their learning as a result of backlogs and children are suffering due to the lack of resources in the healthcare system. This is having a knock-on effect on schooling and education and inclusion and the learning needs of our children. The inclusion of the child is impossible if they cannot speak and the delay in getting a proper diagnosis and solution is hindering the early year's intervention program. Speech and language therapists will not treat a child unless they have a diagnosis to specify what is preventing them from speaking.'

(T4 - Question 17)

Discussion:

The fact that three of the schools involved in this study have not had a school psychologist appointed to them since 2018 was the most alarming response received from participants throughout the entirety of this study and this finding was consistent throughout all of the responses received. These findings are also in agreement with the literature review NPF (2019) revealing that schools are experiencing extreme difficulty in accessing adequate psychological services for pupils. Which could have a

detrimental impact on pupil's development as it affects their access to resource teaching hours and learning support. In the absence of a school psychologist being appointed, there is no doubt that it will lead to further issues and affect the education and wellbeing of pupils with disabilities in Gaeltacht schools.

The services are in place however it is the people to run these services that are in short supply. There is a clear link between the delays in diagnosis, the lack of early intervention and the subsequent behaviour issues that teachers are being left to deal with in classrooms. The level of frustration participants felt concerning the lack of these vital services was a recurring theme throughout the study. Pupils with disabilities are being failed not by the teachers, SNAs or their families but by the Department of Education and Skills and the Irish Government. Similar findings to this were identified concerning the NEPS service and was highlighted in a report on education, inequality and disadvantage and barriers to education (Houses of Oireachtas, 2020).

It was stated that children are on long waiting lists well over eighteen months to be seen by such an audiologist, and even longer for speech and language therapy. Delays concerning speech and language services were highlighted by Doherty (2019) stating that some *'people in Donegal were on the waiting list for over two years waiting to be assessed by the Speech and Language Therapy services,'*

The findings of this final theme indicate that pupils are being enrolled in schools without a diagnosis or the provision of adequate support in place for them to experience success in mainstream classrooms. Participants discussed how parents are trying to do everything they can to help their children to access the support they require at their expense. This indicates that pupils with disabilities are being treated unfairly and their needs are being neglected by the very services i.e. the DES and the NCSE that were put in place to protect them, and promote their inclusion in mainstream Gaeltacht schools. This suggests that pupils are being denied their right to equal education and discriminated against as a result. In conclusion, the findings indicate that pupils with disabilities psychological and health needs are not being adequately supported in Gaeltacht primary schools. Which is contrary to the Education for Persons with Disabilities Act (2004) and the guidelines enforced under

the UNESCO Salamanca statement (1994) endorsing the idea of inclusive education and the provision of the necessary support and services to achieve this.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, the main findings that emerged from the data analysis were presented and discussed under three different themes and sub-themes. This chapter provided evidence that there was a relevant link between aspects of the literature reviewed, research questions, and the findings of the data analysis and prior studies carried out in the research area. There is a connection in the findings and discussions between the benefits and challenges of mainstreaming pupils with disabilities and the adequacy of supports in place to facilitate inclusion in education. The final chapter will discuss the limitations of the study, conclusions and recommendations based on the discussion of findings in this chapter.

Chapter Five - Conclusion and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The perceptions of professionals on the adequacy of supports available in four Gaeltacht schools for pupils with disabilities were revealed in this study. There was a consensus among participants in support of inclusive learning environments and all felt that it was beneficial for most pupils with disabilities to attend mainstream schools as it was seen in a positive way to promote the social, emotional and academic learning skills and an important part of future independent living for pupils with disabilities. It was mentioned how pupils gain more respectful, caring, empathic natures as a result of inclusion. Teachers praised and acknowledged the crucial role SNAs play in supporting the inclusion of pupils with disabilities in Gaeltacht schools. The majority participants felt that their schools were as inclusive as they could be.

This chapter will provide policy implications, limitations of the study and gaps identified in the literature concerning the findings. Prospects for future research opportunities will also be presented and discussed. Details of recommendations will be suggested from the perspectives of both the researcher and professionals who participated in the study. Conclusions will be portrayed linking the research objectives with support from the literature. The perceptions provided by participants involved in this study have contributed significantly to the researchers understanding of the benefits and challenges concerning the adequacy of supports available to create an inclusive learning environment for pupils with disabilities attending Gaeltacht primary schools.

5.2 Policy implications:

The researcher commends the positive work being carried out in Gaeltacht schools involved in this study and their great efforts promoting inclusion and the level of education therein. However, the faults identified do have a direct impact on the facilitation of inclusive education for pupils with disabilities not just in Gaeltacht school but in all national primary schools. Areas for concern and barriers to inclusion in education were identified and would need to be addressed at a Macro-planning level within the DES and the Government. There is a need for more robust and responsive actions to identify diverse and inclusive solutions

concerning resource allocation, educational assessment, and partnerships with parents and communities.

5.3 Limitations of the study and research implications:

It is important to note that this is a small scale study and only provides a brief representation of the perceptions of a small number of professionals from four mainstream settings. Due to the word limit in this study, some areas of the findings from the data analysed could not be discussed. The long-term educational prospects of pupils with LPD and bilingualism, the impact of overcrowding in class on the academic performance of pupils with SEN, and the challenges involved in teaching pupils with SEN in bilingual IME multi-class settings requires further research and highlights a possibility for future studies in the area to be developed.

5.4 Recommendations:

The provision of adequate services and supports for pupils with disabilities:

It was identified throughout the study that although the legislation and services are in place there is a shortage of psychologists in schools. This viewpoint concurs with the results of the NPF survey (2019) stating that over ninety percent of school principals believed that the NCSE does not provide adequate support to schools for pupils with additional needs. It was highlighted how early intervention supports, particularly audiology screening tests, speech and language and psychological services are being hindered as a result of long delays and waiting lists for assessment. Until this aspect is either remedied or removed it will ultimately have a knock-on affect on all other aspects of support for inclusion required or being allocated to pupils with disabilities, including access to SNAs.

Additional investment SNAs and classroom teaching assistants:

There is a requirement for further clarification and guidance on the definition of the role of the SNA and the duties therein. SNAs are being shared between different pupils, indicating that some pupils are perhaps not getting their full allocation of resource hours. The lack of allocation of adequate support is having a detrimental effect on the wellbeing of pupils with disabilities causing a lack of confidence and low self-esteem. It was also recommended that there should be an expansion to the role of the SNA to include academic duties or further

investment allocated toward the provision of teaching assistants to provide academic support to class teachers and pupils with disabilities.

Standardisation of teacher training:

For a school to be inclusive practices should be standardised when teaching pupils and it could be contested that all teachers should be retrained in the area of special education and differentiation to achieve this. An NCSE (2010) stated that the status of a fully qualified teacher should include education in the area of SEN and provide practical experiences that teachers may encounter in the classroom environment. All participants agreed that there is no "one size fits all" solution to inclusion in schools and that each pupil has different needs and abilities (Hornby, 1999). Further practical training for new and post-qualification teachers concerning special education in areas of providing education for pupils with diverse learning needs should also be adopted. There should also be a provision for training in behaviour management and the most beneficial teaching strategies for the bilingual education of pupils with diverse needs and abilities should also be put in place.

Reduction in class sizes and investment in learning resources in the Irish language:

The lack of space in classrooms was seen as a challenge to accommodate the recommendations of educational professionals regarding pupils whose disabilities require additional space allocations. Multi-class setting and large class sizes were identified as being a hindering factor to the inclusion of pupils with disabilities with five teachers stating that they have over thirty pupils in their classes. It was recommended that a reduction in the class sizes should be considered as class sizes have a major impact on pupils' level of learning (INTO, 2020; OECD, 2019). The DES (2017) recommended a lower pupil: teacher ratio of twenty to one as part of the package of support in DEIS band one schools, yet over two years on this reduction has not been passed on to DEIS schools (INTO, 2019). It is recommended from the findings of this study that this reduction in class size should be passed onto DEIS schools with immediate effect. Urgent investment is required for the provision of additional resources providing visual and sensory stimuli in the form of books and technology in the Irish language for educational purposes.

Development of a UDL approach to assessment and standardised tests:

Teachers highlighted issues concerning the challenges experienced by pupils as a result of standardised testing which concur with similar results revealed in a study carried out by DCU

and the INTO (2019). Although tests can be a valuable tool for assessment, they are also linked to unintended negative consequences in pupils (O'Brien, 2019). According to Nic Craith (2019), the results from the INTO report highlights a "*requirement for clarity on policy and practice concerning assessment and standardised testing in primary schools.*" The researcher concurs with this and feels that the area of assessment and standardised assessment, in particular, should be developed further to cater better for the diverse needs of all pupils.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the researcher believes that principals, teachers and SNAs in Gaeltacht schools are doing extremely positive work and trying their best to provide an inclusive educational environment albeit under extremely challenging circumstances. The researcher does feel however that the good work being carried out by teachers and SNAs is being undermined by the inadequacy in the provision of supports being allocated and the lack of bilingual support services, and systematic failures at a macro level nationally. This study reveals that the fundamental wellbeing of pupils with disabilities in Gaeltacht schools is being neglected not by the school staff but by the DES and the Irish Government. The researcher concurs with findings from a survey carried out by the NPF (2019) indicating that there is an "inclusion illusion" currently taking place in Irish primary schools.

Inclusion involves more than just integrating pupils with disabilities into mainstream schools, in a "sink or swim" approach (NCSE, 2011). It's about providing the necessary support required to enable pupils with disabilities to have the same educational learning expectations, opportunities and aspirations as their peers without disabilities to ensure that success is achievable and that they are not at a disadvantage. The issues highlighted must be addressed by significant investment and urgent allocation of professional expertise support services to promote and enable pupils with disabilities to fully participate in mainstream Gaeltacht schools.

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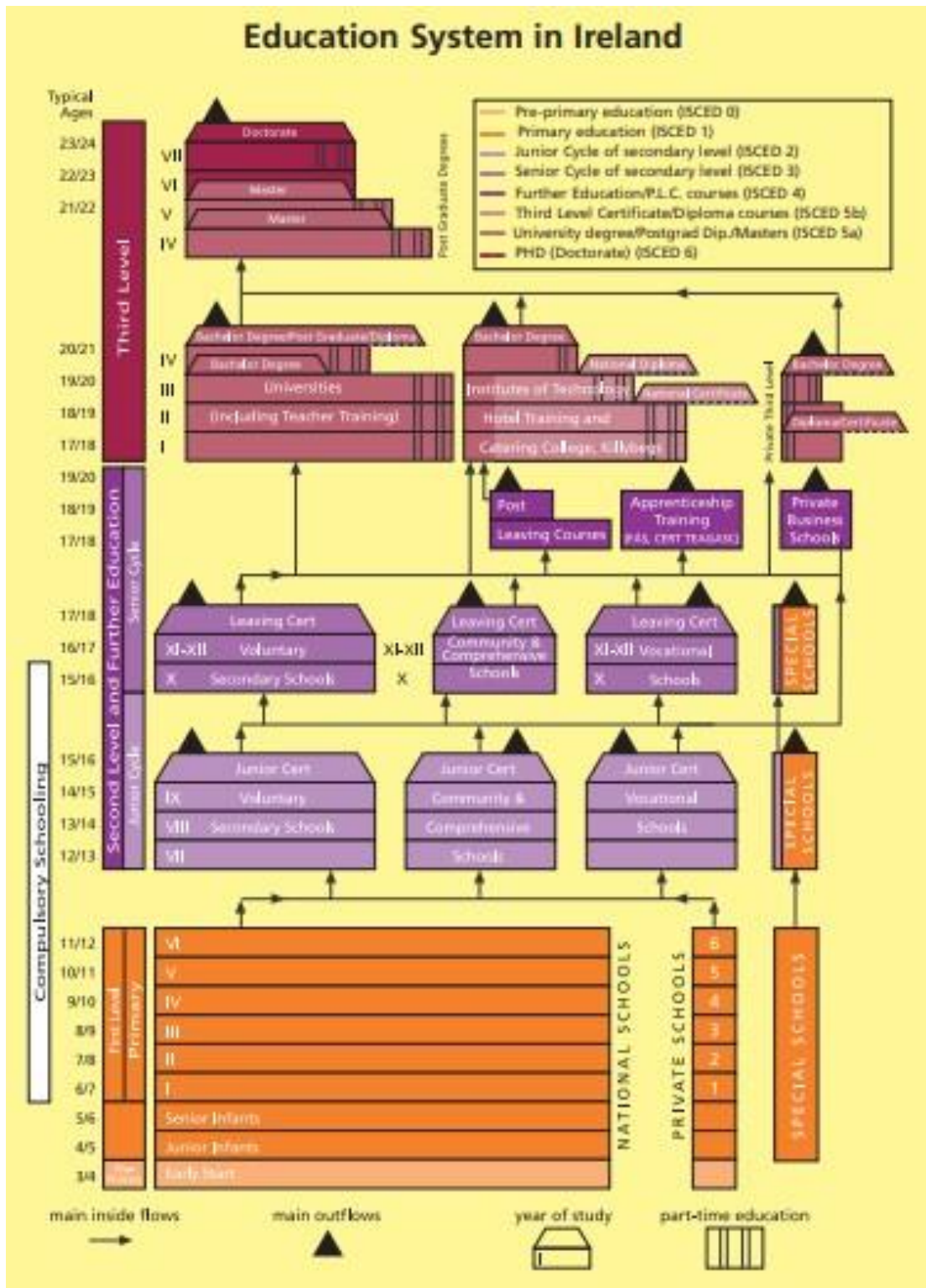
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Appendix A – Primary educational system in Ireland



<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/A-Brief-Description-of-the-Irish-Education-System.pdf>

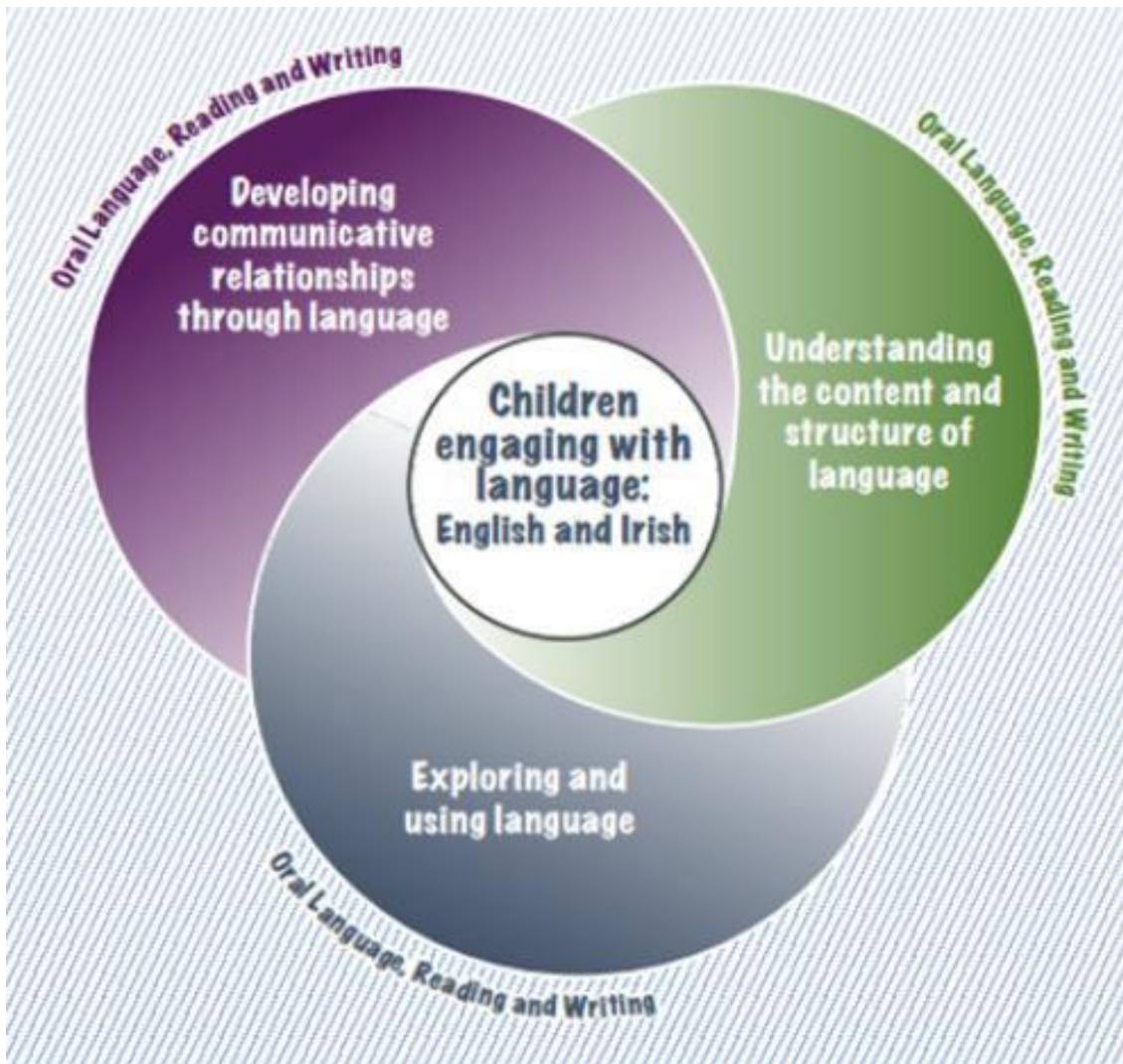
Appendix B – Continuum of Support Process

Identification of Needs through the Continuum of Support Process - (Primary Guidelines, p.9-10)

Classroom Support	<p>The class teacher considers how to differentiate the learning programme effectively to accommodate the needs of all pupils in the class. A classroom support plan is developed and / or adjusted over time for those pupils who do not respond appropriately to the differentiated programme.</p> <p>This is informed by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental consultation • Teacher observation records • Teacher-designed measures /assessments • Basic needs checklist * • Learning environment checklist* • Pupil consultation - My Thoughts About School Checklist • Literacy and numeracy tests • Screening tests of language skills <p>A Classroom Support plan runs for an agreed period of time and is subject to review</p>
School Support	<p>At this level a Support Plan is devised and informed by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher observation records • Teacher-designed measures / assessments • Parent and pupil interviews • Learning environment checklist • Diagnostic assessments in literacy/numeracy • Formal observation of behaviour including ABC charts, frequency measures • Functional assessment as appropriate, including screening measure for social, emotional and behavioural difficulties <p>A support plan at this level may detail suitable teaching approaches including team-teaching, small group or individual tuition. A School Support Plan operates for an agreed period of time and is subject to review</p>
School Support Plus	<p>This level of the Continuum is informed by a detailed, systematic approach to information gathering and assessment using a broad range of formal and informal assessment tools, reports from outside professionals (as appropriate) and may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher observation and teacher-designed measures • Parent and pupil interviews • Functional assessment • Results of standardised testing such as measures of cognitive ability; social, emotional and behavioural functioning; adaptive functioning etc. <p>Data generated from this process are then used to plan an appropriate intervention and can serve as a baseline against which to map progress. A support plan at this level is likely to be more detailed and individualised, and to include longer term planning and consultation</p>

*These checklists are available in the Continuum of Support Guidelines for Teachers

Appendix C – New Primary Language Curriculum



Available online:

<https://ilsa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Overview-Primary-Language-Curriculum-Fionnuala-Drudy.pdf>

Appendix D

Timetable of participant interviews

No. of interviews	Date	Interview Participant
1	27 th February 2020	Special Needs Assistant 1
2	13 th March 2020	Special Needs Assistant 2
3	25 th March 2020	Special Needs Assistant 3
4	27 th March 2020	Special Needs Assistant 4
5	9 th March 2020	Principal 1
6	9 th March 2020	Principal 2
7	29 th February 2020	Teacher 1
8	28 th February 2020	Teacher 2
9	23 rd March 2020	Teacher 3
10	21 st March 2020	Teacher 4
11	26 th March 2020	Teacher 5
12	24 th March 2020	Teacher 6

Research Timetable

Planning
Writing
Reading
Analyzing
Formatting

2019/2020	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul
Identifying research topic/area		31 Aug											
Research questions													
Research proposal 1 st /2 nd draft				01 Nov	22 Nov								
Literature review													
Ethical approval					25 Nov								
Participants consent													
Pilot interviews													
Interviews & research													
Data collection							05 Jan		05 Mar				
Data analysis													
First draft													
Second draft													
Final draft													
Dissertation submission													31 Jul

Appendix E - List of interview questions for principals and teachers:

1. Can you please give me a brief synopsis of your professional qualification and background?
2. How long have you been working in the education sector?
3. How long have you been working in a Gaeltacht school?
4. Have you had the experience of working with pupils with learning disabilities and or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)? If so, which type of settings i.e. mainstream classroom, ASD unit, etc.? Can you discuss your experience of how often children with disabilities progresses from being in mainstream school to a specialised setting or vice versa?
5. In your view have you received adequate training and the appropriate resources in order to provide adequately for the learning needs of pupils with disabilities and/or ASD?
6. Do you feel it benefits pupils with disabilities to be part of an inclusive education environment in mainstream school? If so, can you please give your views on the benefits to be gained for pupils with disabilities socially, emotionally and academically?
7. What in your opinion are the challenges if any, encountered by pupils with disabilities when accessing primary education in an inclusive mainstream school?
8. What impact in your view has providing an inclusive education to pupils with disabilities on the school and on other pupils in the class who do not have a disability?
9. What are the challenges you have encountered if any, when teaching a child with a disability at school? (Teachers only)
10. Does having access to an SNA have an impact on creating an inclusive learning environment for a child with a disability in your view. If so, can you please explain how?
11. Do you feel that the current method of allocation of SNA access to children with disabilities is adequate? Do you face any extra challenges when teaching a child who is not entitled to have access to a SNA? If so, please give details.
12. What do you do to ensure that the child with a disability is actively involved in class? And in extracurricular activities?
13. What type of teaching style do you use to create an inclusive educational environment? i.e. scaffolding, modelling, blended learning, team teaching, etc.
14. How is learning accessed and are there any challenges when carrying out assessment procedures?

15. “The NCSE (2011) described inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners. It involves removing barriers so that each learner will be enabled to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her schooling.”
Do you think that your school is providing an inclusive education? Can you please elaborate as to why you think this?
16. Do you think that the fact that the Irish language is the primary language of the school might have a negative or positive impact on the learning ability of a child with a disability and the inclusivity of the school as a whole? If so, please state which and why?
17. Can you please advise of any proposals or recommendations you feel could be made to improve and enhance the provision of an inclusive educational system for pupils with disabilities i.e. at a school level or nationally?
18. Do you feel that there is adequate support for teachers, SNAs and the parents/guardians of children with disabilities from the relevant authorities i.e. NCSE, TUSLA, HSE, Department of Education, etc.? Could you elaborate and advise of why you are of this opinion?
19. Is there additional information that you would like to add that you feel is important or relevant to the study?

Appendix F - List of interview questions for SNAs:

1. Can you please give me a brief synopsis of your professional qualification and background?
2. How long have you been working in the education sector?
3. How long have you been working in a Gaeltacht school?
20. Have you had the experience of working with pupils with disabilities and or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)? If so, for how long and in what type of setting i.e. mainstream classroom, ASD unit, etc.? Can you discuss your experience of how often children with disabilities progresses from being in mainstream school to a specialised setting or vice versa?
4. In your view have you received adequate training and the appropriate resources in order to provide adequately for the learning needs of pupils with disabilities and/or ASD?
5. Do you feel it benefits pupils with disabilities to be part of an inclusive education environment in mainstream school? If so, can you please give your views on the benefits to be gained for pupils with disabilities socially, emotionally and academically?
6. What in your opinion are the challenges if any, encountered by pupils with disabilities when accessing primary education in an inclusive mainstream school?
7. What impact in your view has providing an inclusive education to pupils with disabilities on the school and other pupils in the class who do not have a disability?
8. What challenges you have you encountered if any, when caring for a child with a disability in school? (SNAs only)
9. “The NCSE (2011) described inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners. It involves removing barriers so that each learner will be enabled to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her schooling.” Do you think that your school is providing an inclusive education? Can you please elaborate as to why you think this?
10. Do you think that the fact that the Irish language is the primary language of the school might have a negative or positive impact on the learning ability of a child with a disability and the inclusivity of the school as a whole? If so, please state which and why?
11. Do you feel that there is adequate support for teachers, SNAs and the parents/guardians of children with disabilities from the relevant authorities i.e. NCSE, TUSLA, HSE, Department of Education, etc.? Could you elaborate and advise of why you are of this opinion?

12. Can you please advise of any proposals or recommendations you feel could be made to improve the provision of an inclusive educational system for pupils with disabilities i.e. at a school level or nationally?
13. Is there additional information that you would like to add that you feel is important or relevant to the study?

Appendix G - Information letter for interview Participants

Title of research study: Are pupils with disabilities being adequately supported in Gaeltacht primary schools: the professionals' perspective?

Dear Participant,

My name is Grace O'Donnell, and I am currently a student on the Master of Arts in Learning and Teaching course at Letterkenny Institute of Technology. The primary aim of my research is to ascertain if pupils with disabilities being adequately supported in Gaeltacht primary schools from the perspective of the professionals working with them. I hope that the findings of this research will be of benefit to professionals interested in creating and providing an inclusive educational environment and parents to aid them in deciding which schools or educational pathway would best suit the needs of their child.

This research study is to be used as part of my dissertation. I am conducting interviews on the perspectives of teachers and SNAs in relation to the above topic. I would like to invite you to take part in the above research study. Any information given, recordings made and the identity and place of work of participants will be kept confidential and anonymised.

I can be contacted by email at XXXXXX or by phone at XXXXXX. My supervisors contact details are: Úna Carthy, Department of Law & Humanities, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, phone XXXXXX, and email at XXXXXXI really appreciate your time and consideration in participating. If you are happy and willing to participate, please read the attached information sheet and complete and sign the consent form attached. Please feel free to ask me any questions in relation to the project.

Thank you, Yours Sincerely,

Grace O'Donnell.

Appendix H - Information sheet for interview

As part of the requirements of the Master of Arts in Learning and Teaching. I have to complete a research study for a dissertation. The primary aim of my research is to ascertain if pupils with disabilities are being adequately supported in Gaeltacht primary schools from the perspective of the professionals working with them on a daily basis. The research data will be collected by myself by way of an interview, there will be approximately 10-15 questions asked during the interview and participants will be asked to respond with their views if they wish. The interviews should last approximately 20-30 minutes.

Why have you been chosen?

You have been chosen as you are working or have had experience of working with children with disabilities in a mainstream Gaeltacht primary school.

What will happen, and what will you be required to do?

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can change your mind and withdraw from the study at any time without any explanation until the data are analysed and about to be written up.

If you consent to take part in an interview I will meet with you or interview you by phone or video call, whichever option suits you best. If you consent with your permission, I will record the interview for the sole purpose of the dissertation. The interview will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner. Any information given by you will be anonymized and kept confidential. The researcher will be the only person with knowledge of who the actual participants are.

Benefits of the study

The results of the interview will be used as part of my dissertation research study which will be seen by my supervisor, the examiner, external examiners and perhaps future students. I believe that it may be of benefit to parents and guardians of children with disabilities and/or autism spectrum disorder to help them to decide on the most suitable education route for their child. I hope the findings of this study will be of benefit to professionals interested in creating and providing an inclusive educational environment.

Confidentiality

The researcher and supervisor will be the only people with access to the data and the identities of the area, schools and identities of participants will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to ensure participant anonymity. All data generated in hardcopy will be held securely in a locked cabinet and no names or identities will be used. Softcopy data will be stored on a password protected laptop and on a password encrypted file which is used exclusively by the researcher, and all individual documents will be password protected and encrypted. The data will be kept securely for 5 years after the completion of the project when softcopy will be deleted. Any hardcopy will be shredded. In relation to the interview, it will be anonymised and transcribed, and each participants interview transcript will be given to them to read to make sure that they are comfortable with its content before the researcher proceeds to write up the analysis. Participants will be given the opportunity to request deletions or amendments to the transcripts. All findings collected from data received and conclusions drawn as a result of the research will be readily available to participants if requested. Data collection will be in line with the Data Protection Act 2018 and 1988 (Ireland) GDPR legislation and in accordance with the BERA ethical standards 2018.

Appendix I – Research Consent Form

Title of research study: Are pupils with disabilities being adequately supported in Gaeltacht primary schools: the professionals’ perspective?

Name of researcher: **Grace O’Donnell**

I can be contacted by email at XXXXXX or by phone at XXXXXX

If you are in agreement with the statements below, please tick the boxes.

- I have read and understand the dissertation research information letter asking me to participate in an interview. Yes
- I understand that all the information collected will be kept confidential and anonymised that my identity and the identity of my organisation will not be included in the writing of the dissertation. Yes
- I give permission for my interview to be recorded electronically and transcribes and understand that this will be kept securely in an encrypted file on the researcher’s computer. Yes
- I understand that participation is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time until anonymisation of transcripts. Yes
- I understand that extracts from my interview may be quoted and that this research will be published in a Master of Arts in Learning and Teaching dissertation and any subsequent publications. Yes

Please tick one of the following boxes to indicate whether or not you agree to taking part:

- I **AGREE** to taking part in the above research
- I **DO NOT AGREE** to taking part in the above research

Signature: _____

Date: _____

(Participants signature)

Thank you for taking time to consider participating.

