

# A Study of the Experiences of Post Primary Students with Special Educational Needs

By Dr Garry Squires, Dr Afroditi Kalambouka,  
Joanna Bragg (University of Manchester)

RESEARCH REPORT NO. 23





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# Foreword

The voices of students with special educational needs – as those of all children and young people – are always important to hear. Their experiences and perspectives are valuable for education policy makers, providers, parents and learners themselves to reflect upon. In this regard, the NCSE is pleased to publish its latest commissioned research, *A Study of the Experiences of Post Primary Students with Special Educational Needs*, which captures these voices and analyses their views.

The research team from the University of Manchester consulted with over 270 post-primary students with different special educational needs, from 30 different educational settings across the country: secondary; vocational; community; comprehensive; special; and youthreach centres. They also reviewed the international evidence of the post-primary education experiences of children with special educational needs to contextualise the views of those involved in this research.

The report reveals that students in the Irish education system share many of the same views documented in the international literature. They value teachers who care about them as individuals and who are sensitive to their range of needs – learning, social and emotional. They like and want to be involved in decisions which affect them, in particular in making curriculum choices, but sometimes need help to do this. Friendships are important to them but some students experience problems developing and maintaining such relationships, particularly as they transition into post-primary. Some students in mainstream can feel that the pace of the curriculum moves too quickly for them. Some students in mainstream schools note that peers who attend special classes are not sufficiently included in the school community. Students dislike when schools delay in responding to incidents of bullying, and all are not welcoming of school strategies to address it.

Along with other recent NCSE research reports, including *Project IRIS – Inclusive Research in Irish Schools* (2015), and *A Study of Transition from Primary to Post-primary School for Pupils with Special Educational Needs* (2013), this study further enhances our understanding of the lives of students with special educational needs in our education system. It will be of interest to those working in schools, parents of children with special educational needs, policy makers and education sector stakeholders more generally.

**Teresa Griffin**  
*Chief Executive Officer*

July 2016

# Abstract

This commissioned study explores the views of 223 students with special educational needs to understand their experiences of post-primary education. Thirty post-primary settings participated from across Ireland involving a range of types of educational setting. Students were interviewed in their educational settings individually, in pairs or as part of focus groups.

The findings were consistent with other previously conducted international studies and indicated that the views of Irish students are broadly similar to those of students with SEN in other countries. Students were able to comment on school culture and climate; relationships with teachers; relationships with peers; curriculum and teaching methods; identification of SEN; support arrangements; accreditation routes and examination supports; and, participation and engagement with learning. The majority of students were positive about their current provision. Those that had changed placement preferred their current placement.

We identified a large number of helpful and unhelpful approaches used in mainstream and other settings to help schools think more carefully about how to remove barriers to learning and participation. From this, we were able to make suggestions for recommendations to further improve the educational experience of students with special educational needs. The most important key lesson from the literature review and from the students who participated in the study was that the students want to be involved in key decisions about their education and support arrangements suggesting that planning needs to be more student-centred.

There are a number of limitations to the study which are discussed in the report. There is breadth to the study but this meant that there was only a short time to work with students in each school; despite this we have a wide range of views consistent with previous research. The way in which students were recruited relied on teachers and schools selecting possible participants and there is potential bias in the selection, though students talked about their negative experiences as well as their positive experiences. There may be an under-representation of students with severe communication disorders and from designated special classes. The selection of areas to explore followed the adult agenda of commissioners and may not coincide with student agendas.

## Key Words

Special educational needs; student experience; student voice; mainstream; special school; Youthreach; post-primary; inclusion; supports.

# Acknowledgements

The support and help that the researchers received from schools to carry out this task was tremendous and we were made to feel very welcome. We are sincerely thankful to all of the students, parents and teachers who made the data collection possible.

We would like to thank the Advisory Group set up by NCSE for their enthusiasm for this project, for giving up their time freely and for their willingness to provide us with helpful advice and support. This group consisted of:

- Aisling Bacon, NCSE
- Mary Byrne, Head of Special Education, NCSE
- Paddy Connolly, CEO, Inclusion Ireland
- Dr Susan Crawford, Lecturer, University College Cork
- Michael Cullinane, Regional Director, National Educational Psychological Service
- Clare Farrell, Research and Communications Unit, NCSE
- Paula Flynn, Assistant Professor of Inclusive Education, Trinity College
- Joe O’Connell, Director, Limerick Education Centre
- Mark O’Connor, Inclusion Ireland
- Anne O’Donnell, Head of Communications and Citizen Participation, Department of Children and Youth Affairs
- Finn O’Murchu, Department of Education and Skills, Inspectorate
- Donie O’Shea, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Advisor, National Disability Authority
- Jennifer Van Aswegen, Regional Support Officer, Disability Federation of Ireland
- Michael Sheehan, Educational Psychologist

We would also like to thank the members of the project’s Steering Group who responded to emails and helped to ensure that our understanding of the Irish context was as best as it could be. This group consisted of:

- Michael Sheehan, previously worked for the DES, now treasurer of the International School Psychology Association
- Dr Susan Crawford, School of Education, University College Cork
- Dr Joe O’Connell, Director, Limerick Education Centre
- Dr Janet Muscutt, Executive Principal Educational Psychologist, UK
- Dr Richard Rutledge, Educational Psychologist, National Educational Psychological Service
- Professor Keith Sullivan, Statutory Professor and Head of the Discipline of Education, National University of Ireland

# The Research Team

This research was commissioned by NCSE and undertaken by the University of Manchester. The research team consisted of:

## Principal Investigator

Dr **Garry Squires**, Senior Lecturer and Director of the Professional Doctorate in Educational Psychology. Dr Squires is a Health Professions Council registered educational psychologist with substantial experience of Special Educational Needs in the UK.

## Research Assistants

Dr **Afroditi Kalambouka** and **Joanna Bragg** are senior research assistants with substantial experience on research projects within educational settings and utilising a range of research methods. Both are expert in the use of qualitative approaches and skilled at using nVivo for data analyses within research teams. Dr Kalambouka has lengthy experience of carrying out face-to-face interviews and focus groups involving young people, including students with SEND.

## Research advice and support

This research was supported by Dr **Caroline Bond** (Fieldwork Director of the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology), and Professor **Kevin Woods** (Director of the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology). Both are registered educational psychologists with the Health Professionals Council with substantial experience of working with parents, schools and students with special educational needs in the UK.

# Contents

Foreword	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
The Research Team	iv
Contents	v
List of Tables	x
List of Figures	xi
List of Acronyms	xii
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2. Literature Review</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1 Systematic review of peer-reviewed literature	15
2.2 The Person-Process-Context Model for conceptualising pupil experience	17
2.3 Conceptualisation of influences on student experiences based upon the Irish context	18
2.3.1 Categorising special educational needs	20
2.3.2 A continuum of support for special educational needs	23
2.3.3 Special schools and special classes	24
2.3.4 Summary of the policy context and involvement of students with special educational needs	25
2.3.5 Curriculum	28
2.3.6 School types	30
2.4 RQ 1 What does the international and Irish research literature tell us about the views and experiences of students at second level school, the particular experiences of students with special educational needs and the comparative experience of these two groups?	32
2.4.1 The views and experiences of students without SEN at second level schools	32
2.4.2 The views of students with special educational needs	35
2.4.2.1 Curriculum access	35
2.4.2.2 School climate	38
2.4.2.3 Processes and structures	39
2.4.2.4 Relationships with teachers and peers	40

2.4.2.5	Engagement with school and learning	43
2.4.2.6	Access to qualifications and achievements	44
2.4.2.7	Development of identity, well-being and independence	45
2.4.3	Summarising the comparative experiences of the two groups	46
2.5	RQ 2 What are the lessons for policy and practice that arise from an analysis of this body of work?	49

### **3. Methodology: How Did We Find Out Students' Views? 50**

3.1	Overview of the project design	50
3.2	Piloting the approach with students	52
3.2.1	Changes made to the methodology as a result of the pilot	53
3.3	Schools: How did we choose the schools?	54
3.3.1	Sampling frame	55
3.3.2	Type of school by gender intake	56
3.3.3	Schools contacted and invited to participate	57
3.4	Understanding what the schools were like: the school context	59
3.5	Participants: Who did we ask?	59
3.6	Asking students what they think	63
3.6.1	Subject cards	64
3.6.2	Topic cards	65
3.6.3	Feelings cards	66
3.6.4	Scaling	67
3.6.5	Open ended response boards	68
3.7	Ethics	68
3.7.1	Ethical clearance	68
3.7.2	Process of informed consent	68
3.7.3	Keeping data safe	69
3.7.4	DBS and child protection protocols	69
3.7.5	Fieldwork risk assessment	69
3.8	RQ 7: Limitations to the design of the study and the lessons arising	69
3.8.1	Breadth versus depth	69
3.8.2	Informed consent and deviation from the sampling frame	70
3.8.3	Type of special educational need represented	70
3.8.4	How widely views are held and generalisability of the findings	71
3.8.5	Selection of experiences to research	71
3.9	Data analysis	72

<b>4. Findings: Making Sense of What Students Told Us</b>	<b>75</b>
4.1 Mainstream settings	76
4.1.1 Experience of teaching methods	76
4.1.2 Experience of the curriculum	77
4.1.3 Supports	80
4.1.4 School climate	84
4.1.5 Processes and structures	85
4.1.6 Experience of relationships	86
4.1.6.1 Relationships with peers	86
4.1.6.2 Relationships with teachers	88
4.1.7 Participation and engagement	90
4.1.8 Attendance	91
4.1.9 Formal outcomes	91
4.1.10 Informal outcomes – wellbeing and independence	92
4.1.11 Summarising the views of mainstream students with SEN	93
4.2 Special schools	94
4.2.1 Context	95
4.2.2 Experience of the curriculum	96
4.2.3 Supports	97
4.2.4 School climate	98
4.2.5 Relationships with teachers	98
4.2.6 Relationships with peers	98
4.2.7 Participation and engagement	99
4.2.8 Formal and informal outcomes	99
4.3 Youthreach centres	100
4.3.1 Context	100
4.3.2 Experience of the curriculum and teaching methods	101
4.3.3 Supports	102
4.3.4 School climate	103
4.3.5 Processes and structures	105
4.3.6 Experience of relationships	105
4.3.7 Participation and engagement	106
4.3.8 Formal and informal outcomes	107

4.4	Summarising student experiences around Research Questions 3 and 4	107
4.4.1	RQ 3 How do Irish students with a broad range of special educational needs and across a range of second-level school types, experience curriculum, teaching methods, supports, school climate, processes and structures, relationships with teachers and peers, and other issues at school?	108
4.4.2	RQ 4 How do these experiences impact on their participation and engagement in education and how are different student experiences linked with formal and informal educational outcomes (e.g. attainment, early school leaving, certification, well-being, independence etc.)?	111
<b>5.</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>113</b>
5.1	RQ 5 How does this new data on the experiences of students with special educational needs build on or extend the analysis of the existing literature about the experiences of students with and without special educational needs at second level school?	115
5.1.1	Experience of the curriculum	115
5.1.2	Supports	117
5.1.3	School climate	120
5.1.4	Processes and structures	121
5.1.5	Relationships with teachers	122
5.1.6	Relationships with peers	123
5.1.7	Participation and engagement	124
5.1.8	Formal outcomes	125
5.1.9	Informal outcomes	125
5.2	RQ 6 What are the key lessons from this study which might improve educational experiences and outcomes for second level students with special educational needs? Mapping influences onto the Person-Process-Context model	127
5.3	Lessons arising for policy and practice	134
	<b>References</b>	<b>137</b>

<b>Appendices</b>	<b>148</b>
<b>Appendix 1:</b> Invitation Letter to Principals	148
<b>Appendix 2:</b> Participant information sheet and consent for link teachers	149
<b>Appendix 3:</b> Participant information sheet and consent for parents	153
<b>Appendix 4:</b> Participant information sheet and pupil assent form	157
<b>Appendix 5:</b> Interview and focus group questions for each cycle	159
<b>Appendix 6:</b> Child protection protocol	176

# List of Tables

<b>Table 1:</b> Search terms used	16
<b>Table 2:</b> Distribution of students in different types of Post Primary school	30
<b>Table 3:</b> Retention rates in DEIS and Non-DEIS schools	31
<b>Table 4:</b> School leaver qualifications in DEIS and non-DEIS schools	31
<b>Table 5:</b> Incidence of bullying (Due, 2005)	34
<b>Table 6:</b> Number of each type of school in the study	55
<b>Table 7:</b> Number of each size of school in the study	56
<b>Table 8:</b> Number of each type of school by gender intake in the study	56
<b>Table 9:</b> Schools with special classes included in the study	56
<b>Table 10:</b> Schools invited and those agreeing to participate in the study	58
<b>Table 11:</b> Students in each cycle	61
<b>Table 12:</b> Students in each year group	61
<b>Table 13:</b> Number of students from each setting	61
<b>Table 14:</b> Students following each qualification	62
<b>Table 15:</b> Number of students with each type of need	62
<b>Table 16:</b> Student views about positive and negative teacher qualities	129

# List of Figures

<b>Figure 1:</b> Person-Process-Context model	17
<b>Figure 2:</b> DES Categories of SEN (based on published information DES, 2005b)	21
<b>Figure 3:</b> Continuum of support for special educational needs	23
<b>Figure 4:</b> Themes and tensions from policy impacting on school practice and student experience	27
<b>Figure 5:</b> School and class combinations	32
<b>Figure 6:</b> Overview of the project design	51
<b>Figure 7:</b> Original data collection design	51
<b>Figure 8:</b> Revised Data Collection	54
<b>Figure 9:</b> Process for selecting schools	57
<b>Figure 10:</b> Process for recruiting students	60
<b>Figure 11:</b> Outline of the Person-Process-Context model	127
<b>Figure 12:</b> Policy influences on student experience	128
<b>Figure 13:</b> Meso level – school culture	130
<b>Figure 14:</b> Meso Level – curriculum	131
<b>Figure 15:</b> Meso level – support	132
<b>Figure 16:</b> Meso level – friendships	133
<b>Figure 17:</b> Meso level – bullying	134

# List of Acronyms

## Acronym

<b>ABA</b>	Applied Behaviour Analysis
<b>ADHD</b>	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (also ADD)
<b>ASD</b>	Autistic Spectrum Disorders
<b>ASDAN</b>	Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network
<b>DBS</b>	Debarring Service (UK)
<b>DCD</b>	Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (dyspraxia)
<b>DEIS</b>	Delivering of Equal Opportunity in Schools
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Skills
<b>EAL</b>	English as an Additional Language
<b>EBD</b>	Emotional and Behavioural Disabilities
<b>EPSEN</b>	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
<b>FETAC</b>	Further Education and Training Awards Council
<b>GAM</b>	General Allocation Model
<b>GCSE</b>	General Certificate in Secondary Education (UK exam)
<b>GLD</b>	General Learning Disability
<b>HI</b>	Hearing Impairment
<b>HSCL</b>	Home, School, Community Liaison Scheme
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technology
<b>IEP</b>	Individual Education Plan
<b>JC</b>	Junior Certificate/Junior Cycle
<b>LC</b>	Leaving Certificate (Established)
<b>LCA</b>	Leaving Certificate Applied
<b>LCVP</b>	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
<b>LD</b>	Learning Disability
<b>LSA</b>	Learning Support Assistant

**Acronym**

<b>NCSE</b>	National Council for Special Education
<b>NEPS</b>	National Educational Psychology Service
<b>PE</b>	Physical Education
<b>RACE</b>	Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations scheme
<b>SC</b>	Senior Cycle
<b>SCP</b>	School Completion Programme
<b>SEBD</b>	Social and Emotional Behavioural Disabilities
<b>SEN</b>	Special Educational Needs
<b>SENO</b>	Special Educational Needs Organiser
<b>SET</b>	Special Education Teacher
<b>SLD</b>	Specific Learning Disability (also SpLD in UK)
<b>SNA</b>	Special Needs Assistant
<b>SSLD</b>	Specific Speech and Language Disorder
<b>SSP</b>	Schools Support Programme
<b>TY</b>	Transition Year
<b>UNCRC</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>VI</b>	Visual Impairment



# Executive Summary

## Introduction and Background

This research study was commissioned by NCSE and undertaken by a research team led by Dr Garry Squires from the University of Manchester.

The study explores the '*Experiences of Post Primary Students with Special Educational Needs*'. The study starts with a literature review that provides the focus for the second phase of the study which involved gathering views from students themselves. We were concerned with exploring student views in relation to:

- The curriculum offered
- Teaching methods
- Supports for special educational needs
- School climate
- Relationships with teachers and peers
- Engagement with school and learning
- Access to qualifications and achievements
- Development of well-being and independence
- Any contrasts and similarities between the students' primary experiences and their experiences of a more complex post-primary setting.

**RQ 1** What does the international and Irish research literature tell us about the views and experiences of students at second level school, the particular experiences of students with special educational needs and the comparative experience of these two groups?

There are similar issues coming up for both students who do not have SEN and those who do. However, some of the studies with students with SEN focus on aspects of their education that are directly related to their type of SEN and this prevents direct comparison on every issue. Sometimes the studies involve very small numbers of students so there is a need to be cautious of over-generalising and the points should be considered as indicators of potential issues.

It seems that both groups of students value qualifications and see developing literacy skills as important. For students with SEN, a lack of development of literacy skills was seen as leading to negative attitudes about school in one USA study. The majority of students without SEN wanted to go onto further education. Students with SEN were more likely to seek employment or work-based education than their peers. Those with SEN who continued in to post-16 education preferred practical subjects to academic subjects.

Curriculum relevance was important to students with and without SEN. Students without SEN valued a range of teaching approaches with activities that simulated real life experiences being desirable. The most popular subject choices amongst students without SEN were sport, art and creative subjects. Students with SEN in one study reported that there was limited support in mainstream schools for them to take part in sport. Studies found mixed results for how well students with SEN were able to access the wider curriculum and the extent to which curriculum adaptations were made to meet SEN. In one study less than half said that work was suitably differentiated to their needs. Students identified sciences, languages and information technology as the most difficult to access. Having the correct technical support was reported to improve curriculum access for students with SEN in another study. Individually tailored programmes were viewed positively by English students with SEN. Repetitive remedial teaching approaches were reported as boring or seeming irrelevant to USA students with SEN. Irish students valued the chance to repeat a year. Subject choice in special schools was reported to be more limited than in mainstream by Scottish students with SEN.

Although the notion of inclusion is promoted by adults as being a good thing this view is not necessarily shared by students. The results of previous studies that looked at the views of students with SEN about placement in mainstream, special classes or special schools were mixed. Typically, students tended to have positive experiences irrespective of which setting they were placed in. In the UK some students in special schools would have preferred to be in mainstream, whereas in Ireland students who had experienced both mainstream and special classes or schools preferred the special school or special class to the mainstream classroom. The differences may be due to the way in which additional adult support is organised – students in both countries wanted easy access to help when they needed it. One study in Australia found that, while some students with disabilities wanted mainstream schools, others wanted special classes or special schools. An Irish study found that students liked the notion of having different types of school that they could attend to address their special educational needs, however, the choice that they would make would depend on the support available in each setting. The key issue was a need for a co-ordinated approach that would allow them to make use of the opportunities available.

Autonomy and involvement in decision-making was valued by students with and without SEN. Both sets of students often perceived teachers as being too busy to take account of student interests or views when making the curriculum relevant or planning support for students with SEN. When students were involved in decision-making in one USA study of students without SEN, this was found to lead to greater academic engagement. Just under half of students without SEN in an Irish study reported perceived unfair treatment by teachers. A study in Scotland found that students with SEN were provided with limited ways of being involved in decision-making and not always encouraged to express their views. One study found that students with SEN wanted to be able to take risks with their learning and develop independence and only wanted adult help when it was needed. Adult support provided too tightly was seen as limiting social and academic development. Students valued practical support. Internationally, students did not like adult support that was over-controlling or which interfered with developing relationships with peers or made them stand out from other students. Standing out or appearing different was also a concern of students who needed specialist equipment to help with their physical disabilities. In one study, students with SEN thought it was important that the supporting adults needed to understand their disability in order to provide appropriate support. One study found

that students with SEN were sometimes unsure about the roles of different adults in providing support to them.

A number of studies highlighted the views of students around the importance of friendships and support networks. An English study of students with SEN reported that they received help from support agencies and teachers at transition points. For students without SEN, support came from family and friends to make the transition to post-secondary life easier. A small-scale study found that the difficulties encountered at transition to second-level education for students with SEN can be long-standing and relate to workload increases, complex timetables, moving around a building, friendships, keeping track of learning materials and tasks. Transition planning helps to some extent and is better when this is extended beyond a single visit. The majority of students without SEN found making friendships easy, though girls felt less popular than boys. More of a mixed picture emerged for students with SEN. One English study found that the majority of students with SEN found making friends easy while, in contrast, an Irish study found that friendships were an issue for most students with SEN. USA studies have indicated that students with SEN have fewer friendships than peers. There is some evidence that friendship development varies with the type of SEN. Physical disabilities and chronic illnesses affect the quality educational experiences of some students with SEN. Teacher views and student views about friendships may not coincide; one study found that students with ASD reported more friendships than their teachers thought was the case. Students with SEN are less likely to undertake extracurricular activities than students without SEN and this may limit opportunities for friendship development.

Many studies have found that the relationship between students and teachers is important. Students with SEN in these studies cite a range of teacher qualities that are desirable including: establishing trust; being honest; encouraging and supporting students; being clear and consistent; inclusive attitudes; good quality interpersonal relationships. Students value being cared for and treated with respect. They value teachers who understand their needs and understand the whole person, with strengths alongside weaknesses. School enjoyment is often linked directly to students' experiences of relationships with teachers. In an English study of students without SEN, the majority liked school, however older students liked school less than younger students, 40 per cent of students from disadvantaged backgrounds found school boring and more boys than girls thought that school was a waste of time. Students with SEN were more likely to feel out of place in school than those without SEN.

Students with SEN experience more bullying than those without SEN. School type has a mixed effect on the experience of bullying. In Ireland, students with SEN experience more bullying in mainstream schools than in special schools. In the USA the opposite pattern was found, in England there were no substantial differences. The type of SEN seems to matter. Students with physical difficulties in Ireland have reported being victims of name calling and verbal bullying. Students with ASD reported being more likely to be bullied than students with dyslexia and this may be linked to poorer social communication skills. In a Dutch study there were differences in how adults perceived bullying and how the students themselves perceived bullying, with students with ASD experiencing less bullying than teachers indicated.

## RQ 2 What are the lessons for policy and practice that arise from an analysis of this body of work?

Several studies have shown that adult views about how best to educate students and student views about what they would prefer are not always the same. How students perceive the relevance of curriculum subjects was important to students in some of the studies. There were mixed findings about how well students can access support. The role of teachers is crucial and having inclusive attitudes and a flexible, supportive approach in which good relationships are engendered seems important to student engagement and learning. The key lesson is that this suggests that **student views should be obtained and taken seriously for a range of things including: educational placement; how support is provided and co-ordinated; the types of teaching methods used; how adult support is used in the classroom; and, aspirations for education and employment.**

Students with SEN do not want to be marked out as different to peers. This means that teachers will need to explore how they can help students learn by removing barriers to learning and participation at the whole class or school level. The key lesson is that **discussion with the student could help teachers understand how individual support can be arranged in ways which are less intrusive or obvious.**

Students with SEN are more likely to report being the subject of bullying and this may be linked to poorer social skills and fewer friendships. This suggests that strategies that help develop social skills may be preventative of bullying. The key lesson is that **whole school approaches to helping students form friendships should be developed and schools will need to put more emphasis on helping students with SEN form friendships.**

## Methodology

The empirical part of the study used the main themes from the literature review to help conceptualise the questions to be asked of post-primary students with SEN. We visited 30 post-primary settings selected to provide wide geographical coverage and to be representative of the types of schools found across Ireland. We wrote to 379 schools to invite them to participate in the study and the final sample consisted of schools in 16 counties: 13 secondary schools; 9 vocational schools; 2 community schools; 1 comprehensive school; 3 special schools; and, 2 Youthreach centres. The rationale for including Youthreach centres and special schools was to ensure that we accessed a wide range of post-primary aged students who may have left mainstream but were still in secondary-level education. We ensured that some of the schools in the sample had special classes and the coverage was: 5 schools with a special class for students with ASD; 1 with a special class for Mild GLD; 1 with a special class for Moderate GLD and 1 with a special class for Physical Disability (and the study included 6 students in a special class for students with ASD). We took account of other factors such as whether schools were DEIS, Non-DEIS, Fee Paying, rural or urban, school size (small, medium or large), number of resource hours and number of SNAs.

The students were recruited by teachers at their schools and we aimed for a mixture of phase of post-primary education (Junior Cycle, Transition Year and Senior Cycle) and a broad range of types of SEN as reported by link teachers in each school or setting. Students involved in the study were spread across a range of qualification routes. We provided information sheets and consent forms for parents to provide informed consent. Students whose parents provided informed consent were themselves informed about the research and asked to give their assent to be involved in the study. In total, 272 post-primary students participated in the research. However, we were unable to obtain data from schools about the type of SEN for 59 students. Our analysis is based on the views of 223 students with SEN.

Procedures for collecting student views were piloted with post-primary students aged 11–12 in a special school near to the University of Manchester. This allowed the design to be modified and materials developed to support students in giving their views of their experiences of school. The views of the students were collected through individual interviews, paired interviews or focus groups carried out in the post-primary setting. Key visuals were provided to support language, working memory, attentional focus and content interest. All procedures used were approved by the University Research Ethics Committee. Members of the research team were vetted through UK child protection procedures. A detailed Child Protection Protocol was drawn up and checked through the NCSE with the HSE (now Tusla) to ensure that it was in compliance with the requirements of Irish policy and the *Children First* Guidelines.

**RQ 3 How do Irish students with a broad range of special educational needs and across a range of second level school types, experience curriculum, teaching methods, supports, school climate, processes and structures, relationships with teachers and peers, and other issues at school?**

The majority of students like school and those who have changed settings prefer their current setting. The school climate encompasses many aspects of this question in that it describes how the school is organised, how well school discipline is managed, the values of the school community and their stance on inclusion. One common theme that emerged in response to many of the questions that we posed is that students value teachers who care about them as individuals, reflected in comments such as those on how teachers modified their teaching for specific students. Similarly, the Youthreach students supported this view when they talked about mainstream teachers who they perceived as being inflexible, petty, unfair and insensitive to individual needs. Some mainstream students also commented on their perception of a lack of inclusive teaching and what ranged from insensitivity to intolerance of individual needs. Students talked positively about how post-primary settings were able to be more flexible than primary settings.

Attempts by schools to manage behaviour were felt to be important to students in reducing disruptive behaviour that interferes with learning. Reward systems that encouraged positive behaviour were valued in special schools. Mixed responses came from mainstream students who sometimes indicated that they did not think that the reward system allowed them to be successful in attaining rewards. Students thought that the punishment system had to be meaningful and systems that used punishment instead of helping students learn did not make sense. Systems that used an increasing tariff system in which small transgressions can lead to a sanction that would be expected for a more major infringement of school rules were felt to be

ineffective. Equally, students talked about peer pressure being used to undermine school systems to manage behaviour. Mainstream students found that larger classes with disruptive pupils ('messers') interfered with learning. Students in Youthreach also contrasted these classes with smaller classes in which support was more easily accessed and there was less disruption.

The choice of subjects was valued by mainstream students and those students in Youthreach centres appreciated that the range of subjects available to them was similar to that in mainstream with access to a similar range of qualifications. A more restricted choice of subjects was mentioned by students in special schools. There were mixed responses from mainstream students about being able to do Irish or foreign languages. Students wanted to be involved in decision-making around subject choice and, across all settings, they placed importance on the relevance of the subject to future aspirations and relevance to career choices or college access.

Some students found the pace of the curriculum in mainstream moved too quickly. Students in Youthreach valued a more relaxed pace that was available to them compared to their experience of mainstream. Students in all three settings indicated that a relaxed atmosphere was more conducive to learning.

Across the settings, teaching methods were linked to experiences of individual teachers and students found creative teachers who could respond flexibly and were sensitive to individual needs were helpful to learning. Particular teaching methods mentioned as being helpful included: having interactive lessons (rather than teacher-centred lessons); having practical lessons; making use of co-operative group work where students can support each other's learning; and, allowing concentration breaks for students to regain focus.

Students in mainstream schools talked about the use of resource rooms as a means of providing support. They were seen positively as being able to provide more intensive teaching. The smaller teaching group allowed some students to focus better and for some students to see them as an emotional sanctuary. The atmosphere in resource rooms was generally reported to be more relaxed than the mainstream classrooms. Some students differentiated between the general support available through resource rooms that was successful in helping students develop basic skills, from the more subject specific support they needed that resource rooms did not always provide. Some students indicated that there was poor synergy between what happened in the mainstream classroom and what happened in the resource room. In some schools this was overcome by subject teachers who were able to drop into the resource room to provide additional help to individual students. Some of the basic skill teaching occurring in resource rooms was experienced by some students as demeaning and not age appropriate.

Some of the students in mainstream schools that had special classes told us that the students who attended the special classes were not sufficiently included in the school community. We were only able to talk to a small number of students from an ASD special class who valued being able to move into mainstream classes, however, these could be threatening for some students. This indicates that there is more work to be done to promote inclusive attitudes for the whole community.

In some schools, additional teachers are available in some classes and this is valued by students when there is good communication between the teachers. Students had a negative experience when the teachers did not communicate well and used different teaching methods. The use of SNAs in some mainstream schools and special schools seems to be more flexible than the scheme intended and students report that they find this helpful. Some students in mainstream and those in Youthreach reflecting on their mainstream experiences commented that they did not want to be singled out for individual support within the classroom. This sometimes made them reluctant to ask for help. Students talked positively about teachers who were able to anticipate barriers to learning and adjusted their teaching so that students did not need to seek additional support within the classroom. Mainstream and Youthreach students reported negative experiences of mainstream teachers who seemed too busy or disinterested and who were not able to respond to individual needs.

Students in special schools that had transferred from mainstream primary schools indicated that they did not think that they had enough support when they were at primary school. Several mainstream and Youthreach students talked about how support reduced as they moved from primary to post-primary settings. The processes and structures in operation affect student experience of their setting. Some students talked about how the transition from primary to post-primary settings had initially been difficult due to the geographical and social size of the post-primary setting. A tension exists in the way that support is identified with some students reporting delays in the formal assessment process that would lead to them receiving individual support or allowing examination arrangements to be put in place. Other students had a more positive experience where schools identified individual support in a flexible way. In some cases, students talked about informal support arrangements being made between schools and parents. Students in special schools and Youthreach thought that these were more flexible than mainstream settings in organising support and carrying out individual assessments to produce learner-centred approaches.

How students experience their education is largely affected by their experience of their social environment, that is to say their relationship with teachers and their relationship with their peers. Students thought that the teachers who could provide the best support were those that were friendly, fair and knew the student well. Good relationships with teachers was reported to foster a sense of trust and allowed difficult issues to be dealt with. Students valued teachers who were sensitive to the student's learning needs, social needs and emotional needs. Students in Youthreach centres thought that their teachers were more caring than those in mainstream. Students in all settings reported the importance of friendships. Mainstream students talked about the enduring nature of friendships that existed beyond the bounds of the school premises. In contrast, special school students talked about the difficulty of maintaining friendships outside of school because they tended not to live near their school friends. There were positive examples of how special school teachers helped students to use technology to overcome geographical limitations to maintain friendships outside of school. The transition from primary to post-primary and from primary to special was reported to be a challenge to maintaining friendships for some students who missed their old primary school friends. Some of the students in Youthreach reflected on how they had experienced troubled relationships with peers and how

this had changed when they moved to smaller settings. The impact of friendships on examination pathway choices was mentioned by some students as was the reverse process of pathway choices interfering with established friendships.

**RQ 4** How do these experiences impact on their participation and engagement in education and how are different student experiences linked with formal and informal educational outcomes (e.g. attainment, early school leaving, certification, well-being, independence etc.)?

It is clear that teachers can have a positive impact on encouraging students to learn and to engage with education. Teachers who made school interesting were cited by some mainstream students as a way of encouraging attendance. Teachers who show that they like the student and treat students respectfully are seen as encouraging students to work harder and behave better. Some mainstream students talked about the clubs that the school organised to encourage engagement with learning and school and thought that they were a good idea. However, they did not go themselves because their friends did not go.

The optional transition year was viewed differently by different mainstream students. Some wanted to avoid it all together; some were ambivalent; while others valued it highly. For some students the transition year was seen as a time to become more mature and improve independence.

Students in all settings were aspirational and talked about how formal examinations would help them into employment or on to college. Students in Youthreach perceived better opportunities for this than they had experienced in mainstream. Some students talked about examinations and the processes around examinations as being stressful. Some students talked about how they could be supported in examinations through waivers. Technological aids were helpful to engagement with the curriculum for some mainstream students and some students in special schools.

Views about school councils were ambivalent. Some students thought that they encouraged involvement and made the school better. Other students were sceptical about their ability to participate in the school council or the school council's ability to influence school policy.

Bullying was mentioned by students across all settings. Students valued strategies used by schools to tackle bullying and prevent bullying. Not all strategies were valued by all students and some were valued more by younger students. When there was an incident that required school involvement, students did not like it when there seemed to be delays between the event and follow-up. Students who had transferred from mainstream primary school to special schools compared their experience with mainstream school and thought that special schools were safer environments where they were less likely to be bullied. Youthreach centres were also cited as being perceived as safer than mainstream by some students.

**RQ 5 How does this new data on the experiences of students with special educational needs build on or extend the analysis of the existing literature about the experiences of students with and without special educational needs at second level school?**

The findings in this study are consistent with those in the literature and gives more weight to the findings of many of the small-scale studies reported. Students liked being involved in curriculum choices; wanting their curriculum to be meaningful in terms of their aspirations; and expressed a preference for practical subjects. Specific to this study were the views that some examination types were more suitable to some students. Many students expressed a preference for examinations that involved a portfolio rather than a written examination. Some students commented on stress produced by taking many examinations at the same time. The pace of the curriculum in special schools and Youthreach was perceived as being more relaxed than in mainstream. Some students in special schools felt that they did not have the same examination opportunities as peers in mainstream. Unlike a previous study in Ireland that found that students valued the transition year, our research produced mixed results. We found limited involvement of students in setting learning goals, possibly because IEPs are not mandatory.

Student views around support arrangements are consistent with studies reported in the literature. They thought that teachers in special schools, special classes or Youthreach were more supportive and had more experience than those in mainstream settings; that they were not involved in decision-making about how support was organised; that some schools were able to use support flexibly to the benefit of students; SNA support that was too specific to the individual interfered with development of peer relationships; and, technological support seemed to improve engagement for students. Some students preferred more general support such as a resource room. Specifically, in this study, students who attended smaller classes across the different settings reported more confidence. Resource rooms allowed more opportunity to focus on skill development, however, there were not always good links between small group teaching and mainstream class teaching. SNAs were able to work flexibly and beyond their care role to support more students with SEN. Mainstream student views of special classes attached to mainstream schools suggest they may not be socially inclusive, though some caution is needed with this finding as we only spoke to six students from a class designated for ASD students.

School climate is defined through relationships between members of the school community, tone, and attitudes of staff and students. As with other studies, most students had positive experiences of their current setting. Those that had moved to more special schools or 'second chance' education reported that their experiences were better in their current setting than in mainstream. Students across all settings wanted to be treated with respect. Some students in this study echoed the findings of other studies in that they had encountered mainstream teachers who they perceived as being too busy. Similar to other studies, students valued teachers who seemed committed to engage with teaching and learning. Specific to this study, we found students did not like teachers whom they perceived as being unfair, overly rigid, or insensitive to student needs. The physical environment of the school was also important for student engagement and inclusion.

As with other studies, our method of recruiting participants highlighted the difficulty of defining SEN with teachers using a looser definition than the 14 categories of disability used by the DES. Some students in our study cited difficulty in being assessed and believed this influenced the support that they received. Other students talked about how teachers flexibly provided support.

In common with other studies, positive relationships with teachers were found to be important to students. Teachers were seen to be a key factor in student engagement. Similarly, peer relationships and friendships were seen as being important, both in school and beyond school. Maintaining friendships from school in the local community seemed easier for mainstream students than for special school students.

Many students with SEN reported experiencing some form of bullying and this is consistent with previous studies. Students in this study were able to cite a range of supports adopted by schools to help reduce bullying.

**RQ 6 What are the key lessons from this study which might improve educational experiences and outcomes for second level students with special educational needs?**

This study has explored the views of Irish students with SEN and found that these are consistent with the views of students with and without SEN reported in the international literature. Most post-primary students with SEN in this study were able to express themselves well and had definite views about what contributed to a positive educational experience. A few post-primary students with low incidence SEN in the study were able to express their views with the assistance of adults who knew them well.

Central to most parts of this report has been the need to listen to students and to involve them in decision-making. The finding from the international literature that student views should be obtained and taken seriously for a range of things is also echoed by the students in this study. Students with SEN are able to articulate their views about a range of important issues including: educational placement; how support is provided and co-ordinated; the types of teaching methods used; how adult support is used in the classroom; and, aspirations for education and employment. The curriculum has to be relevant to students, have an appropriate accreditation route, be presented at an accessible pace, preferably be practical rather than written and be taught by engaging, creative teachers. Students want to be involved in making curricular choices. To make these choices, students may need support to understand the options available and the pros and cons of different choices that they could make in terms of both short-term goals and long-term aspirations. The key lesson is that **students should be central to decisions made about them and actively involved in the process.**

The policy section of this report set out the context for education in Ireland and how this has led to different types of schools. Historically, special education has been different to general education but there has been a continual move towards a more inclusive education system in line with what has been happening in other countries. There is a range of types of schools and support arrangements that have to be managed by the principals of the schools. A key finding is that the way that schools are organised mediates between policy and school experience. School culture and the climate in terms of teacher attitudes, values and attributes are very important in

promoting student engagement and encouraging participation. The majority of students report that their experience of the supports available in their current setting is positive. The key lesson is that **school leaders need to consider how they can create a culture and climate in their schools that is supportive of all students, especially those who are vulnerable or have special educational needs.**

Teachers seem to be defining SEN more broadly than the DES categories of disability to include students for whom there are potential barriers to learning that need to be addressed through support. A flexible response is possible under the continuum of the special need model. Some students in this study have commented on how the formal identification of SEN and allocation of resources had adversely affected their educational experience. It is worthy of note that during the time this study has been conducted there have been moves to explore how resources are allocated to individuals and schools. Getting access to appropriate help when it is needed is an important issue for students, with most students wanting the help directly from the subject teacher or a flexible use of resource teachers and SNAs. Schools can consider how additional adult support within a classroom can be used flexibly. This allows help to be given to a wider range of students; help to be given more quickly; reduces the stigmatisation of having help; reduces inhibition of social development and peer relationships. The key lesson that emerges is **when different teachers are involved in teaching an individual student or group of students there needs to be good communication between the teaching team so that consistent approaches are used and opportunities for skill generalisation are developed.** This applies equally to team teaching; links between resource teachers and class teachers; links between support staff and class teachers, links with outside support services and class teachers. Consideration should be given to using teacher expertise in special schools to help develop teacher knowledge and skills in mainstream. This would particularly apply to the use of technology but could also be a wider pedagogic discussion about responding to individual needs.

Friendships are important at school and extend across the school–community boundary. In this study, students identified particular problems related to developing and maintaining friendships and some students specified positive steps that teachers had taken to overcome these difficulties. For students in special schools the geographical area from which the students are drawn is larger than a mainstream school and this poses additional challenges. The key lesson is that **friendship development and maintenance is harder for some students with SEN and particularly challenged at times of transition when existing friendships may change. Schools need to continue to explore how they use a range of strategies with vulnerable students.**

Across the literature there is evidence that bullying is more prominent amongst students with SEN. Students in this study identified several protective factors and strategies (friendships; peer mentoring; buddy systems; teaching coping strategies; teaching ways of responding; active involvement from teachers; smaller groupings such as special classes or special schools). The key lesson is that **schools should reflect on how they manage bullying in their school and pay particular attention to students with special educational needs.** In particular, having systems that show that students have been listened to and action has been taken quickly seem important to students. Preventative approaches help students to feel safe and can include teaching social skills and encouraging the development of supportive friendships.

There is evidence in the international literature (e.g. Lightfoot *et al.*, 1999) that how the physical environment of the school prevents inclusion is not always considered for students with physical difficulties and this was echoed by one student in our study. The key lesson from this is **that school buildings need to be audited in terms of accessibility with the aim of improving access for different groups of students.**

#### RQ 7 Limitations to the design of the study and the lessons arising

There are a number of limitations to the study which are discussed in the report. There is breadth to the study but this meant that there was only a short time to work with students in each school; despite this we have a wide range of views consistent with previous research. The way in which students were recruited relied on teachers and schools selecting possible participants and there is potential bias in the selection, though students talked about their negative experiences as well as their positive experiences. There may be an under-representation of students with severe communication disorders and from designated special classes. The selection of areas to explore followed the adult agenda of commissioners and may not coincide with student agendas, however, it is clear that the students had a lot to say about their experiences of the issues raised for discussion.

## 1. Introduction

This research project has been commissioned by the National Council for Special Education and seeks to add to the evidence base to assist in development of policy advice to the Minister of Education and Skills.

The study explores the '*Experiences of Students with Special Educational Needs at Post Primary School*'. The study starts with a literature review that provides the focus for the second phase of the study which involved gathering views from students themselves. The empirical work was mainly conducted during 2013 and 2014 and is timely given that this coincides with the 25th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We have been concerned with exploring student views in relation to:

- The curriculum offered
- Teaching methods
- Supports for special educational needs
- School climate
- Relationships with teachers and peers
- Engagement with school and learning
- Access to qualifications and achievements
- Development of well-being and independence
- Any contrasts and similarities between the students' primary experiences and their experiences of a more complex post-primary setting.

The research team were asked to address the following research questions:

- RQ 1** What does the international and Irish research literature tell us about the views and experiences of students at second level school, the particular experiences of students with special educational needs and the comparative experience of these two groups?
- RQ 2** What are the lessons for policy and practice that arise from an analysis of this body of work?
- RQ 3** How do Irish students with a broad range of special educational needs and across a range of second level school types, experience curriculum, teaching methods, supports, school climate, processes and structures, relationships with teachers and peers, and other issues at school?
- RQ 4** How do these experiences impact on their participation in and engagement with education and how are different student experiences linked with formal and informal educational outcomes (e.g. attainment, early school leaving, certification, well-being, independence etc.)?

- RQ 5** How does this new data on the experiences of students with special educational needs build on or extend the analysis of the existing literature about the experiences of students with and without special educational needs at second level school?
- RQ 6** What are the key lessons from this study which might improve educational experiences and outcomes for second level students with special educational needs?
- RQ 7** What are the possible limitations associated with this study and the lessons arising?

NCSE wanted us to seek a wide range of views from students in 30–40 schools in the terms of reference for this study; this was refined through discussion to include other post-primary settings. This means that the study has breadth of experience represented by the views of around 270 students heard and analysed. However, obtaining such a wide range of views inevitably means that there is only a small amount of time available to the researchers to spend with each student. Consequently, we may not have obtained the depth of experience or fully understood the nuances of each experience reported. A number of steps were designed to compensate for this which arose from the pilot study described later in the report (see page 53). The literature review provides a good background of wider, international research against which to compare the views that we have obtained and reflect on the authenticity of the experiences reported.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature review section sets out the international and peer-reviewed literature that we examined at the start of the project. This was to inform our decisions on how to go about the research and what kinds of issues might be relevant to the research questions. We also include the policy documents and state of play in the Republic of Ireland at the start of the project. Some of this information may have changed as policy has evolved over the period of the research. For example, the number of hours allocated to each category of need or the numbers of special classes catering for each category of need may have changed.

The literature search consists of the following main approaches:

- Exploring the policy context in which special education has been developed in Ireland by looking at Government policy documents and guidance from different bodies within Ireland. It also draws upon existing published research sponsored by the National Council for Special Education and from other bodies.
- Examination of the grey literature for example using the SIGLE (System for Information on Grey Literature in Europe) database, searches on Google and other relevant web-based sources (e.g. Education-line, European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education).
- A search of published peer-reviewed literature using electronic databases available to the University of Manchester. A systematic approach was taken to find the most likely international research that would inform our study.
- Literature was also identified by following up citations from reviewed sources and published reference lists.

### 2.1 Systematic review of peer-reviewed literature

The following education, sociology and psychology databases were used:

- Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)
- Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)
- British Education Index (BEI)
- Australian Education Index (AEI)
- British Humanities Index (BHI)
- PsychInfo
- Google Scholar
- Sociological Abstracts
- Social Policy and Practice
- Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA)

The following terms were used in various combinations (often varied between different databases) in order to identify as many relevant sources as possible:

**Table 1: Search terms used**

Concept of interest	Terms used
<b>Student voice</b>	Student voice OR student experiences OR experiences of students OR student views OR views of students OR student attitudes OR attitudes of students OR students perspectives OR perspectives of students
<b>Student SEN, disability</b>	SEN OR special educational needs OR special needs OR disability OR disabilities OR disorders OR learning difficulty OR learning difficulties OR hearing impairment OR deaf OR visual impairment OR blind OR emotional behavioural OR emotional behavioral OR emotional disturbance OR autism OR autistic OR asperger OR specific learning difficulty
<b>Area of study</b>	School OR curriculum OR teaching method OR support OR pedagogy OR school climate OR classroom climate OR processes OR structures OR relationships with teachers OR relationships with peers

Although this review does not claim to follow the principles of systematic reviews, general inclusion and exclusion criteria were agreed amongst the members of the research team in order to make the searches manageable and consistent. The following inclusion criteria were agreed for the searches in relation to research:

- Studies should report empirical research on student voice such as views, experiences, and attitudes as these were reported by the students themselves. Research studies that solely reported views or experiences and attitudes of students as these were perceived by teachers or parents were excluded.
- Studies should be written and published in the English language.
- We intended to include meta studies such as reviews of other studies reporting students' views, attitudes and experiences.
- Student participants should be at post-primary school age (or secondary school, or high school, according to the country), or, be between the ages of 12 and 18 years.
- There was no strict cut-off year for publication of the study. The earliest relevant paper included in the review was published in 1988, with the majority being published since 2000.

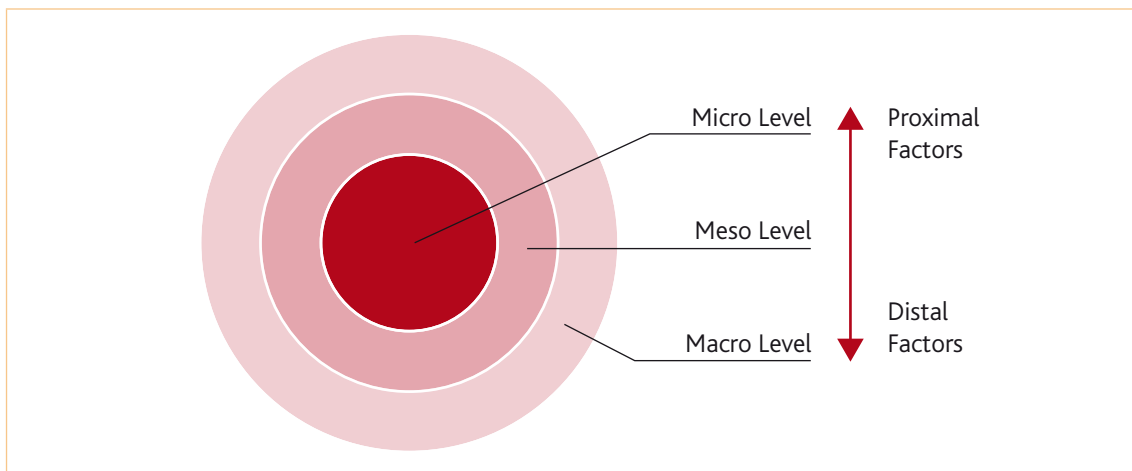
The searches produced a large number of potential papers for inclusion in the study, not all of which were relevant. The results produced from the keywords were then manually scanned for relevance. This started by checking the titles. Those papers that seemed relevant were then checked further by reading the abstract. Finally, the full research paper was read. At each stage, those papers not relevant were discarded. This reduced the number of papers to be included in the study and these were compiled into our own research database using EndNote bibliographic software.

## 2.2 The Person-Process-Context Model for conceptualising pupil experience

The experiences that a student has depend upon the context in which they live and go to school. Within an educational context there are certain processes that are designed by the school to enable education to take place and students with SEN to be supported. The experience of supports for SEN can be considered in what has been described as a 'person-process-context' model (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1999, 2005; Darling, 2007). The model is drawn as a series of different concentric circles that represent different levels of the systems around the person. In this respect, the model is useful in considering the different levels of the societal and educational system that might impinge upon student experience of support for SEN.

In the model, different components can be assigned to different levels with each wider level impacting on the inner levels. What appears in each level is somewhat arbitrary and based on the logic of the author writing the report. Central to our model will be pupil experience. A series of concentric circles can be constructed which move outwards from pupil experience to those immediate or proximal things that impinge upon this experience and through to factors that become more and more distal from the experience.

**Figure 1: Person-Process-Context model**



Each level can be further divided into layers and sections that show how the educational system is organised in terms of possible structures. The individual experiences of pupils will be determined by the combination of effects from each of these layers. This model is useful to the current study because it allows us to map on the different factors in each level that contribute to the experiences that the students are reporting to us.

In our model, we are placing international policy and practices that influence Irish educational policy and practice at the macro level. DES policy and advice from the NCSE will influence how schools are organised and managed.

We are placing locality and school type at the meso level. A crude indicator of social deprivation will be whether a school has increased funding through the DEIS scheme. The type of school, its size, pupil intake and curriculum offered are hypothesised to influence how flexibly the school can provide support and respond to individual need. The school might provide in-class support or it might group students with similar needs together for efficiency of teaching and in doing so provide a particular niche for learning to take place.

At the micro level are those things which are more proximal to the pupil experience. These include:

- The classes to which the pupil is assigned (special classes or mainstream, streamed or mixed ability).
- The availability of additional adult support (resource teacher time or SNA) and how this compares to the skill of the class teacher to provide support through differentiation or adaptation of the learning experiences or environment.
- The characteristics of the pupil themselves (the type of SEN, their age).

Right at the centre of the model is the phenomena that we are interested in exploring. The interplay of the wider contexts brings about a unique set of circumstances to the way that education is organised and supports are arranged for each pupil. This means that the pupil's experience of SEN and supports provided need to be explored through this context. The personal meaning to the child is affected by the interplay between their circumstances and the sense that they make of the experience (Mahruf, Shohel, & Howes, 2008).

## **2.3 Conceptualisation of influences on student experiences based upon the Irish context**

Historically, the Irish education system had seen the expansion of special schools for students with disabilities during the 1970s leading to a separate development of the special education system from the general education system (F. Smyth *et al.*, 2014, pp. 437-438). According to Smyth *et al.* (2014), the situation began to change to a more inclusive system in response to the international politics around inclusion and disability. There has been 'considerable progress made in the inclusion of students with special educational needs in schools since 1993' (NCSE, 2013, p. vii). This has led to the evolution of the Irish educational system and the way that support is provided to students with SEN and disability. It influences how the curriculum is arranged and the qualifications available and the likelihood of students remaining at school.

The nature and purpose of education varies from country to country and this impacts on which students are able to benefit from the education that is offered, both in terms of curriculum and in terms of how the educational delivery is arranged. The way that education is organised has more impact on some students than others. Students who do not make expected levels of progress or have difficulty in accessing the curriculum are generally referred to as having special educational needs and may need additional support or a modified educational experience in order for them to make adequate progress. There is an expectation that all students will have

access to education, irrespective of their personal needs and circumstances, and this is enshrined in Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This says that every child has a right to education with primary education free for all (Children's Rights Alliance, 2010; United Nations, 1989). It encourages the development of different types of secondary education including general and vocational education. Although it does not specifically discuss special educational needs, Article 29 goes on to state that education should include the development of the child's, '*... talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential*' (United Nations, 1989, p. 11). The Irish government signed up to this convention in 1990 and ratified it on 28 September 1992 (Children's Rights Alliance, 2010). The Salamanca agreement set out an expectation that neighbourhood schools would be able to meet the needs of all students, especially those with special educational needs (UNESCO, 1994). Six years later this expectation was strengthened through the Dakar agreement which emphasised the total inclusion of all students in mainstream schools by 2015 (UNESCO, 2000). International development has continued to promote inclusive teaching with a list of teacher competencies being drawn up to form part of teacher training (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012). The direction towards a more inclusive education system is not certain in all countries. For instance in England there has been very little change in the numbers of students educated in special schools (OFSTED, 2010) and, more recently, there has been a political move to 'reverse the bias towards inclusion' (Squires, 2012). Alongside this has been an attempt to categorise students and to use a diagnostic model of SEN for identifying students with SEN. This undoubtedly leads to tensions and debates about which students should have access to mainstream education and which students will be segregated or excluded from mainstream education (Squires, 2012).

In Ireland, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004), places a strong emphasis on educating students with SEN in an 'inclusive environment' (MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007; Shevlin, Kenny, & Loxley, 2008; F. Smyth, *et al.*, 2014). It also sets out the expectation that students with SEN in mainstream education would automatically be provided with appropriate supports (Armstrong, Kane, O'Sullivan, & Kelly, 2010) and this is seen as being a strength of the EPSEN Act by some writers (MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007). The Act advocated a practice found in many countries of focusing support for the individual needs of students through Individual Education Plans. However, this part of the Act has not been enacted and has been seen as lessening the impact of the EPSEN Act (R. Rose, Shevlin, Winter, O'Raw, & Zhao, 2012). NCSE has set out the aspiration that the EPSEN Act should be fully implemented as soon as funding allows so that all students can attend the nearest school that can be resourced to meet their needs (NCSE, 2013, p. 3).

The numbers of students in different countries identified with SEN has been rising as the definition of SEN becomes broader (Banks & McCoy, 2011). In the UK, this has led to concerns that many students are now being identified as having SEN who do not have significant difficulties (Farrell, 2012). There is some evidence to support this view and suggests that students who do not meet political aspirational targets for their age group are now being included in this group and diverting resources away from more needy students (Squires, Humphrey, Barlow, & Wigelsworth, 2012). When teachers are asked about how many students have SEN then the numbers are even higher than official estimates (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2007).

This suggests that the way in which SEN is defined has a bearing on the number of students identified. Broader definitions tend to lead to more students being viewed as having SEN. In Ireland, the definition of SEN used in the EPSEN Act is broad:

*'special educational needs' means, in relation to a person, a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition and cognate (Government of Ireland, 2004, p. 6).*

In 2006, 18 per cent of students in Ireland were estimated to have a disability leading to a special educational need as defined by the EPSEN Act (NCSE, 2006, p. 16). Recent estimates in Ireland suggest that around 18 per cent of students have SEN when this wider definition is used (Armstrong, *et al.*, 2010). Teacher estimates of SEN are higher than those derived from other sources and suggest as many as 25 per cent of students have SEN (Banks & McCoy, 2011, p. 97). This perception of a larger number of students with SEN may be related to the expectations placed on teachers or the fuzziness of the definition of SEN as has been found in other studies (Squires, *et al.*, 2012).

There is a tension between the wide ranging inclusive definition of SEN based on the EPSEN Act and the DES categories of SEN used to allocate resources. This is potentially resolved to some extent by the continuum of support. The way that each of these approaches is organised is discussed in the next two sections.

### 2.3.1 Categorising special educational needs

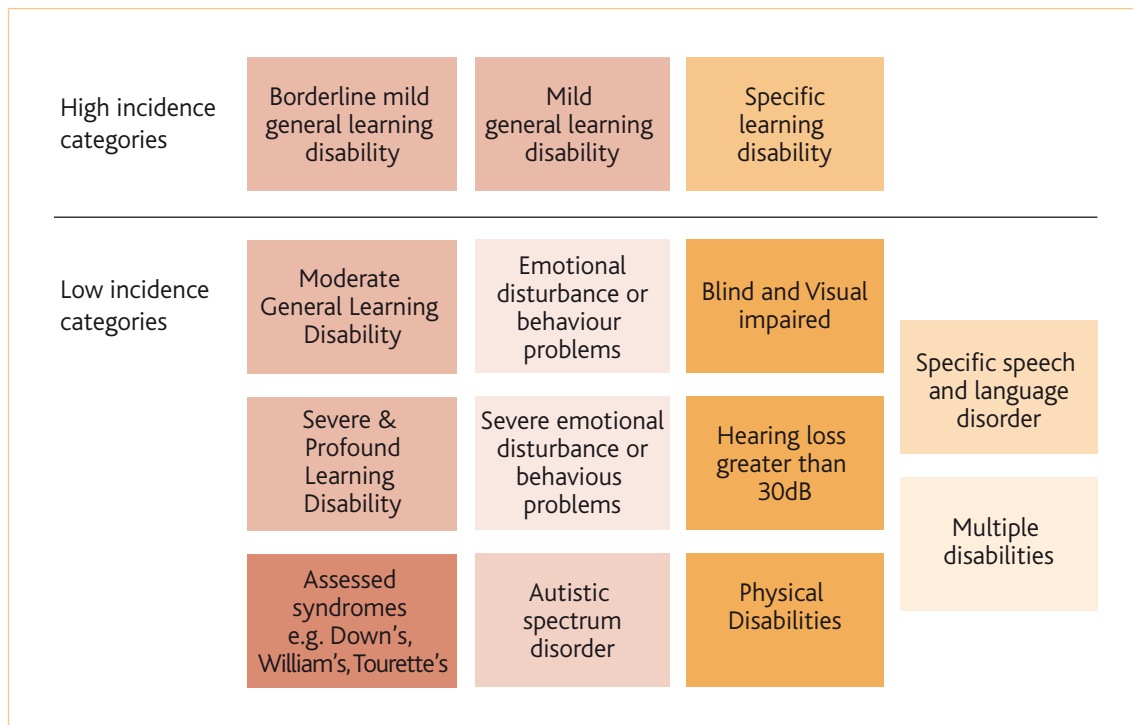
There are different ways of categorising SEN. One internationally used model simply looks at the level of need and the incidence in the school population. In this broad categorisation there are a large number of students who learn more slowly than their peers but for whom the difficulties are not complex and the educational support is low – these are referred to as high incidence, low need. In contrast there are a small number of students with very complex difficulties who need a high level of support, referred to as low incidence, high need. This distinction is also used in Ireland (NCSE, 2011b); for instance, specific learning disability would be described as a high incidence need, while severe and profound learning disability would be described as a low incidence need.

Another model for comparing international levels of SEN was devised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (NCSE, 2010) and this splits difficulties into three broad categories of Disability (organic impairments), Difficulties (behavioural, intellectual or learning) and Disadvantage (e.g. social deprivation). It has been argued that the EPSEN Act has a more restricted view of what constitutes a SEN and emphasises disability as a determinant of SEN (MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007). This may arise from section 20(1) (g) of the Act which refers to educational provision in 'relation to each type of disability' (Government of Ireland, 2004). The EPSEN Act recognises four main categories of disability (NCSE, 2011a):

- Physical
- Sensory
- Mental health
- Learning disability

The DES has used a medical model of disability to categorise SEN into 14 types of disabilities, 11 low incidence and 3 high incidence (DES, 2005b).

**Figure 2: DES Categories of SEN (based on published information DES, 2005b)**



However, guidance to parents emphasises that, while a child's condition is important, it is only important if it leads to the child learning differently from other students. Having a condition is not by itself an indicator of a special educational need (NCSE, 2011a, p. 10). This suggests that there may be some tensions around the way in which SEN is defined in Ireland and the way in which resources are allocated.

In Irish primary schools, a General Allocation Model (GAM) operates that is based on the principle that all schools have some students with high incidence needs and the funding is to ensure that the schools can respond immediately and flexibly (DES, 2005b; NCSE, 2011b). Every mainstream school in Ireland is allocated subject teachers or class teachers for the education of all enrolled students (NCSE, 2013, p. 83 & 114). Post-primary schools are also allocated learning support teaching hours to support students with special educational needs based on the number of students in the school (NCSE, 2013, p. 83).

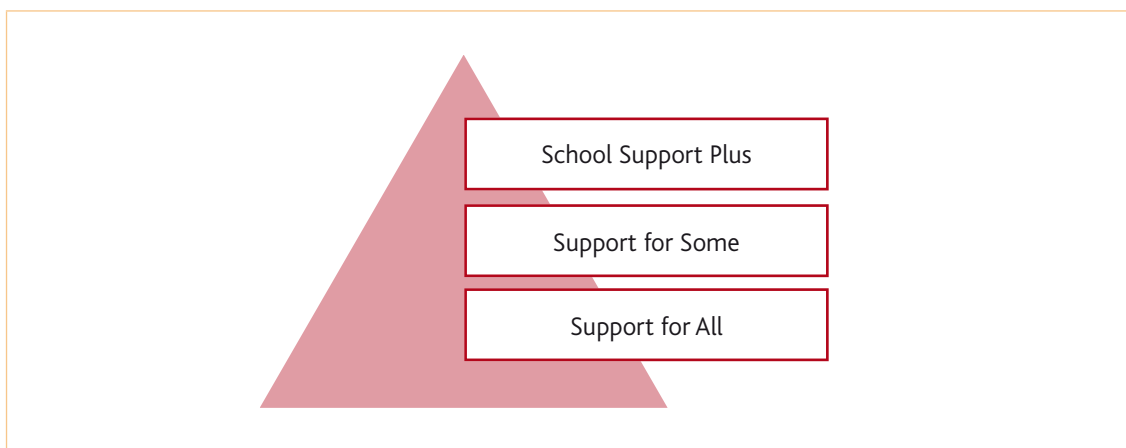
In addition, there are resource teaching posts available to mainstream schools to support students with disabilities (NCSE, 2013, p. 114). Resource Teachers are additional posts developed to assist a school or a cluster of schools in meeting the needs of students assessed as having special educational needs. Their role is defined in Circular Sp Ed 08/02 (DES, 2002a). Schools approach the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) network for help in providing diagnostic information for individual students with low incidence needs to see if they meet the criteria for additional hours. Each type of SEN has a specified number of additional hours allocated and suggests that these additional hours are diagnosis-led rather than learning-needs led, with an emphasis on a discrepancy model (Desforges & Lindsay, 2010). Ireland is similar to other countries (e.g. Australia, Ireland and the USA) in requiring a diagnosis of a disability before resources can be allocated to students with low incidence needs (Desforges & Lindsay, 2010). The need for a diagnosis can lead to a particular type of assessment being undertaken that meets the bureaucratic resource allocation need but does not directly inform teaching (Armstrong & Squires, 2015). One problem in the identification process in Ireland is a shortage of key professionals (Desforges & Lindsay, 2010; NCSE, 2014). A flexible approach is used in which additional hours of resource teacher time are allocated to students with low incidence needs. These resource teacher hours can be deployed through individual or small group teaching sessions outside of the mainstream classroom or the resource teacher can work with the class teacher to provide support in the mainstream class.

At the time that this study was undertaken, additional special education teacher time was allocated for a set number of hours per week to each student dependent on their DES SEN category (DES, 2002a, 2002b, 2004c, 2005a, 2005b; NCSE, 2011a, 2011b). It should be noted, however, that there has been a review of this process and a new model is proposed whereby additional teaching resources would be allocated to schools according to their level of need (based on a number of indicators) without the necessity for individual student diagnoses (NCSE, 2013; 2014, p. 3).

### 2.3.2 A continuum of support for special educational needs

The support structure for SEN is based around three levels to provide a continuum of support (NCSE, 2011a, 2011b; NEPS, 2010). In many respects this is similar to models of response to intervention in the USA (for more detail see Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2009; Klotz & Canter, 2007; NCCA, 2012) or the Code of Practice levels of School Action, School Action Plus and Statements from the UK (DFES, 2001), or waves of support (National Strategies, 2006). These models differentiate between universal support and targeted support and are evident in the continuum described by NEPS (National Educational Psychological Service). Three layers are presented for the continuum of response. The three layers of support appear to have the same underlying principles of Response To Intervention as found in the USA in having whole school screening; teach the class as a whole; intervene with those students who do not make adequate progress; monitor and chart progress; adjust the teaching further to match learning needs (Dickman, 2006). Support is arranged on a continuum that moves from universal support through teacher differentiation to targeted support. The continuum of support implies that SEN is comparative and based on learning needs. Assessment becomes a process to support planning of interventions and supports (Shevlin, Winter, Rose, & O'Raw, 2013). At the broadest level, the model implies a social model of disability in which the setting or environment can be adjusted to accommodate individual difference. A diagnosis of a disability is not a requirement for supportive interventions being put in place within the classroom.

**Figure 3: Continuum of support for special educational needs**



Support for All is intended to be a whole school preventative approach. It encourages good quality teaching with a system of early identification through whole school screening. Teachers adjust their teaching to cater for the range of students in the classroom through differentiation of the learning tasks.

Support for Some is an assessment and intervention focused around small groups of students. It is envisaged that this would be for 10% to 20% of students and would be organised through accommodations to support learning and social interaction, joint individual education plans (IEPs), subject specific goals, and consultation and planning.

School Support Plus provides intensive and individual supports for a few students with long-term and complex difficulties. It is envisaged that this would be needed by 2% to 5% of the school population. Interventions are more specific to the individual and consist of IEPs with input from other professionals. However, this part of the EPSEN Act has not been implemented and it should be noted that IEPs are not mandatory due to economic constraints (F. Smyth, *et al.*, 2014) and this means that their implementation in schools is likely to be variable. The use of IEPs in Irish schools has been described as an 'emergent process' in mainstream schools (R. Rose, *et al.*, 2012, p. 110). Rose *et al.* looked at 10 mainstream primary schools to see how well IEPs were being implemented and found that, although schools were not legally bound to use IEPs, all 10 of the schools had them in place and six had developed management systems for IEPs. The study found that IEPs did not follow a standard format, even within the same school. The development of the IEP appeared to be school-led (usually by a resource teacher or support teacher). While nine of the schools involved parents in the planning process, only two involved the students. This means that the views of students are not being fully considered in the planning process despite this being seen as a 'significant provision' within the EPSEN Act (Shevlin & Rose, 2008, p. 427). There seems to be a gap between the intentions of providing student support involving students in the planning and decision process set out as an aspiration by policy and the evolving practice in schools.

### 2.3.3 Special schools and special classes

Irish students can be supported in a mainstream class with additional support; in a special class within a mainstream school; or, in a special school (DES, 2004a). Most students with special educational needs attend mainstream schools (Shevlin, *et al.*, 2008). Ireland has 119 special schools for students with special educational needs arising from a disability (NCSE, 2012). This is lower than the 144 special schools listed in the primary schools list for 2011–12 on the DES website as this list also includes other types of special schools such as hospital schools, schools for Traveller children and schools in detention centres. Some students may be unofficially dual placed in a special school and mainstream school and attend each part time (Banks & McCoy, 2011; Ware *et al.*, 2009, p. 18). One study has found that the students themselves were least in favour of dual placements compared to parents and teachers (Ware, *et al.*, 2009, pp. 166–168). There seems to be very little evidence about the use of dual placements for different categories of SEN, and for certain categories of SEN (e.g. autism) there have been some concerns expressed about the meaningfulness of the dual placement (Ware, *et al.*, 2009).

A special class is a class that is part of a mainstream school that has a small number of students, providing a lower student to teacher ratio. For example, in a special class for autistic students there may be one teacher and six students (NCSE, 2011a, p. 13). A national survey of special classes for the NCSE by McCoy *et al.* (2014) showed a substantial number of special classes across both primary and post-primary sectors: 357 at primary and 302 at post-primary, representing 659 schools at the time of their survey in 2011 (Banks & McCoy, 2011, p. 4). In total, 7% of primary and 24% of post-primary schools operated at least one special class at the time.

McCoy *et al.* note a considerable growth in this form of educational provision in recent years, particularly at post-primary where over half of classes were established between 2009–2011. Their survey also showed some differences between primary and post-primary special class provision. For instance, at primary level over 90% of special classes were formed on the basis of a sanction by the SENO or the DES, whereas at post-primary level a considerable share (51%) of special classes emerged through pooling resource teaching hours and many had no specific special educational needs designation (McCoy *et al.* 2014: 4). In addition, overall, 60% of primary special classes were designated as ASD classes while, at post-primary, ASD classes accounted for less than one-fifth of special classes, with much greater diversity in special class designation than at primary. The authors point out that special classes have recently become a predominant form of provision for young students with ASD at primary level. It is possible that over time this will change the profile of post-primary special classes as children in these special primary classes move through the educational system.

There is some international evidence to suggest that students who are withdrawn from classes or attend special classes do not do any better than those who are not withdrawn from mainstream classes. In some post-primary schools in Norway their performance was worse than those who remained in mainstream classes (Markussen, 2004).

### **2.3.4 Summary of the policy context and involvement of students with special educational needs**

Internationally there has been a shift towards inclusive education and this has been matched in Ireland with a gradual merging of what was seen as two distinct systems in the 1970s: special education and general education. Driving this has been a consideration of the rights of students and the principle that students should have a say in decision-making processes. Economic constraints have meant that some parts of the EPSEN Act have not been implemented. This has left some parts of the Act as aspirational and consequently there is a gap between the aspiration and school-based practice. This is evident in the development of IEPs: we cited one study that considers the implementation of IEPs that involve students as emerging practice rather than universal practice within mainstream primary schools.

The EPSEN Act emphasises inclusion, at the same time there has been an increase in the number of designated special classes. On the one hand, this makes inclusion easier because students who have a category of special educational needs that have been diagnosed can attend a resourced mainstream school near to where they live. The criteria for placement in special classes follows a diagnostic model and fits in well with the general differences position proposed by Norwich and Lewis (2005) assuming that these classes can be resourced so that the needs of students within them can be addressed on the basis of their general characteristic. The classes account for a small proportion of students with complex and severe needs. Most of these classes have been set up to meet the needs of students with autism. Not all categories of SEN have designated special classes, and the majority of students with SEN are supported in their mainstream classroom.

Some post-primary settings use special classes flexibly and widen the range of SEN that is catered for. On the other hand, the use of special classes could be seen as a form of integration rather than inclusion, or even more extremely could be a form of segregation within the same building, depending on how much time students spend in the special classes and how much time is spent in mainstream classes. This would be predicted to affect how students feel they are able to engage in the school as a whole.

The number of designated special classes appears to be increasing and this suggests that they are a form of segregated education, though this would depend on how many hours students spend in these classes compared to mainstream classes. Yet, at the same time, the number of students in designated special classes in post-primary settings is less than that in primary schools. This could be because some students move out of general education to special education at the time of transition from primary to post-primary. It could be that more students with complex needs are included in primary school through the increased provision of special classes and they have not yet moved to post primary. It could also be that post-primary settings have the flexibility to combine resource hours allocated to individual students to create resource classes. Also many post-primary settings had set up their own small group classes prior to the EPSEN Act. In effect, there is variation in the use of small group classes whether they are designated as special classes or not. Some of the international research questions the benefits to students of being in special classes, however, this research is limited.

The way that resources are allocated is on the basis of a diagnosis of SEN with resources allocated to one of 11 low incidence categories of need. This has seen additional resource teacher hours allocated to individual students for educational purposes and SNAs allocated for care purposes. Schools have used SNAs flexibly and outside of the scheme's original intent, resulting in a steady increase in the numbers of SNAs used in schools. This suggests that students with SEN were not being included successfully and having their educational needs met solely through the provision of resource teachers. The continuum of support model seems in tension with this traditional approach. In the continuum model individual students have their educational needs considered from a pedagogic position rather than a quasi-medical diagnostic position. Teacher estimates of how many students have SEN are more likely to be based on pedagogy than on diagnostic criteria and this may explain why they consider there to be more students with SEN. There is a proposal to shift the way that resources are allocated that retains the central role of teachers in meeting the needs of the majority of students with SEN, while still allowing for resources to be targeted towards those students who have the most severe educational needs. The continuum models would take the unique differences position suggested by Norwich and Lewis with teachers planning general teaching and then differentiating on the basis of individual need. This also requires a shift in power relations to involve students more fully in the decision-making processes around how teaching could better meet their needs by removing barriers to learning.

**Figure 4: Themes and tensions from policy impacting on school practice and student experience**

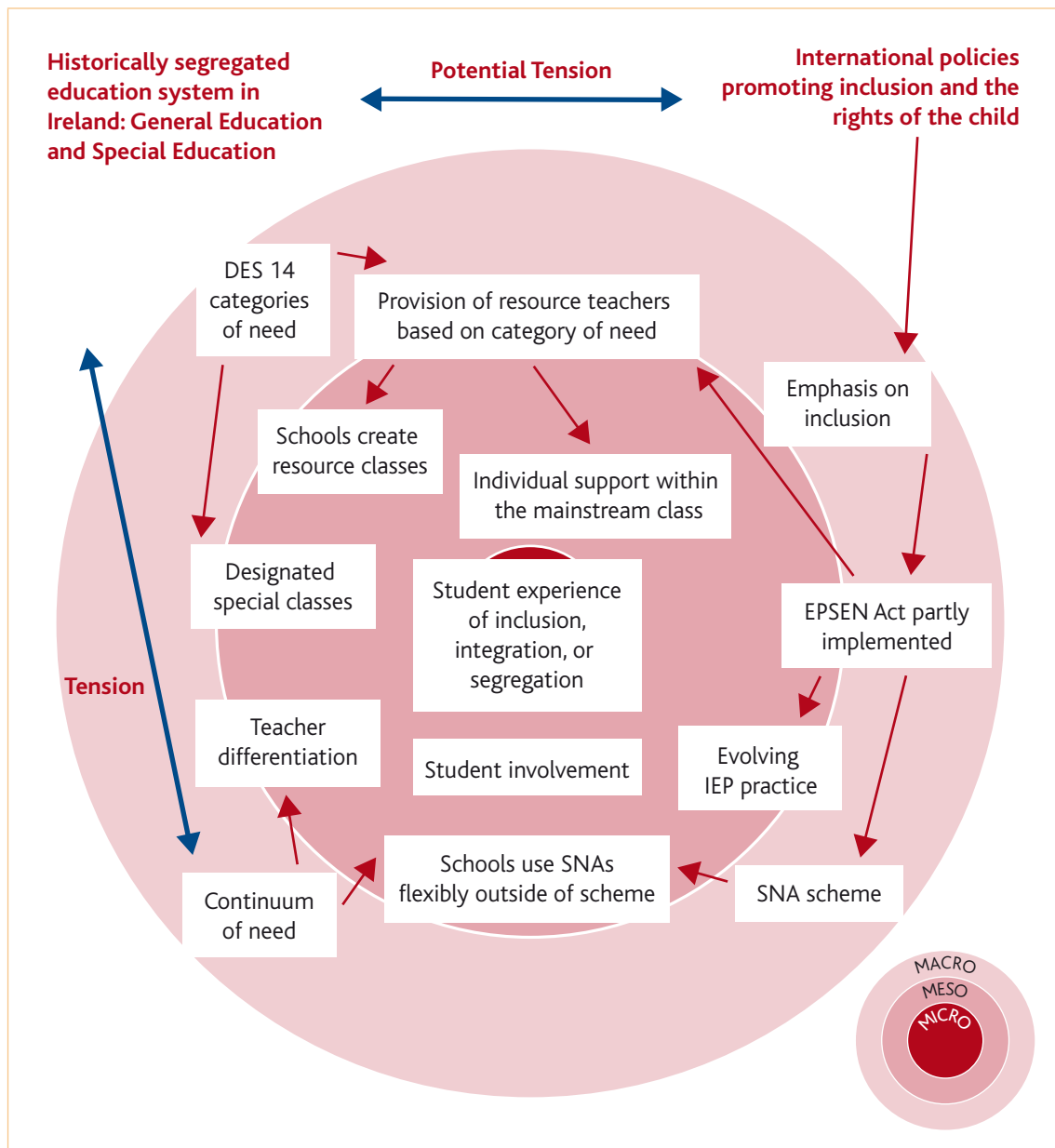


Figure 4 shows how the macro level of historical position and international policies are in tension with the latter driving inclusive attitudes and values while the former brings historical values that support a segregated position. The mediating DES categories of SEN, EPSEN Act and the model of continuum of need all introduce different agendas that play out in the meso layer of the individual school. This creates a unique set of circumstances for any student within a given school context that determines how involved they are in decision-making; what resources are available; the extent to which teachers can remove barriers to learning; and, ultimately their experience of inclusion, integration or segregation within the school.

### 2.3.5 Curriculum

The curriculum that students follow is described by the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (Inspectorate, 2011). Primary school education covers ages six to 12 and then students move to post-primary schools. The curriculum is split across two cycles with an optional transition year and a range of different types of leaving certificates depending on the focus of the learning:

- The junior cycle (lower secondary) is completed between the ages 12 to 15. It involves a broad and balanced curriculum which is followed by an examination when students are 15 to 16 that leads to the award of the Junior Certificate. Students at risk of leaving school early may follow the Junior Certificate Schools Programme. At the start of the research project, the junior cycle was being reformed.
- Optional Transition year. This is not always available and provision varies between schools. Students following a three-year senior cycle programme choose an optional Transition Programme for the first year which aims to contribute to personal development, social awareness and work-related learning. There is no assessment at the end of the Transition year, though students can receive school-based certificates of completion and a Transition Year Certificate from the Department of Education and Skills. Students who complete the Transition Programme then go onto the senior cycle two-year programme.
- The senior cycle (upper secondary) covers the ages 15 to 18 and allows students to choose from a range of routes lasting between two and three years. The final two years of the post-primary curriculum have differentiated pathways (Banks, Byrne, McCoy, & Smyth, 2014). There are three leaving certificate programmes:
  - 34 different subjects lead to the Leaving Certificate (Established) (LC) or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is an optional, two-year, academic and experience-based programme, available in two out of three post-primary schools. Candidates following the LCVP take a specified range of Leaving Certificate (established) subjects as well as a formal and practical programme called the Links Modules. The Links Modules consists of compulsory work experience and enterprise activity together with personal vocational exploration and substantial use of information technology (State Examinations Commission, 2014).
  - The Leaving Certificate Vocational differs from the established Leaving Certificate in that students study a modern foreign language, some of the subjects are vocational, they follow two additional link modules (Enterprise Education and Preparation for the World of Work).
  - Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is designed for students who find traditional examinations too demanding. The Leaving Certificate Applied is a single award based on a unified programme, rather than a set of grades achieved in discrete subjects. Candidates accumulate credits by three different routes over two years and are then certified on the basis of the total number of credits accumulated. Their certification gives the overall level of the award (pass, merit or distinction), as well as a detailed breakdown on how the candidate's credits have been accumulated.

- The programme of learning is modular. Each of the two years of the programme is divided into two sessions. Over these four sessions, students complete 44 modules (including 4 elective modules) in a range of courses across three broad curricular areas: Vocational Preparation, Vocational Education, and General Education. They also complete seven substantive Student Tasks, which are practical and/or reflective activities through which they integrate and apply their learning experiences. This programme is offered to a small number of students and does not give direct access to higher education (Banks, *et al.*, 2014, p. 3 cite about 5% of students in 2013). Banks *et al.* (2014) interviewed 29 students and used five typical cases to understand the different reasons why students take this programme. The reasons included: a decision to escape from negative educational experiences encountered in the junior cycle; poor academic attainment in the junior cycle; and student choice around the likely benefits of an academic programme compared to a programme directing students towards the labour market. Banks *et al.* (2014) argue that schools influence student choice and in doing so may provide barriers to particular educational experiences and limit life chances and social mobility.

The majority of students follow the Leaving Certificate (Established) programme. The overall number sitting the examinations has increased by 1.6% from 56,990 candidates in 2014 to 57,929 in 2015. Of the 57,929 candidates who sat Leaving Certificate examinations this year, 55,045 candidates followed the Leaving Certificate (Established) programme, including 14,924 (25.8%) who followed the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. A further 2,884 (5%) candidates followed the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (State Examinations Commission, 2015).

Students with complex needs can be supported in the transition from primary to post-primary schools by the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO). Once students are in the senior cycle, their transition beyond the post-primary school can be supported by teachers and Guidance Counsellors.

Irish is a mandatory part of the curriculum. However, some students with SEN can be exempted from studying Irish (DES, 1996, 2004b). This includes those having:

- A specific learning disability
- A general learning disability due to serious intellectual impairment
- A serious sensory impairment

Students with more severe difficulties may be educated in special schools following a formal assessment of disability. All special schools are designated as primary schools (NCSE, 2013, p. 102). Some of these students will start their education in the special school, while others transfer from mainstream primary schools instead of moving to mainstream post-primary schools. Academic awards in special schools for post-primary students include:

- Junior Certificate level 2.
- Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) awards. Levels 1 and 2 are designed for students who have significant learning disabilities and cannot access the Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate programmes.
- ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) awards.

The curriculum arrangements may mean that the experiences of students with SEN differ for each cycle and the way that the curriculum is arranged leads to different aspirations and experiences of school. For the Junior Cycle this meant that our questions for students needed to focus on transition from primary school, experience of the Junior Cycle and thoughts about the Junior Certificate and optional transition year. For the Senior Cycle, we wanted to know what students who completed the transition year thought about this, what they thought about their curriculum pathway and the qualifications to which this will lead. We were also interested in what impact this has on their school retention and attendance.

Students with severe and complex needs may remain in their special schools and follow the primary curriculum and may have a very different experience from those who attend mainstream.

### 2.3.6 School types

There are four types of post-primary school listed on the DES website. Secondary schools may be fee paying or non-fee paying and in the past provided a more academic education. Vocational schools historically provided a vocational education and are non-denominational schools. Community and comprehensive schools were established to provide a broad curriculum (CIB, 2015). According to the 2011–12 statistical release, there are 359,047 second-level students, including those on the Post Leaving Certificate course (this is third-level education). The majority are taught in Secondary schools (DES, 2012b).

**Table 2: Distribution of students in different types of Post Primary school**

School Type	Numbers of students	Number of aided schools (722)
Secondary	186,409	376
Vocational	116,839	253
Community	48,113	79
Comprehensive	7,686	14

The incidence of SEN is higher in areas of low socio-economic status and for families with the lowest income (Banks & McCoy, 2011; Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010; Perry & Francis, 2010). The Delivering of Equal Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative increased support for 150 second-level schools through the integrated School Support Programme (SSP) in disadvantaged areas (DES, 2005c). There is some evidence to show that students with certain types of learning difficulties (though not necessarily the result of SEN) such as numeracy, literacy and emotional and behavioural problems are more likely to be enrolled in DEIS schools (Banks & McCoy, 2011; E. Smyth, Darmody, McGinnity, & Byrne, 2009). The DEIS programme specifically set out to improve educational inclusion through an integrated approach of target setting, and measuring student progress. This emphasis on monitoring student progress has been shown to be effective in raising outcomes for students with SEN in other countries (e.g. see Holland, 2012; Humphrey & Squires, 2010, 2011a, 2011b).

Retention rates have been increasing for all second-level students since 1965, when about 20% of students remained at school to complete the Leaving Certificate (DES, 2004a) to 90.1% in 2014 (DES, 2014). From July 2002, the school leaving age was raised to 16 years or the successful completion of three years' second-level education (DES, 2005c).

Attendance is an integrated part of the Leaving Certificate Applied and Junior Certificate School Programme. The JCSP tended to be used for discrete groups within the school, usually those with SEN, and particularly literacy and numeracy needs (Humphrey & Squires, 2011b; NCSE, 2011a). Recent data from the Department of Education and Skills show that the DEIS initiative has been successful in improving retention rates, particularly for males (DES, 2012c).

**Table 3: Retention rates in DEIS and Non-DEIS schools**

School Type	Retention 2001 cohort	Retention 2004 cohort	Change
DEIS	68.2	73.2	5.2%
Non-DEIS	85.0	87.4	2.4%

However, this data does not indicate the impact on students with SEN. There appears to be a differential impact with students who are achieving lower qualifications more likely to leave school than those achieving higher qualifications. There is a higher impact on students from disadvantaged areas who are able to achieve well (DES, 2012c, 2012d).

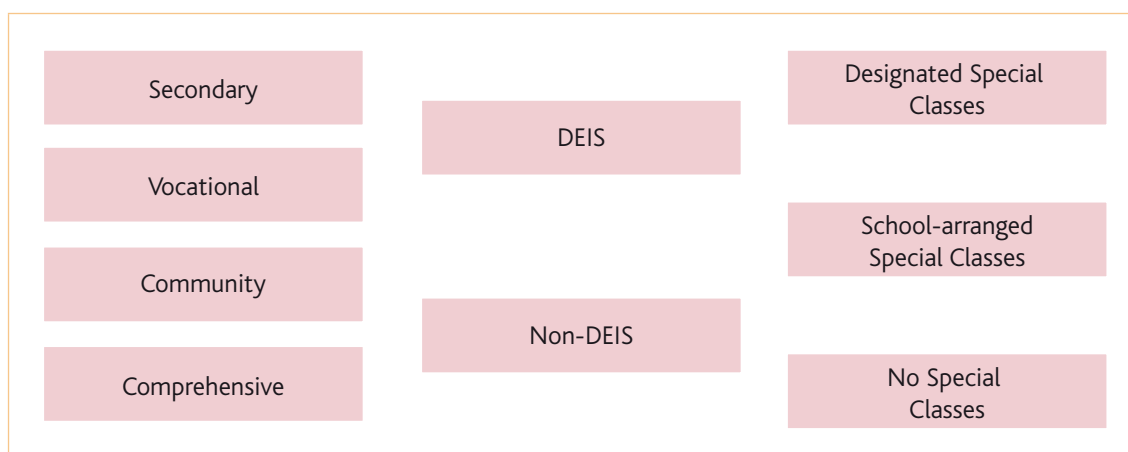
**Table 4: School leaver qualifications in DEIS and non-DEIS schools**

Qualification	DEIS 2001	DEIS 2006	DEIS Change %	Non-DEIS 2001	Non-DEIS 2006	Non-DEIS change %
Junior Certificate, Year 2	98.2	97.14	-1.06	99.0	98.57	-0.43
Junior Certificate, Year 3	95.6	94.77	-0.83	98.2	97.49	-0.71
Senior Cycle, Year 1	87.9	90.95	+3.05	95.3	95.99	+0.69
Senior Cycle, Year 2	74.6	82.69	+8.09	88.1	91.69	+3.59

Comparing students who entered second level in 2001 to 2006, the average Leaving Certificate retention rate in DEIS schools increased from 68.2% to 80.1% (DES, 2012c).

This section has outlined how schools differ in size, location, deprivation indices and the number of students with SEN or disability. It could be anticipated that these different forms of school organisation would have the potential to affect pupil experience.

**Figure 5: School and class combinations**



## 2.4 RQ 1 What does the international and Irish research literature tell us about the views and experiences of students at second level school, the particular experiences of students with special educational needs and the comparative experience of these two groups?

The international literature provides a background to this study and allows contrasts and similarities to be compared to the views of the students that participated in the study with those in previous studies. We will deal with the research question by exploring the literature about students' views generally, then more specifically focusing in on students with SEN and finally reflecting on the comparisons between the two groups of students.

### 2.4.1 The views and experiences of students without SEN at second level schools

Student views of the curriculum have been explored in several studies. An exit survey of students in the USA of 1,270 students found that there were high levels of satisfaction with the way the school prepared them for reading and writing (Repetto *et al.*, 2011). A study involving 1,776 students aged 14–15 in English secondary schools (Sammons *et al.*, 2011) found that the curriculum offered to students is important in terms of the perceived relevance to the student and how it seems to be preparing them for life beyond school. The most popular subjects for

students were sport, arts or other creative subjects. A more general study of the experiences of 14 Australian students aged 15–17 found that students valued a variety of learning activities and a combination of teaching methods (Groves & Welsh, 2010). Specifically students cited a combination of learning experiences as beneficial, such as: bookwork (textbook reading, worksheets); written activities; practical work; and, having the opportunity to be part of classroom discussions. Students were very keen to have school learning activities that simulated real life experiences and valued close connections between school and real life experiences. However, the students felt that teachers were often too busy and preoccupied to consider the students' interests. Groves and Welsh (2010) suggested that some one-to-one time or extra lessons designed to help students improve learning could be used to enable teachers to find out about students' individual interests which could motivate student learning.

In England, students aged 14–15 acknowledged that getting GCSEs and A levels was important for their future. Around eight out of 10 students reported that they planned to go to college after they finished school. Overall, the majority of students believed that it was important to get a University degree and over a third had aspirations of going to University. About 15% reported that they planned to leave school to get a job or go into work-based training. Compared to girls, boys were more likely to go into work-based training and less likely to go to college. Students from poorer backgrounds were more likely to leave school in order to get a job or work-based training (Sammons, *et al.*, 2011).

Studies of student autonomy and empowerment in decision-making have shown these to be important factors. A survey of the views of 578 USA students aged between 14 and 18, found that the strongest predictor of academic engagement was the students' perception of autonomy within the classroom (Hafen *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, Australian students thought that their voice and involvement in decision-making on issues such as the curriculum and classroom routines should be important, although they considered that this was solely the teachers' responsibility. While some students were quick to blame teachers for doing poorly in exams, others took responsibility for their own learning and connect their current learning with their future long-term goals. This suggests that, whilst the importance of teaching and the role of teachers is acknowledged, students can share responsibility in their learning (Groves & Welsh, 2010). Lodge and Lynch (2000) obtained the views of 1,202 students in Ireland who were asked to write essays about school. They used content analysis to identify broad themes around equality issues and found that the most significant issues related to how power was negotiated and managed within the school. Just under half of the students reported unfair treatment by teachers and almost the same number wanted to be more involved in decision-making with more democracy within the school. Many students wanted a Student Council to be set up within the school to ensure that students' opinions were taken seriously. There were concerns about teachers interfering with students' personal lives and concerns about how students were labelled by teachers on the basis of their behaviour.

School enjoyment and engagement is often directly related to students' relationships with teachers and peers (Harris, Vincent, Thomson, & Toalster, 2006; Sellman, 2009). In England, school engagement and enjoyment has been found to be affected by several factors for Year 9 students. These include number of siblings, socio-economic status, the presence of behavioural or developmental problems, and so on. The majority of students liked school (69% agreed and 20% strongly agreed) and around two-thirds (68%) liked lessons. Students aged 14 liked school less than younger students aged 7 and aged 10. Students entitled to free school meals (commonly regarded as an indicator of lower socioeconomic status), were less positive about school than other students. Two-fifths of students entitled to free school meals reported being bored in class (36% agreed, 5% strongly agreed). Boys were more likely than girls to report that school was a "waste of time" (Sammons, *et al.*, 2011). The importance of relationships and support networks is evident in several studies. USA students reported that transition from secondary school to post-secondary education or work was easier when there was support from family and friends (Repetto, *et al.*, 2011). A study in England (Sammons, *et al.*, 2011) found that most 14–15 year old students in mainstream schools feel rather popular with their friends. Ninety per cent of students felt that they could make friends easily. Girls felt less popular than boys; those on Free School Meals only felt slightly less popular than peers. The majority felt that other teenagers wanted to be their friend. However, another 10% reported not making friends easily and 20% felt unpopular (Sammons, *et al.*, 2011). The relationship between bullying and friendships was explored amongst 48,000 students from seven countries. Students were categorised in four groups according to their behaviours (bully, victim, bully-victim, neutral). In all countries, bullying had negative social and emotional impacts for victims. In England, the students who had the most friends were bullies. In Ireland, bullies had more friends than victims or bully-victims (Eslea, 2004). It may be that bullies need highly developed social skills in order to manipulate their victims.

The reporting of bullying amongst students without SEN varies with age with younger students more likely to report being a victim than older students (Due, 2005; C. A. Rose, Espelage, & Monda-Amaya, 2009). Cultural factors are also important in reporting bullying (Due, 2005; Eslea, 2004). Levels of bullying have been found to vary amongst adolescents in different countries (Due, 2005) ranging from 5.1% to 38.2%. Gender differences were apparent with boys reporting more bullying than girls in most (but not all) countries:

**Table 5: Incidence of bullying (Due, 2005)**

Country	Girls	Boys
Sweden	5.1%	6.3%
England	9.1%	7.2%
Ireland	11%	7.4%
Lithuania	38.2%	41.4%

Due *et al.* reported an association between being the victim of bullying and a variety of health symptoms, both physical and psychological (e.g. headache, stomach ache, bad temper, difficulties in getting to sleep).

## 2.4.2 The views of students with special educational needs

### 2.4.2.1 Curriculum access

The international literature exploring the views of students with SEN about the curriculum offered is limited. For example, in a recent Irish and international literature review on curriculum and curriculum access issues for post-primary students with SEN, it was found that most studies used teachers' and teaching assistants' views on what works and rarely 'went to the trouble of accessing students' views' (O'Mara *et al.*, 2012, p. 4).

The international literature on student views about whether to be educated in mainstream, special classes or special schools demonstrate that the views are mixed. A recent study in Ireland by Prunty, *et al.*, found that students and young people were happier with the support and social arrangements in special schools and special classes compared to mainstream classes. Students who had experiences of both mainstream and special settings often preferred the special settings as teachers were more supportive or had better expertise in supporting them (Prunty, Dupont, & McDaid, 2012). A study in the UK looked at the views of students who had a Statement of SEN for moderate learning difficulties (Norwich & Kelly, 2004). The students were aged between 10 and 14 years with 51 students in mainstream and 50 in special school settings. Most students had positive views of their school, teachers and the teaching they received. Students in mainstream and in special schools reported that they preferred their current setting. However, about a third of the students in special schools said that they would like to be in a mainstream setting compared to only one child in a mainstream school that said they would like to be in a special setting. There were some gender differences with special school boys showing greater preference for mainstream settings compared to girls. At the same time, some of the students in special schools reported 'bad' previous experiences in mainstream settings. Most students reported receiving help when they needed it from teaching assistants rather than from teachers, and more help from adults than from peers. Those in mainstream schools reported that they mainly received support in withdrawal classes, whilst less than half of the students reported small group work and one-to-one support. Mainstream students did not express a preference for any of these methods overall, but stated more reasons for preferring withdrawal settings than the other methods (e.g. better teaching, less distraction and less bullying).

Support in its broadest sense means the adaptations, resource allocation, placement of students and curriculum adaptations that enable a child with special educational needs to succeed in school. Many countries have a continuum of SEN and the support arrangements around this. As with *Support for All*, this often starts with classroom differentiation and then becomes more specialised as the child's needs increase. In a consultation exercise in Scotland involving 46 students with a variety of needs, it was found that they had difficulties accessing part of their curriculum. While around half of the young people said that they could take in subjects and activities along with everyone else, around a quarter reported that either they could not participate in subjects with peers or that it depended on the subject. A lot of young people reported difficulties in accessing science, languages and information technology. There was also a feeling of limited subject choice in special schools and limited support in sport in mainstream schools. Some people reported changing facilities and transport issues as limiting them in taking part in activities. Most students reported difficulties with equipment but some also reported difficulties with people's attitudes (Children in Scotland, 2002).

The way that learning tasks are presented can influence student perceptions of learning and themselves as learners. A small-scale case study in the USA found that students who had failed to learn to read in school were generally negative about school and experienced stress when they were asked to read. The four students in the study saw themselves as different from their peers. They reported that repetitive teaching instruction that focused on sub-skills of reading was boring and irrelevant to them. The authors suggested that a better approach would have been to use scaffolding and modelling of successful reading (Leafstedt, Richards, LaMonte, & Cassidy, 2007). In an Australian study that implemented a new inclusive programme for six students with mild learning difficulties, the students perceived tasks as enjoyable if they did not involve writing (O'Rourke & Houghton, 2009). Three students from the focus students with mild learning difficulties in O'Rourke and Houghton's study were not sensitive to changes in teaching, despite teachers' attempts to provide a stimulating teaching environment. Moreover, they suggested that they needed additional explanations even though teachers felt that they had broken down the tasks to an appropriate level.

Individually tailored programmes and an increased staff:student ratio were viewed positively by students with behavioural problems being supported in learning support units after being excluded from another school in England (Harris, *et al.*, 2006). Hamill and Boyd (2002) found that students with Social and Emotional Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) in secondary schools in Scotland did not always feel that they had access to differentiated support. They found the curriculum often inaccessible, difficult and/or boring, which often led to incidences of challenging behaviour. Two-thirds of students interviewed made comments about how their learning difficulties led to their challenging behaviour. Some of these students found it difficult to deal with the same work 'as everyone else', which often made the instances of misbehaving worse. A separate study in Scotland explored the views of students aged 10–14 years in relation to curriculum access, physical access and access to information, using postal questionnaires to students who attended mainstream and special schools. The authors report mixed results in relation to curriculum access, mainly suggesting that the curriculum needs to be modified further in order to meet *all* students' needs. For example, whilst over half of the students sampled reported that their schoolwork was adapted according to their needs, less than half said that they received individual class work to suit their needs. In terms of physical access, overall the students were very satisfied, confirming their ability to move around schools freely in order to participate in a variety of activities, including both school-planned and after-school ones. There were some concerns raised in relation to physical access for certain practical subjects, for which students had to often receive additional support (Woolfson, Harker, Lowe, Sheilds, & Mackintosh, 2007). An earlier study in the USA looked at the perceptions of students with dyslexia (LD) on classroom practices that concern adaptations in tests, homework, textbooks and grouping. The dyslexic high school students wanted to be treated the same as other students when it came to tests, homework, and textbooks. In contrast, other students with lower attainments were in favour of such classroom adaptations (Vaughn, 1993). Although this study is old it does bring out the importance of involving students in decisions. It suggests that accommodations need to be considered through discussion with the student and take into account different types of SEN. Alternatively, making the accommodations available to all students could help the accommodations to be viewed more positively (Vaughn, 1993). This last kind of approach

underpins the principles of inclusive schooling and the conceptualisation of inclusive education as meaning that all learners are '*engaged in activities that are meaningful for them*' and that '*inclusive education is an approach for all learners*' (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012, pp. 11–12).

A study in the UK found that disabled students valued a flexible response from schools in providing support when it was needed and not simply providing the support outlined on their Statement of Special Educational Needs (Lewis *et al.*, 2007). For example in this study, one student talked about how the same curriculum could be offered in the mainstream class and in a small group depending on how comfortable students felt. Several students in a study in the UK appeared to appreciate extra time in tests, whilst others raised issues on the fairness of the assessment system, e.g. 'what are they tested on', 'how fair is it for them to be tested on how quick they can read or write' (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Parsons, & Robertson, 2007). In both of these studies, disabled students valued being involved in making *decisions* about their education and support arrangements (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007; Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Parsons, *et al.*, 2007). Several authors have commented that students in their study indicated that they do not always feel that teachers listen to their concerns about how they can best be supported. These authors have identified a need for adults to take students' views seriously when planning how support is arranged (Leafstedt, *et al.*, 2007; Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007; Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Parsons, *et al.*, 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Vaughn, 1993; Woolfson, *et al.*, 2007). A recent study of the implementation of IEPs in Irish primary schools found that the involvement of pupils only happened in a minority of schools (R. Rose, *et al.*, 2012).

Adult support is not always viewed positively by students with SEN. A study covering England, Wales and Scotland found that, while students valued the help they received from adults, they would have liked the help to be provided more flexibly. They wanted to be allowed to take risks with their learning and develop independence (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007; Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Parsons, *et al.*, 2007). A small study in Australia which obtained the views of three students following a newly introduced inclusive programme found that they valued support from a co-teacher more than from a teaching assistant (O'Rourke & Houghton, 2009). The authors hypothesised that this difference in value might be because the students were unclear about the relative roles of adults offering support. In contrast, a UK study involving 54 secondary students with specific language impairments found that they particularly valued teaching assistant support (Sellman, 2009). Students in this study valued practical support such as the teaching assistant reading materials or writing down ideas for the student. Some students commented on the lack of understanding that adults had of their disability and how this limited the support that they received. A Belgian study found that six students with SEN reported that adult support was useful because it reduced barriers to them participating in school activities. However, the students were critical of adult support that was over-controlling or prevented them from fiddling or taking a few minutes out of the work (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). The students in the Belgian study also reported that adult support sometimes limited opportunities for developing relationships with peers. The students suggested that it would be better if they could indicate when they needed adult support and when they needed help. A similar barrier to peer relationships is reported in a Scottish study that found that students preferred to use a designated classroom with enhanced support referred to as a learning support base compared to having a teaching assistant in the

classroom (Woolfson, *et al.*, 2007). Students with autism in the UK reported that adults who 'shadow them' in the classroom impede their ability to blend in with peers (Jenkins, 2008). An Irish study looking at the experiences of students with physical disabilities found that overall students valued the support received from special needs assistants or personal assistants. This included physical accessibility facilities (ramps, lifts, etc.) and adaptations, special equipment, help with personal care needs, scribing facilities, provision of flexible time to allow students to move between classrooms, physical adaptations, extra time for exams and one-to-one support from assistants (Daly, Keogh, & Whyte, 2007).

Having the correct technical support for different disabilities helped students to feel that they had overall access to the curriculum (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Parsons, *et al.*, 2007). For example, students felt that ICT was a useful support but accessing this sometimes was considered a matter of 'luck' rather than its ready availability as a result of a planned curriculum activity. A similar problem had been noted in an earlier study in the UK for students with chronic physical illness, where students reported that assistive tools and equipment were seen as essential but not always available (Lightfoot, Wright, & Sloper, 1999). In the UK, specialist equipment such as adapted chairs, walkers and tables were seen as making students with physical disabilities stand out in the inclusive classroom. Computers on the other hand were not seen as stigmatising (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). In a Scottish study, most students reported having access to computers when they needed them but about one in five reported not having access to special equipment when required (Woolfson, *et al.*, 2007). Nielsen (2011) found that there was need for suitable tools to help Scandinavian students with dyslexia access learning, alongside time and space.

Students with physical disabilities and chronic conditions can be particularly vulnerable in accessing the curriculum in English schools (Lightfoot, *et al.*, 1999). In their study they found that 29 out of the 33 secondary mainstream students aged 11–16 felt that their participation in the curriculum and in school-related social activities were affected by their physical health. Physical symptoms such as pain, tiredness, physical co-ordination often prevented equal access. For example, some students mentioned that they had to have lessons in different classes because their wheelchair could not go everywhere. They appreciated physical support from teachers and friends (e.g. carrying bags for them); adaptations to the school rules (e.g. being allowed to leave early to get around easily); and, choices around participating in activities (e.g. teachers asking them whether they want to participate in PE or alternative activities).

#### **2.4.2.2 School climate**

School climate is a term that refers to the quality of school life, the relationships between members of the school and the overall tone and attitudes of staff and students. The term is used to cover the subjective experience of the school's values, norms and interpersonal relationships. Positive school experiences for high school students are associated with a school climate that is characterised by an 'aura of trust' and where there is mutual respect between students and teacher (Groves & Welsh, 2010). We would expect that when this is present, students' views are listened to and considered in decision-making processes. A study in Scotland found that about half of the secondary school students with Statements of SEN were invited to attend their own Annual Review meetings. However, a quarter of them did not feel encouraged to express their views in the meeting. Focus group interviews with some of the students found that they felt their

views were listened to and respected. However, students did not feel that they were part of the decision on support provided on a daily basis. They often felt that their views were not sought by staff (Woolfson, *et al.*, 2007). A similar lack of empowerment was reported in an earlier Scottish study of young people aged 11 to 21 with a variety of difficulties (from mild and specific learning disabilities to severe learning disabilities, communication disabilities, physical disabilities, sensory needs, social-emotional and behavioural disabilities and complex needs). The students identified a narrow range of ways in which their views could contribute and they were concerned that their views were not always heard. Even when heard, they were not sure that their views were taken into account when decisions were about to be made (Children in Scotland, 2002).

In contrast, another study in England found that young people's participation in school councils was felt as empowering and as an important factor contributing to increased confidence, knowledge and the power to change things. It also raised their awareness on issues and mechanisms that could potentially enable change. In terms of experiencing their rights, the findings revealed very individualised experiences: whilst some students/young people had accepted their disabled identity and used it as a means of empowerment, other students (mainly in special settings) found it difficult to accept that the language of 'disability' applied to them. Some of the students/young people were sensitive about the terms used to describe them, showing preference for certain terms (such as 'disabled') and opposing strongly to the use of others ('thick', 'spastic', etc.). Some students, although they did not like the term 'disabled' either, had to recognise that at times, their 'condition' came in 'handy' (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007).

### **2.4.2.3 Processes and structures**

The terms processes and structures refer to the ways that schools are organised (structures) and how they are managed (processes). The studies that we were able to find exploring the experiences of students with SEN in relation to process and structures tended to seek the views of students with higher cognitive abilities.

Thirty-four young people with physical disabilities were interviewed about their post-primary school experiences in Ireland. The results, amongst others, provide valuable insights into what processes and structures students value. Young people reported that they appreciated having a choice of schools (mainstream, mainstream with a special support unit or special). However, they implied that this choice very much depended on the support available in each setting. The students also valued the optional transition year as this enables them to make new friends and engage in extracurricular activities. In all structures and processes examined, the key issue was the existence of co-ordinated approaches to enable them to take full advantage of the opportunities (Daly, *et al.*, 2007).

Byrnes (2011) interviewed 73 students with hearing loss aged 12–16 in Australia. This built on a previous study that involved seeking the wider views of students with disabilities (Byrnes, 2004). Both studies found that the students were not wholly supportive of inclusion in mainstream settings, with some wanting local school placement, while others wanted special classes or special schools. While the setting in which education took place did not seem to matter to the group as a whole, the curriculum and student outcomes were considered very important.

Transition stages, both from primary to secondary and from secondary to post-secondary are often a crucial aspect of processes determining the experiences of students and can be a time when problems escalate (O'Connor & *et al.*, 2011). Students with SEN report more help from agencies and special education teachers (Repetto, *et al.*, 2011). Six students were followed up a year after their transition to secondary school in England. These students found it difficult to adapt to some of the differences between primary and secondary school, especially the increased workload both at school and homework. Organisational issues and structures were more difficult, such as the complex timetable, moving around classrooms in a large building, carrying books to and from school, keeping track of the worksheets and making new friends. Also, students and their mothers felt that longer and/or repeated visits prior to transferring to secondary school were beneficial in comparison to short or single visits. Similarly, special needs support, such as a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) or a dedicated room to 'cool off' was also appreciated. The opportunity to have a flexible timetable for students with SEN in the new secondary school was recommended. The authors suggest that what is needed is not extra transition services but continuity of support throughout the period of transition and the need for a dedicated space in the new secondary school such as a special needs unit (Maras & Aveling, 2006).

A recent study for the NCSE in Ireland (Barnes-Holmes, Scanlon, Desmond, Shevlin, & Vahey, 2013) reported what students with SEN thought about transition before and after the move to second-level education. Before the transition, students were worried about losing the supportive environment of teachers who 'understood, protected and cared for them' and whether they would be supported in the same way by teachers in the post-primary setting. They were concerned about being able to 'follow a new set of rules' and a desire to 'fit in and stay out of trouble'. Fitting in seems to refer to relationships with peers and with teachers, and understanding and following school rules. Not being able to keep up with the school curriculum threatened this ability to fit in through the potential social disapproval that might follow. The students seemed to value having a head start in getting to know the new school through information and pre-transition visits. The post-transition views expressed continued concerns about fitting in, especially a lack of consistency between teachers' rules. Some of the students discussed a lack of availability of support classes while others commented on how being absented from lessons had the potential for stigmatisation and not fitting in (p. 40) and difficulties with being able to ask questions. Many pupils were positive about the transition finding the teachers helpful, the range of new subjects exciting, opportunities for praise and being valued by teachers contributing to building self-esteem.

#### **2.4.2.4 Relationships with teachers and peers**

Several studies state the importance of friendships for students and young people with SEN. Eighty-two per cent of students with SEN in an English study reported that they could make friends easily (Sammons, *et al.*, 2011). In interviews and focus groups with 38 students from primary and post-primary schools in Ireland, issues such as making new friends, retaining or losing friends, and overall the importance of friendships was frequently mentioned as contributing to the quality of experiences at school (Prunty, *et al.*, 2012). An attempt to make use of social support using collaborative learning was found to have differential effects for six secondary-aged Australian students. Students without SEN reported that collaborative learning

promoted friendships, while students with moderate learning difficulties remained feeling isolated as they perceived peers not wanting to work with them (O'Rourke & Houghton, 2009). This general finding is consistent with the perception of students with disabilities in the USA as having fewer friends (Repetto, *et al.*, 2011).

The nature of the disability can have an effect on friendship development and how it is perceived. For example, part of the triad of difficulties necessary for a diagnosis of ASD is that of social interaction. One UK study found that parents and teachers tended to underestimate the ability of students with ASD to form friendships. Approximately half of a sample of 100 students with ASD aged between 10 and 12 years reported that they had one meaningful friend compared to a third of parents believing this to be the case (Rowley *et al.*, 2012). Within the sample, lower scores on communication and social skills were associated with lower friendship levels. A similar difference between adult perceptions and that of students was found in an Australian study (Taylor & Houghton, 2008). Parents and teachers tended to underestimate friendships compared to the students themselves. The study found that the students' perceptions of friendships varied according to the ADHD subtype. Students with the inattentive subtype of ADHD felt that they are able to control their friendship patterns and be in control of their socialisation but felt that they prefer generally to be on their own. Those with the predominantly hyperactive subtypes felt that their ability to initiate and sustain friendships largely depends on the actions of others such as teachers and peers. These studies suggest that adults are attributing relationship difficulties based on the diagnosis rather than asking the students themselves.

A UK study reported that 32 out of 33 secondary school students with physical disabilities and chronic illness felt that their social activities were affected as they often had to spend time in treatment or personal care instead of participating in social activities. Tiredness and transport restriction made it difficult for them to access after-school activities and their physical health and having to find somebody to accompany them meant they often had to miss school trips. Not surprisingly, 23 out of 33 young people felt that their friendships were also affected by their condition. They did not like it when their peers were drawn to them because of curiosity and some of them wanted to keep their health issues private (e.g. taking medication privately). The remaining 10 young people felt that their health conditions made no difference to relationships with peers and that people "watched out" for them (Lightfoot, *et al.*, 1999).

The incidence of the experience of bullying for students with SEN is generally higher than for students without SEN. One large-scale study of 2,500 students attempted to compare students with SEN and those without, but found no difference in perceptions of other students and teachers treating the student with respect. However, the same study found that more students with SEN reported being bullied or picked on (21%) compared to 13% who did not have SEN (Repetto, *et al.*, 2011). A much higher incidence of bullying was reported in another English study, with 83% of secondary students with SEN reporting some form of bullying (Norwich & Kelly, 2004). A recent study in Ireland found that being bullied was more likely for primary pupils with SEN than those without SEN (Cosgrove *et al.*, 2014). The students most vulnerable were those with high risk SEBD, dyslexia with SEBD, ASD, and a physical or sensory disability with SEBD (pp. 143–144).

The evidence on placement and bullying is mixed. One Irish study found that students with SEN in mainstream schools were more likely to report being bullied than students with SEN in special schools (Prunty, *et al.*, 2012). In contrast, a large-scale USA study found that students with SEN in self-contained classrooms reported higher rates of bullying and victimisation compared to students in inclusive settings. These incidents for students in self-contained classrooms were higher during transitional times, e.g. entry into high school, exit (C. A. Rose, *et al.*, 2009). An English study found no differences in bullying reported by students with SEN in mainstream and special settings (Norwich & Kelly, 2004). Unstructured times have been found to be more risky for students with SEN in a UK study (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007; Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Parsons, *et al.*, 2007).

Students with ASD have been found to report more incidents of bullying than students with dyslexia or without any form of SEN in an English study (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). The students were found to experience higher levels of rejection and lower levels of acceptance from peers. This suggests that students with ASD are more vulnerable to bullying than peers (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). This is supported through a more recent UK study which also found high levels of experiences of victimisation in a sample of 100 students with ASD. Forty per cent of students with ASD reported feelings of 'exclusion and rejection', although nearly all students reported experiences of disagreements with other students. Students with lower social skill and communication skill scores reported higher levels of victimisation and bullying. According to the authors, this suggests that students who are less socially able may be less attuned to subtle norms of bullying, or that more socially able students are more likely to mix with their peers and exchange social interactions with them. In mainstream schools the level of social and communication impairment made a difference. However, for more socially skilled students with ASD, there was no real difference in perceived bullying depending on whether they were placed in a mainstream or special school (Rowley, *et al.*, 2012).

In a Dutch study, teachers of adolescents with ASD attending special schools tended to report higher incidents of bullying than the students themselves. Students with ASD tended to self-report bullying incidents at levels comparable with ASD students in mainstream settings. Students in mainstream settings tend to report higher levels of bullying than teachers and this is explained in that the bullying tends to occur outside the classroom at unstructured times. In this study, the teachers and students are together for most of the day so any bullying is likely to be noticed by the teacher. It could be argued that the students with ASD are not good at recognising bullying, however, the researchers went on to explore this using video fragments and found that they were as good as peers at recognising bullying (van Roekel, Scholte, & Didden, 2010).

Bullying has also been reported to be a problem by students with physical disabilities in Ireland (Daly, *et al.*, 2007). A UK study involving 33 young people with physical disabilities and chronic illness mentioned bullying when they were interviewed. Comments such as 'name calling', being laughed at and other students 'taking the Mickey', were frequently mentioned. Students had to adopt ignoring strategies and avoiding possible bullying situations (Lightfoot, *et al.*, 1999).

The relationship between the teacher and the student has been found to be important (Harris, *et al.*, 2006; Lightfoot, *et al.*, 1999; Nielsen, 2011; Nind, Boorman, & Clarke, 2012; Repetto, *et al.*, 2011; Sellman, 2009). Students aged 13–16 attending a special school cited 'clarity, consistency, inclusivity and good quality relationships' as being important (Sellman, 2009, p. 42). Students who had been previously excluded and given the chance to start afresh in a new school reported that feelings of being cared for and valued by teachers helped them to raise their self-esteem and change their relationship with school and, by implication, their chances of retention (Harris, *et al.*, 2006). Perceptions of being treated with respect by teachers were found to be equally important to students with SEN and students without SEN (Repetto, *et al.*, 2011). For English secondary school students with physical disabilities and chronic illness, relationships with teachers were crucial; they placed a lot of value on teachers who 'understood'. The vast majority of the 33 students they interviewed felt that they had special relationships with certain members of staff, often the SENCO or pastoral care staff. Some students appreciated the efforts by teachers including encouragement to return to school after absence, day-to-day help, allowing them to leave the class because of their medical problems, having access to certain resources, carrying medication, etc. A few students felt that the SENCO was mainly for students with learning difficulties and not for them (Lightfoot, *et al.*, 1999). A study of students with dyslexia found that they did not mention specific teaching methods but were more concerned that teachers perceived the whole person, with strengths alongside weaknesses, rather than a 'dyslexic' (Nielsen, 2011).

The experiences of four girls who had previously been excluded from school and then placed in a special school for SEBD in England were explored using digital photography and video as a means to empower girls and provide them with opportunities to be heard. The narratives showed that the girls were able to form attachment with this special school and to construct and negotiate aspects of space, identity, rules, and new relationships with staff and other girls (Nind, *et al.*, 2012).

A study was conducted across 11 secondary schools in Scotland which had set up student support bases for students who had previously been excluded with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. These comprised classrooms to which the students could be sent if excluded from a lesson rather than allowing confrontation to escalate resulting in school exclusion. The study found that students considered being treated fairly and equitably as important and, when this did not happen, it acted as a trigger for their challenging behaviour (Hamill & Boyd, 2002).

#### **2.4.2.5 Engagement with school and learning**

UK students identified as having behavioural problems in early school years were enjoying school less in Year 9 and were more anxious compared to those with no reported behavioural problems. Students with SEN were more likely to report 'feeling out of place' (18% compared to 8% of students without SEN). In general, students with SEN did worse compared to peers without SEN on all measures of academic self-concept, feelings of popularity and levels of anxiety although this greatly varied across the level of support (Sammons, *et al.*, 2011).

A study in England found that students with SEN expressed a desire to work independently as well as being part of the negotiations on the amounts and type of work to do. Some students felt that their teachers did not believe that they struggled with their work. Students often felt that they needed additional support from parents or peers in order to complete their homework. Students also often attended homework clubs and there was a suggestion for such clubs to take place during lunch or after school to allow students to participate in the homework club (Woolfson, *et al.*, 2007).

Students with SEN in both mainstream and special schools in the UK and New Zealand were found to view their parents' involvement in school negatively (B. Wade & M. Moore, 1993). Over recent years there has been more emphasis on engaging parents in their students' education and this is now more commonplace than when the study was undertaken. However, the study showed that a larger than expected number of students were negative about the home-school liaisons and reported that they felt embarrassed, worried that teachers would say bad things about them and fearful. Despite this, a large number of the students said that they appreciated parents helping them at home with their school work.

#### **2.4.2.6 Access to qualifications and achievements**

In the UK, there is a lot of emphasis on academic achievement for all students and definitions of special educational needs often refer to difficulties with academic achievement and meeting political aspirations and academic standards (Squires, *et al.*, 2012). This creates an interesting tension with students being taught to improve their overall development and learning on the one hand while, on the other, hearing that they are not reaching expected levels. There are potentially two different responses to this that the student can make: one is to look for ways to increase opportunities to achieve at the expected level and the other is to protect self-esteem and look for ways out of the system or to blame someone else. In some countries, government policies have attempted to increase aspirations for young people with SEN (e.g. Aiming High in the UK DFES, 2007).

Almost twice as many students with SEN compared to students without SEN in England reported that they would leave school once they were 16 years old and get a job (13% of SEN compared to 7% of other students). Students with SEN were more likely to report that they would go into worked-based training and less likely to report that they would enrol in a 6th Form or college (Sammons, *et al.*, 2011). This is similar to findings from a much earlier study. Four students with literacy difficulties acknowledged the need to improve their reading so that they would not be 'trapped' in 'dismal' jobs and have less opportunity in life. This made them more sceptical in continuing schooling as, despite their efforts, they felt their attainment had not improved (Kos, 1991).

The chance to repeat a year when time was lost due to illness was particularly valued by Irish students with physical disabilities (Daly, *et al.*, 2007). Most of the students and young people with disabilities in a UK study liked school and wanted to continue on to further study when they were older, mainly going into more practical rather than academic subjects. Some students

expressed aspirations of going to college and/or University. One young person talked about his 'dreading' to go to University because of his disability, which was an element that he had to live with (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007).

#### **2.4.2.7 Development of identity, well-being and independence**

The processes of categorisation, labelling and assessment to make diagnosis inevitably marks some students out as being different to other students, to receive different treatment and to contribute to their identity as individuals (Armstrong & Squires, 2012; Humphrey, 2012; Riddick, 2012). Several studies have shown that awareness of difficulties or differences between an individual and peers is a concern for young people with SEN (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007; Mortier, Desimpel, Schauwer, & Hove, 2011), speech and language impairments (Palikara, Lindsay, & Dockrell, 2009) and reading difficulties (Kos, 1991). Students with reading difficulties caused by mild learning disabilities were aware of their reading delays and that they were 'different' from their peers. This caused them anxiety and stress that they would be 'embarrassed', exposed and/or ridiculed later on during their educational routes. This often resulted in students engaging in inappropriate behaviours in order to avoid exposure (or to attract a different kind of attention, e.g. challenging behaviours or passivity (Kos, 1991)). For example, Mortier *et al.* (2011) found that students were aware of their similarities and differences in terms of the support received; they stressed the importance of keeping activities as normal as possible and did not like it when support meant that they stood out. In a UK national study, Lewis, Parsons & Robertson (2007) found that young people with a range of SEN were aware of their special needs and showed a willingness to participate in the decision-making and have their voices heard.

Students with SEN have been shown to have a number of emotional difficulties, lack in self-confidence, experience more mental health issues compared to their non-disabled peers and have increased levels of stress. The causes of stress may vary such as awareness of the difference, difficulty in functioning in certain areas, bullying (presented under the relationships section) and so on. A study exploring the potential of a web-based mentoring model to provide a platform for black students with SEBD to express their needs found that students needed to have their views heard and to share their emotional experiences. Often, these negative emotional experiences are affected by home and school environments, and can consequently negatively affect school behaviour and academic achievement. The study has shown that such online mentoring was appreciated by the students, as some of their comments reveal: 'It taught me things that I should and should not do'; 'It was helpful because you get to talk up problems with other people' (Grant & Dieker, 2011).

Levels of independence are generally lower for students with SEN and this limits opportunities for participation. The development of independence was seen as important for students in a Belgian study who wanted to be allowed to try to do tasks by themselves before an adult offered support (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Developing independence was also cited as desirable by students with ASD (Whitley, Lupart, & Beran, 2009).

The range of extracurricular activities undertaken by students with SEN is less than their peers and students with SEN are less likely than peers to participate in any extra-curricular activities (Repetto, *et al.*, 2011). A similar finding was evidenced in a second study that found that young people with SEN were overall more restricted in terms of extracurricular activities. The type of SEN affected the degree to which students participated in activities during lunch times or after school. Those with more severe needs, or who required extra support, took part less in extra-curricular activities (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007).

Students with SEN were less likely to mention meeting school friends outside school, which suggests that these students may be held back in terms of gaining social independence. Students who required a taxi to take them to school cited that this restricted their independence if they wanted to stay behind with friends as timetables for taxi lifts were pre-arranged and inflexible. Similarly, some students expressed the wish to get the bus with their friends rather than using the taxi services (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007).

### **2.4.3 Summarising the comparative experiences of the two groups**

The literature presented in sections 1.4.1 and 1.4.2 outlines what the students in the two different groups think about a range of issues related to their education. Similar issues arise for both groups of students. However, some of the studies with students with SEN focus on aspects of their education that are directly related to their type of SEN and this prevents direct comparison on every issue. Sometimes the studies involve very small numbers of students so, in presenting the issues below, the reader is reminded to be cautious of over-generalising and the points should be considered as indicators of potential issues.

It seems that both groups of students value qualifications and see developing literacy skills as important. For students with SEN, a lack of development of literacy skills was seen as leading to negative attitudes about school in one USA study. The majority of students without SEN wanted to go onto further education. Students with SEN were more likely to seek employment or work-based education than their peers. Those with SEN who continued in to post-16 education preferred practical subjects to academic subjects.

Curriculum relevance was important to students with and without SEN. Students without SEN valued a range of teaching approaches with activities that simulated real life experiences being desirable. The most popular subject choices amongst students without SEN were sport, art and creative subjects. Students with SEN in one study reported that there was limited support in mainstream schools for them to take part in sport. Studies found mixed results for how well students with SEN were able to access the wider curriculum and the extent to which curriculum adaptations were made to meet SEN. In one study less than half said that work was suitably differentiated to their needs. In another study, students identified sciences, languages and information technology as the most difficult to access. Having the correct technical support was reported to improve curriculum access for students with SEN in a third study. Individually tailored programmes were viewed positively by English students with SEN. While repetitive remedial teaching approaches were reported as boring or seeming irrelevant to USA students with SEN,

Irish students valued the chance to repeat a year. Subject choice in special schools was reported to be more limited than in mainstream by Scottish students with SEN.

Although the notion of inclusion is promoted by adults as being a good thing, this view is not necessarily shared by students. The results of studies that looked at the views of students with SEN about placement in mainstream, special classes or special schools were mixed. Typically students tended to have positive experiences irrespective of which setting they were placed in. In the UK some students in special schools would have preferred to be in mainstream, whereas in Ireland students who had experienced both mainstream and special classes or schools preferred the special school or class to mainstream. The differences may be due to the way in which additional adult support is organised – students in both countries wanted easy access to help when they needed it. One study in Australia found that, while some students with disabilities wanted mainstream schools, others wanted special classes or special schools. An Irish study found that students liked the notion of having different types of school that they could attend to address their special educational needs, however, the choice that they would make would depend on the support available in each setting. The key issue was a need for a co-ordinated approach that would allow them to make use of the opportunities available.

Autonomy and involvement in decision-making was valued by students with and without SEN. Both sets of students often perceived teachers as being too busy to take account of student interests or views when making the curriculum relevant or planning support for students with SEN. When students were involved in decision-making in one USA study of students without SEN, this was found to lead to greater academic engagement. Just under half of students without SEN in an Irish study reported perceived unfair treatment by teachers. A study in Scotland found that students with SEN were provided with limited ways of being involved in decision-making and not always encouraged to express their views. One study found that students with SEN wanted to be able to take risks with their learning and develop independence and only wanted adult help when it was needed. Adult support provided too tightly was seen as limiting social and academic development. Students valued practical support. Internationally, students did not like adult support that was over-controlling or interfered with developing relationships with peers or made them stand out from other students. Standing out or appearing different was also a concern of students who needed specialist equipment to help with their physical disabilities. In one study, students with SEN thought it was important that the supporting adults needed to understand their disability in order to provide appropriate support. One study found that students with SEN were sometimes unsure about the roles of different adults in providing support to them.

A number of studies highlighted the views of students around the importance of friendships and support networks. An English study of students with SEN reported that they received help from support agencies and teachers at transition points. For students without SEN support came from family and friends to make the transition to post-secondary life easier. A small-scale study found that the difficulties encountered at transition to second-level education for students with SEN can be long-standing and relate to workload increases, complex timetables, moving around a building, friendships, keeping track of learning materials and tasks. Transition planning helps to some extent and is better when this is extended beyond a single visit. Second-level schools can create structures and processes that help, e.g. by providing increased SEN support, or a resource base or dedicated room such as a special needs unit. The majority of students without SEN

found making friendships easy, though girls felt less popular than boys and students from poorer backgrounds felt slightly less popular than their peers from better off backgrounds. For students with SEN, the results of studies are more mixed. One English study found that the majority of students with SEN found making friends easy while, in contrast, an Irish study found that friendships were an issue for most students with SEN. USA studies have indicated that students with SEN have fewer friendships than peers. There is some evidence that friendship development varies with type of SEN. Physical disabilities and chronic illnesses affect the quality of life of some students with SEN. Teacher views and student views about friendships may not coincide; one study found that students with ASD reported more friendships than their teachers thought was the case. Students with SEN are less likely to undertake extracurricular activities than students without SEN and this may limit opportunities for friendships development. One study showed that students with ADHD thought that teachers and peers could play a supportive role. Another study found that students with SEN valued the support of parents and peers in completing homework while yet another study showed that parental involvement can be viewed negatively by students with SEN.

Many studies have found that the relationship between students and teachers is important. Students with SEN in these studies cite a range of teacher qualities that are desirable including: establishing trust; being honest; encouraging and supporting students; being clear and consistent; inclusive attitudes; good quality interpersonal relationships. Students value being cared for and treated with respect. They value teachers who understand their needs and understand the whole person, with strengths alongside weaknesses. School enjoyment is often linked directly to students' experiences of relationships with teachers. In an English study of students without SEN, the majority liked school, however older students liked school less than younger students, 40% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds found school boring and more boys than girls thought that school was a waste of time. Students with SEN were more likely to feel out of place in school than those without SEN.

Studies reporting student views on bullying show that bullying has a negative social and emotional impact for victims. Younger students experience more bullying than older students and in most countries (but not Ireland), boys report more bullying than girls. In England and Ireland, the students who were bullies had more friends than victims of bullying, possibly because bullying requires the application of good social skills to manipulate others. Students with SEN experience more bullying than those without SEN. School type has a mixed effect on the experience of bullying. In Ireland, students with SEN experience more bullying in mainstream schools than in special schools. In the USA the opposite pattern was found, in England there were no substantial differences. The type of SEN seems to matter. Students with physical difficulties in Ireland have reported being victims of name calling and verbal bullying. Students with ASD are more likely to be bullied than students with dyslexia and this may be linked to poorer social communication skills. In a Dutch study there were differences in how adults perceived bullying and how the students themselves perceived bullying, with students with ASD experiencing less bullying than teachers indicated.

## 2.5 RQ 2 What are the lessons for policy and practice that arise from an analysis of this body of work?

International policy has been developing over the last 25 years to promote inclusive education. This is set against a backdrop of segregated education in many developed countries, including Ireland, which had a special education system that was very different to the general education system. This shift in policy has produced tensions in many countries including Ireland in how students with SEN are defined and how schools respond to teaching a wide range of students.

Several studies have shown that adult views about how best to educate students and student views about what they would prefer are not always the same. How students perceive the relevance of curriculum subjects was important to students in some of the studies. There were mixed findings about how well students can access support. The role of teachers is crucial and having inclusive attitudes and a flexible, supportive approach in which good relationships are engendered seems important to student engagement and learning. The key lesson is that this suggests that **student views should be obtained and taken seriously for a range of things including: educational placement; how support is provided and co-ordinated; the types of teaching methods used; how adult support is used in the classroom; and, aspirations for education and employment.**

Students with SEN do not want to be marked out as different to peers. This means that teachers will need to explore how they can help students learn by removing barriers to learning and participation at the whole class or school level. The key lesson is that **discussion with the student could help teachers understand how individual support can be arranged in ways which are less intrusive or obvious.**

Students with SEN are more likely to be the subject of bullying and this may be linked to poorer social skills and fewer friendships. This suggests that strategies that help develop social skills may be preventative of bullying. The key lesson is that **whole school approaches to helping students form friendships should be developed and schools will need to put more emphasis on helping students with SEN form friendships.**

### 3. Methodology: How Did We Find Out Students' Views?

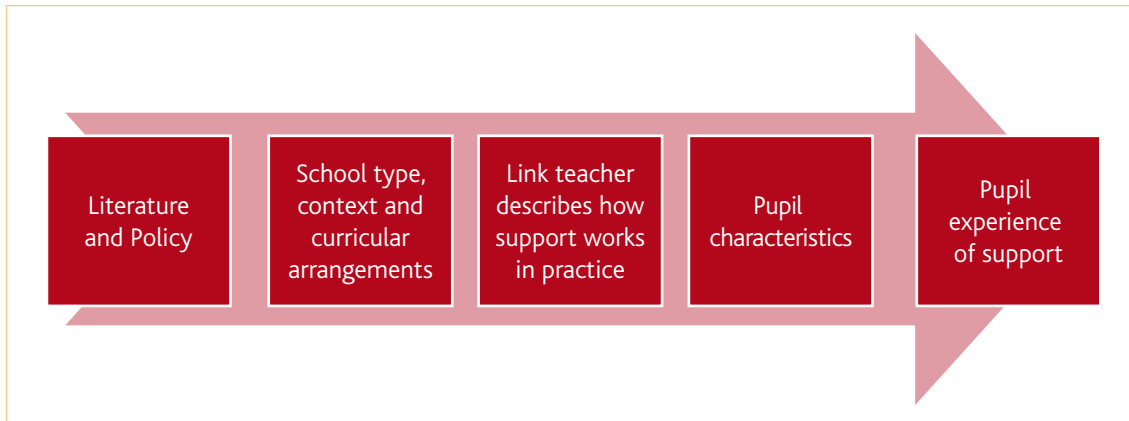
This project has been about what students experience in the supports that are provided for them. This has meant that most of our data has involved asking the students themselves.

#### 3.1 Overview of the project design

The various layers of the person-process-context model all impinge on individual experience and the way that support is organised for the individual student. To understand how these things interact we have organised the research using a progressive focus design. We start with the literature and policy review and this highlights issues and questions to be explored further. The school context and how the curriculum is organised is then considered to set the scene for how students are supported. Once a case description has been produced we then speak with link teachers to understand how support is arranged in practice within the individual school. This then informs our discussion with students so that we can understand their experiences of the way that support is arranged in their particular school to meet their specific special educational needs. The advantage of going through this process is that it allows us to narrow our discussion with the student and to use concrete examples from what we have been told about the school.

Our concern is what the students think about the way their educational experiences are organised. We asked students directly about their experiences and captured their voice as best we could within the constraints of the research tender. A weakness in the design is that it starts with an adult focus, partly determined by the research commission and partly determined by our focusing in on potential issues using adult structures. It is a limitation produced by the need to cover so many settings in the time available. A different approach would have started with a small number of students in a small number of settings and then worked with them to create a student-led agenda for exploring experiences. Approaches that are more student-centred have been used by other researchers and include training students to be researchers (e.g. Yardley, 2014); photo-elicitation techniques in which the students take photographs reflecting experiences (e.g. Hill, 2014); participatory action research in which the students design the research (e.g. Taggart, Franks, Osborne, & Collins, 2013). However, such an approach may not have answered the questions that we were commissioned to explore. Using focus groups, paired discussions and individual interviews in a semi-structured way allowed students to spend longer on topics that were of more concern to them. There is a possibility that we did not address more pressing issues of concern to the students themselves because the students were not fully empowered by the research process.

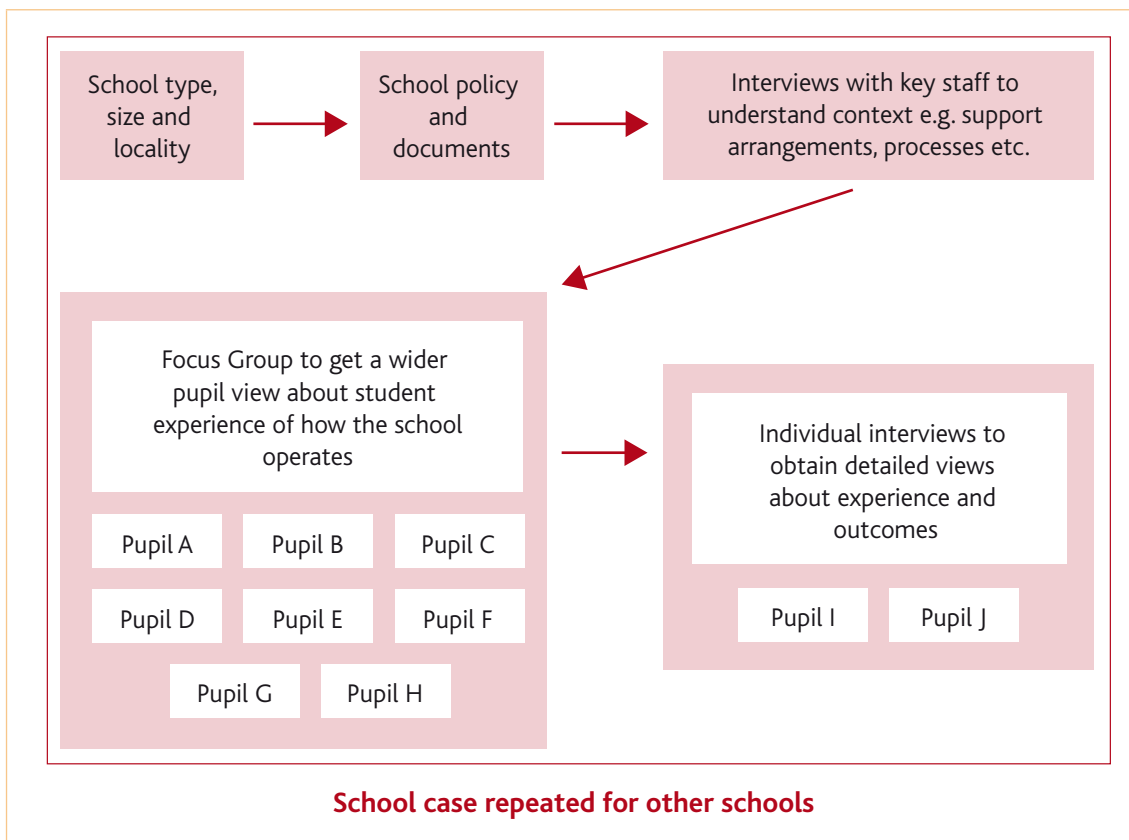
**Figure 6: Overview of the project design**



In total, 30 educational establishments were included for visits and the views of 272 post-primary students collected. Each post-primary setting can be represented graphically as a box containing several data sources or units of analyses. Our focus is on understanding the views of post-primary students and then exploring how context explains any difference that might exist. From Bronfenbrenner’s model, we expect that local context is going to have more of an effect than distal context.

The original design for this study is shown below:

**Figure 7: Original data collection design**



### 3.2 Piloting the approach with students

We wanted to know whether our plan would work before collecting the views of young people in the Republic of Ireland. To do this we sought the support of a secondary school near to the University of Manchester and recruited some of the Year 7 students (aged 11–12) who had special educational needs. This was an important step to take because it allowed us to see how easy or difficult it would be to help young people with special educational needs express themselves. The link teacher at the school arranged for seven students with a range of SEN, but excluding severe communication difficulties, to be part of the pilot. Given the small number of students, we did not collect data about the particular types of SEN in the pilot group.

We devised some materials and approaches to use alongside a list of interview and focus group questions:

- School context templates and questions to guide development of each school description were drawn up to help us create a pen portrait for each post-primary educational setting.
- Focus group protocols for Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle focus groups in each school were devised.
- Interview protocols for Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle students in each school were constructed.
- We considered students who might not be able to cope with the interview process and key visuals were developed to support cognitive, linguistic and memory limitations of some students with SEN.

We found that most of the students with SEN could answer the questions that we wanted to ask. The research team was confident that they could obtain the views of a wide range of students with SEN prior to the commencement of the data collection phase in Ireland. Some of the questions that we asked did not flow easily in the conversation with students and we decided to add key words to our interviewer prompt sheets to allow a more natural and relaxed interview. The revised prompt sheets and questions are in Appendix 5.

During the pilot, some of the students had teaching assistants present. One advantage of this was that it allowed the students to relax more when meeting an unfamiliar researcher. The disadvantage was it tended to restrict the views expressed by students about support arrangements in their school. We decided that we would ask schools in Ireland to prepare students for our visit and we would allow SNAs to be present if the teachers or parents felt that the student would be unduly anxious if a familiar person was not present. Our expectation was that most students would be seen without a familiar adult being present.

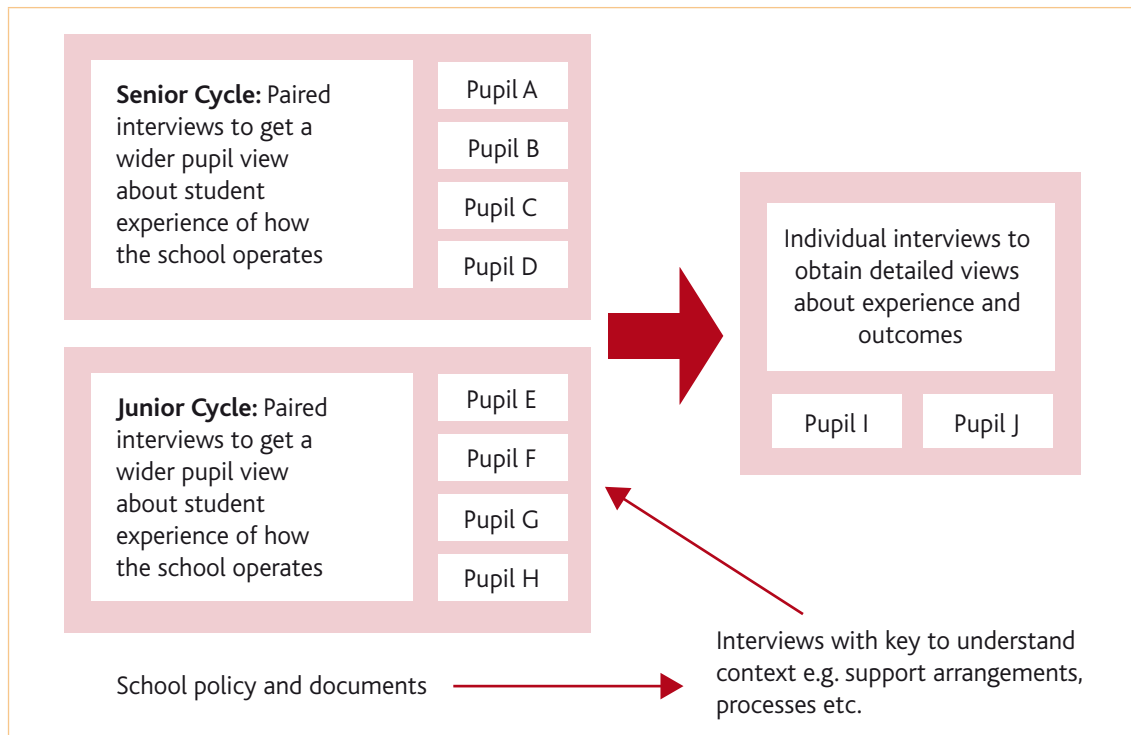
### 3.2.1 Changes made to the methodology as a result of the pilot

We noticed that the number of questions that we had generated to cover the research questions were too many to get through in the time allowed. We could either rush or get a very superficial answer from students or we could reduce the number of questions to get a deeper understanding of student experience. We wanted to be sure that we could address all of the areas of the research questions, but we did not want to rush. Our solution was to start each school with a different subsection of the questions that we wanted to cover. If students needed longer to answer questions, then this was okay because across all 30 post-primary settings we would have all of the questions answered.

The pilot indicated that a flexible approach was needed when working with the students. For instance, we noticed that some students preferred to meet with the researcher if they were with another student rather than individually. So, we decided to substitute this for individual interviews in the main study, if that was what a student wanted. We also noticed that it was better to interview some of the students in pairs rather than individually or in small groups. The students support each other and are able to have time to have their say. Teachers seemed to know which students would benefit from this approach and we used this principle by asking link teachers in the main study to indicate which approach would be best for their students.

We also noticed that the experiences of junior and senior cycle-aged students might be different because they were following different curriculums and they might have different levels of maturity. We decided to split our focus group into two focus groups for each school to take this into account.

We are able to get good meaningful answers in the pilot to the questions posed to students. Our first impressions are that the protocols that were devised and piloted are successful in producing good quality data. However, a small number of students had not contributed much in the pilot school. We think this might be because they need more time to think about their answers and adult support. We therefore decided to provide schools in the main study with an optional set of materials that teachers or parents could use in advance of the visit to help students develop their ideas about the five areas that we are covering. We also put a prompt in the parental information letter to suggest that parents discussed students' views about school prior to our visit (see Appendices).

**Figure 8: Revised Data Collection**

### 3.3 Schools: How did we choose the schools?

We wanted to make our study as representative of the experiences of students with SEN as possible. There might be something about the way that schools are funded or the type of school that means that they can provide support in different ways to students. This would then lead to different experiences. We wanted to take this into account at the start of the project by making sure that we invited schools of different types in proportion to the numbers of each type in Ireland. This type of study is referred to as a maximum variation study.

We wanted to capture the views of students in as many different types of post-primary school as possible. We wanted the range of experiences reported to reflect the numbers of each student in each type of placement. This meant that we had to be systematic in our recruitment of schools and drew up a list of the features of schools that we were interested in. This is referred to as quota sampling and uses a sampling frame. It allowed us to prioritise which schools we would contact first so that we could get the closest match in our sample to the larger pattern of school placements across the country.

### 3.3.1 Sampling frame

There are different types of post-primary placements in Ireland, with most being secondary schools, followed by vocational schools, then community schools and a small number of comprehensive schools. We devised a purposive recruitment strategy to capture and reflect the proportions of each school in the sample.

The project Advisory Group suggested that we should also include post-primary students who were attending special schools and some students that were being educated at Youthreach Centres. Youthreach Centres are intended for students who have left mainstream education without any formal qualifications and the centres accommodate up to 25 students through the ages 15 to 20. Students attending the Youthreach Centres were included in the sample because they provided an opportunity to gain the views of students who had fallen out of the mainstream system. Special School students were included in the study to gain the views of students who needed more intensive support than is normally available in mainstream education. These settings were recruited on an opportunistic basis.

**Table 6: Number of each type of school in the study**

Type of school	Total number of schools at the start of the project	Number of schools in the sample
Secondary schools	376	13
Vocational schools	253	9
Community schools	14	2
Comprehensive schools	79	1
Special Schools with post- primary students		3
Youthreach Centres		2
Total		<b>30 Schools or centres</b>

It could be that school size is important because this determines the overall amount of resources allocated and the degree of flexibility that a principal has to allocate resources. We wanted to include mainstream schools of different sizes to see if this affected student experience. We used the second level school list 2010–11 to obtain the numbers of students in every school in the Republic of Ireland. The list accounts for the placement of 357,459 post-primary students across many different settings.

This list gave the numbers of boys and girls attending each school. Schools vary in size according to location and type. This was used to calculate how many students would be in a small-, medium- or large-sized school based on a statistical comparison. A medium-sized school would be one with an average number of students, calculated by finding the mean and one standard deviation either side of this to provide a range. A small school has less than this range. A large school has more than this range.

**Table 7: Number of each size of school in the study**

Category of school in this study	Number of students	Number of schools in the sample
Small	Less than 224 students	9
Medium	224 to 756 students	16
Large	More than 756 students	5

We know that some schools are in areas of social deprivation and receive additional support through the DEIS scheme. Some schools also receive additional funding through fees. We wanted to include this difference in funding in our sample which contained nine DEIS schools and two fee-paying schools.

### 3.3.2 Type of school by gender intake

**Table 8: Number of each type of school by gender intake in the study**

Type of school	Number in sample
Mixed	20
Girls	5
Boys	5

To explore differences in experiences produced by the presence of special classes we wanted to include schools without special classes and schools with special classes. The majority of special classes in Ireland are for students with Autistic Spectrum Disorders, so we wanted more of these special classes to be represented in our sample. We were unable to include all types of special classes, because not all schools with special classes agreed to participate in the study.

**Table 9: Schools with special classes included in the study**

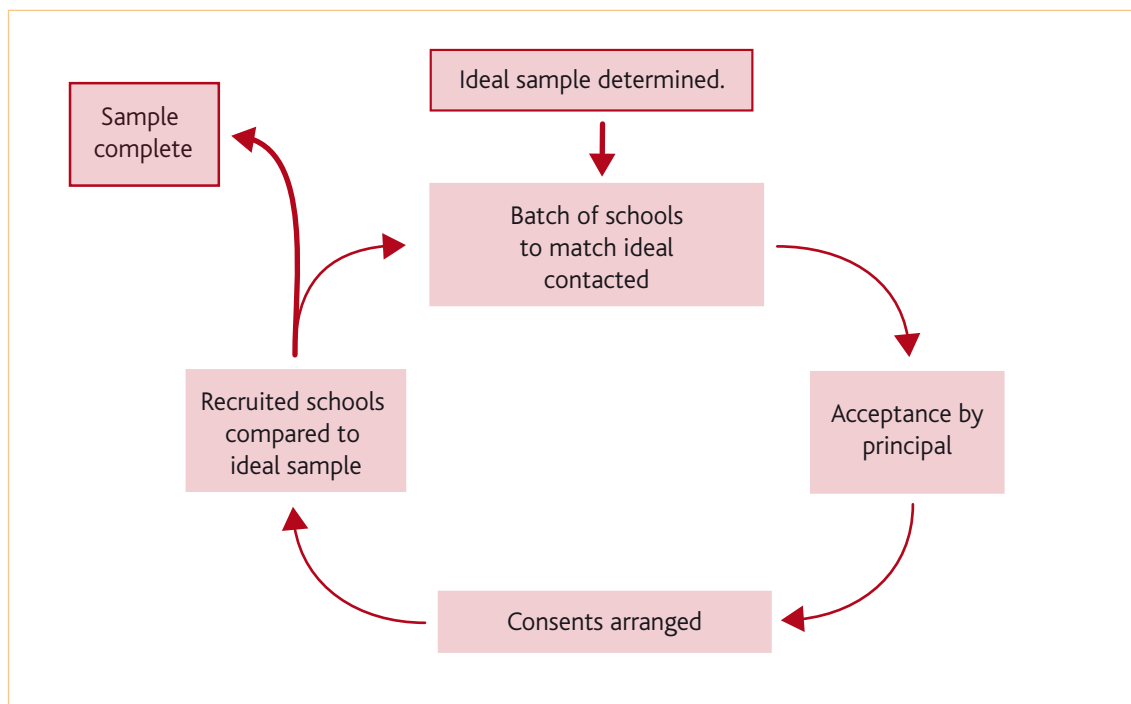
Type of special class	Number of designated classes at the start of the study	Number in sample
ASD	96	5
Mild GLD	11	1
Moderate GLD	18	1
Hearing impairment	5	0
Multiple Disabilities	2	0
EBD	2	0
Physical Disabilities	1	1

We have also tried to take into account allocated teachers and SNA hours using published figures. Excluding the special schools and the Youthreach centres, the post-primary schools visited received different amounts of teaching hours. These ranged between 14.1 and 320, with an average of 89.1 hours. Similarly, the number of SNAs varied between 1 and 17, with a mean of 3.9 full-time equivalent. These numbers depend on the size of the school and the proportion of students with SEN, however, at the time that we were recruiting schools we thought that this might affect the school's potential to flexibly respond to students' needs. Our view was that schools with higher levels of support may also be more familiar with students with SEN and this may impact on the skills and attitudes of adults within the school and consequently affect the experience of the students.

### 3.3.3 Schools contacted and invited to participate

We initially wrote to principals of post-primary settings in batches that best matched the types of schools that we wanted to involve in the project in the correct proportions. We outlined the nature of the project and the commitment needed by the school so that principals were able to decide whether to volunteer or not (see Appendices).

**Figure 9: Process for selecting schools**



To reflect possible geographical differences we wanted to include schools from 17 different counties spread across Ireland. In total we wrote to 379 settings distributed across the Republic of Ireland to be able to secure 30 settings for the research. This represents around 10% take up which is fairly typical for a recruitment strategy of this kind. The final sample of mainstream schools recruited is then based on a purposive strategy to provide an ideal match to represent the different variables, but inevitably also reflects the willingness of principals to be involved in the project.

**Table 10: Schools invited and those agreeing to participate in the study**

County	Number of schools contacted	Schools participating (including special and Youthreach)
Cavan	10	
Carlow	4	1
Clare	16	1
Cork	27	1
Cork Borough	15	1
Donegal	7	
Dublin	51	6
Galway	8	2
Galway Borough	4	
Kerry	8	1
Kildare	15	1
Kilkenny	15	
Laois	4	1
Leitrim	4	1
Limerick Borough	13	
Limerick	10	2
Longford	6	
Louth	6	
Mayo	16	
Meath	6	1
Monaghan	9	
Offaly	10	
Roscommon	8	2
Sligo	8	
Tipperary	20	1
Waterford	15	
Westmeath	15	
Wexford	13	1
Wicklow	6	2
Special Schools <sup>1</sup>	22	3
Youthreach Centres	8	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>30</b>

1 We have not specified which area special schools and Youthreach centres are in because this might make them identifiable.

We were able to recruit schools from across most of the Republic of Ireland. We were unable to recruit schools in some counties. It may be that there are unique socio-political influences in the counties that we did not visit that could have an influence on the experiences of post-primary students with special educational needs and we are unable to comment on these.

### **3.4 Understanding what the schools were like: the school context**

Prior to contacting schools, we made use of available information to find out as much about the context as possible. This included making use of published statistical data on school size and composition of students, additional support hours allocated, any SNAs allocated and designated special classes. There are whole-school evaluation reports available on the DES website, however, we did not make use of these documents in selecting schools or in understanding the context in which students with SEN were being included and supported in mainstream schools.

Once schools had agreed to participate we collected more information. Where school documentation was available online we looked at this. We also had a telephone conversation with the link teacher from each school. The link teacher was sent a participant information sheet and consent form (see Appendices).

During our visits we found schools very supportive of the project and there were many opportunistic discussions, volunteered information and chances to observe support arrangements in practice and to get a feel for the school atmosphere and relationships between school members.

### **3.5 Participants: Who did we ask?**

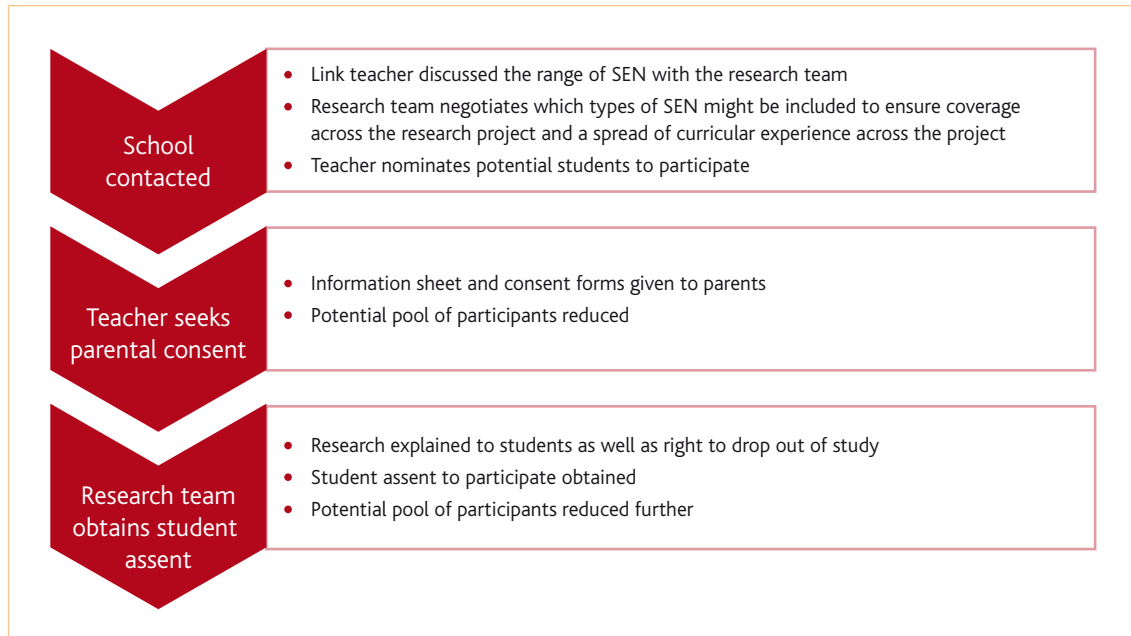
Schools nominated students to participate in our study with some guidance from the research team to make sure that we had a sample of students that widely represented those students with SEN. This kind of approach ensures diversity but does not claim to sample in a way that matches the distribution of student characteristics. Once teachers had identified the students, an information sheet and consent form was sent to parents<sup>2</sup> (see Appendices). We also asked students to give their assent to participating in the study when we first met them.

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2 One student in one of the YouthReach centres was aged over 18 and was able to give their own consent to participate.

The way in which the sample was obtained can be summarised in this flow diagram:

**Figure 10: Process for recruiting students**



We had anticipated obtaining the views of 10 students per school (either as interviews or focus groups); however, fewer students were recruited per school. This was because not all of the students invited into the study by the link teacher returned parental consents or gave their assent. This meant that we had fewer students in the study than we had hoped for. On the other hand, having fewer students in each school has meant that each student had slightly more time to express their views, allowing for richer data to be collected. By the end of the study, we were able to gain the views of 272 students in post-primary provision.

However, we did not have complete characteristic data on all of the students to ensure that they met the profile of having SEN. We attempted to complete this data by e-mailing link teachers to obtain the type of SEN for each student. At the end of this process, we still did not know the type of SEN for 59 students. While we could assume that the students had SEN from the school contact described above, we could not be certain that they fitted the parameters of the study. The decision was made to remove their data from our analysis. We kept the data for 10 Youthreach students who did not have SEN identified to us and this is discussed further in the findings part of the report. This report represents the views of 223 students with SEN.

The majority were boys (147 boys: 76 girls), reflecting the higher incidence of SEN in boys compared to girls. They were spread across the different stages of post-primary education, different year groups, different settings and completing different programme awards.

**Table 11: Students in each cycle**

Stage of education	Number of students
Junior Cycle	107
Transition Year	13
Senior Cycle	82
Unknown <sup>3</sup>	21

**Table 12: Students in each year group**

Year group	Number of students
1	26
2	50
3	33
4	16
5	38
6	29
Post-6	14
Other/Unknown <sup>4</sup>	17

**Table 13: Number of students from each setting**

Type of setting	Number of students
Secondary school	85
Vocational school	60
Community school	11
Comprehensive school	9
Special school	42
Youthreach Centre	16

3 No information was available about the stage of education for 11 students from special schools and for 10 students from Youthreach centres.

4 Special schools used a different class nomination for 12 students. No information was provided by schools for 5 students in the sample.

**Table 14: Students following each qualification**

Qualification course followed	Number of students
Junior Certificate	81
Junior Certificate & Junior Certificate School Programme	19
Transition Year Certificate	13
Leaving Certificate Applied	17
Leaving Certificate (Established)	29
Leaving Certificate (Established) & Leaving Certificate Vocational	5
Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)	10
FETAC and JCSP	1
Unknown	48

We asked teachers to tell us the main type of special education need that the students had. Teachers used many ways of describing the students and these did not always map easily onto the categories used by the DES. However, teachers were able to identify a type of learning disability or medical problem or confirm that the student was receiving some form of support for 213 of the students.

**Table 15: Number of students with each type of need**

	DES Category	Number of students
High Incidence needs	Borderline mild general learning disability	9
	Mild general learning disability	32
	Specific learning disability	56
Low incidence needs	Moderate general learning disability	6
	Severe and profound learning disability	3
	Emotional disturbance or behavioural problems	21
	Severe emotional disturbance or behaviour problems	3
	Autistic spectrum disorders	27
	Blind and visual impaired	2
	Hearing loss greater than 30dB	1
	Physical disabilities	15
	Assessed Syndromes	14
	Specific speech and language disorder	10
	Multiple disabilities	2
Other	YR unspecified needs	10
	Special school unspecified needs	2
	Resource room in mainstream with unspecified needs	10

The categories listed are those that teachers have submitted to us and we cannot guarantee the reliability of these categorisations. Sometimes teachers told us that a student fitted two categories that would be mutually exclusive, for example student MVoc18 02 was a junior cycle male described as having general learning disability and a specific speech and language disorder. From what the link teachers told us, there seems to be a tension created around teachers identifying needs in order to access support for other students. This would be consistent with other research (Armstrong & Squires, 2015; Squires, 2012; Squires, *et al.*, 2012).

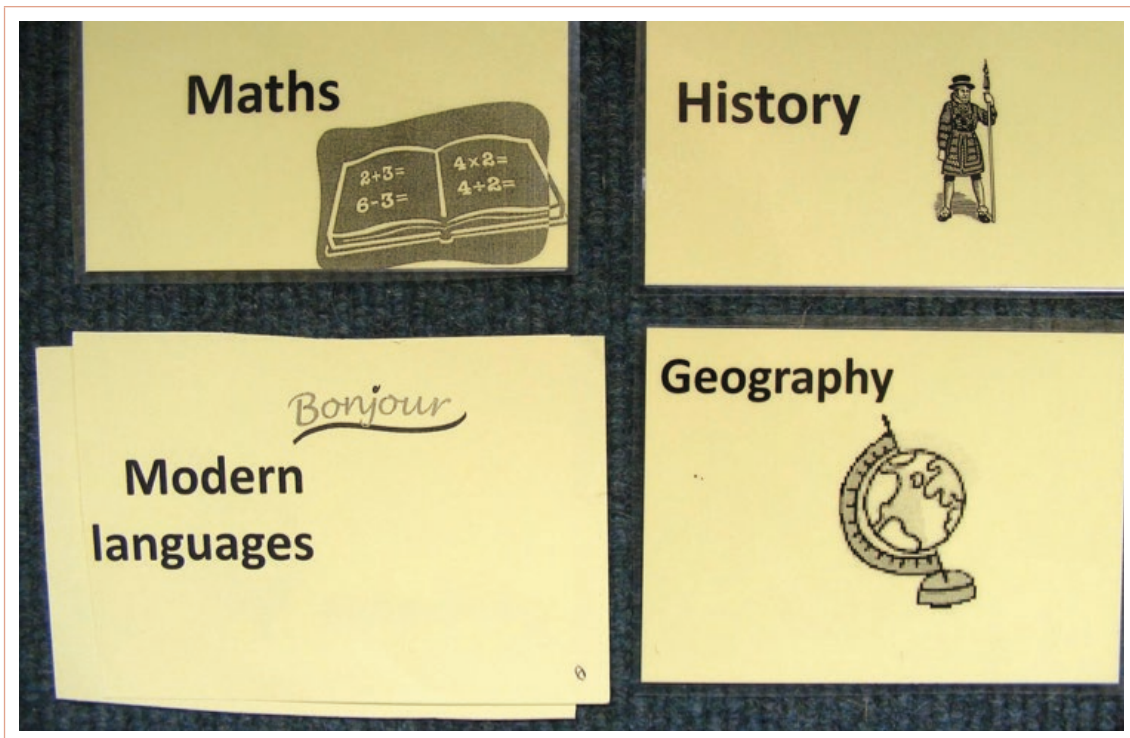
### **3.6 Asking students what they think**

Students were asked their views according to which teaching cycle they were in. Students were either asked their views in single interviews, paired interviews or small focus groups. Focus groups were either made up of Junior Cycle or Senior Cycle students. The questions asked of students are given in Appendix 5. The questions are semi-structured and interview sessions lasted up to 45 minutes. The shortest interview was at one of the Youthreach centres and lasted 9 minutes 21 seconds. All interviews and focus group sessions were audio recorded so that the exact words spoken by students could be used to understand their experiences.

Some students were able to engage in a discussion with us without any additional support for language, working memory, attentional focus or content interest. Other students required support and the research team carried with them a pack of materials that we refer to as 'Key Visuals'. These were based on ideas used in a previous research project (Woods, Parkinson, & Lewis, 2010) and used in our pilot study. Although the key visuals asked about specific issues, the students often found them useful as prompts to help them relax and discuss other issues around school they felt strongly about. Some examples are shown here.

### 3.6.1 Subject cards

Subject cards were used for sorting into 'likes' and 'dislikes'. Each card has a pictogram and written subject title. The researcher was then able to ask why some subjects were liked and others not liked.



### 3.6.2 Topic cards

Topic cards were used as reminder of the topic under discussion. These examples show areas around the school (classroom and library), relationships with peers (bullying and friends), help and support, exams and qualifications.



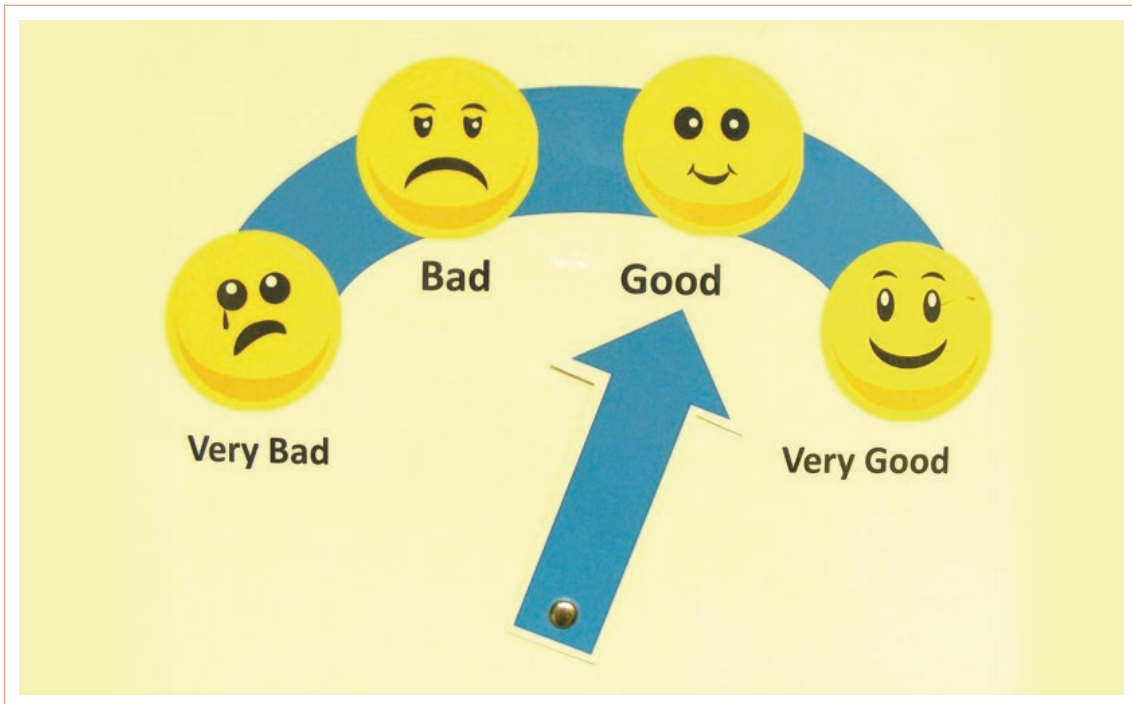
### 3.6.3 Feelings cards

Students were able to select feelings cards to show how they felt about particular issues.



### 3.6.4 Scaling

Scaling cards allowed students to say how much they liked something or how good something was for them.



### 3.6.5 Open ended response boards

Laminated A4 sheets were used. The topic was written on by the researcher – in this example, SNA. Students could then write key words or draw responses. The researcher was then able to probe further with questions.



## 3.7 Ethics

### 3.7.1 Ethical clearance

All research carried out by the University of Manchester has to undergo ethical scrutiny in order to make sure that participants in the study are kept safe and not harmed. The design for the empirical work along with information sheets and informed consent was submitted to the University of Manchester's Research and Ethics Committee. Approval for data collection to proceed was obtained in October 2012.

### 3.7.2 Process of informed consent

Consent giving worked at various levels within the research process and was always taken after providing detailed information about the nature of the research and its focus on the experiences of students with special educational needs; the participants' involvement; and, how data would be used and kept. At each stage, the participants were informed of their right to withdraw without the need for any explanation from them.

Institutional consent was sought from the principals managing each post-primary setting, special school or Youthreach centre. Teachers gave consent for their involvement in describing the context, talking about support arrangements and in helping to select students. Parents gave the legal consent for their students to be part of the study. The final word, however, came from the students themselves. Although all of the consents were in place, they had to assent to be part of the study and were able to withdraw at any point in the process.

### **3.7.3 Keeping data safe**

In this report we will not use any school or student names; these have been stripped out of our data and replaced by code letters. All of the data is held securely on restricted access servers at the University of Manchester that can only be accessed by the research team. When we present quotations from students in the report, these are intended to be illustrative of general patterns that are expressed in the students' own words.

### **3.7.4 DBS and child protection protocols**

All members of the research team were vetted through the UK Child Protection procedures. A Child Protection protocol was devised following our meeting with the project Advisory Group using guidance from the Health Service Executive (now Tusla), Ireland. This was sent to NCSE along with researcher's vetting certificates. This was to ensure compliance with Irish child protection requirements and the *Children First* Guidelines.

### **3.7.5 Fieldwork risk assessment**

The researchers had to stay away from home overnight in order to make the school visits and a fieldwork risk assessment was undertaken for each visit and held at the University of Manchester.

## **3.8 RQ 7: Limitations to the design of the study and the lessons arising**

### **3.8.1 Breadth versus depth**

The brief for this commissioned research project asked us to look at the experiences of students in 30–40 different placements. This provides a good breadth of coverage and includes many types of schools as well as many different types of difficulties faced by students. This adds strength to the study. However, in obtaining breadth we were unable to work in depth with students to see them over several visits and to work out the nuances of their experiences. There was very little time to build rapport with students and to gain their trust and this may mean that their responses are not as open or frank as they could have been if other techniques had been used. However, we have been able to obtain a wide range of views and these seem to be consistent with previous research.

### **3.8.2 Informed consent and deviation from the sampling frame**

To recruit the schools, we used the sampling frame to guide which settings to approach and we then e-mailed settings in batches to ask principals to volunteer their school. All principals were informed about the nature of the project before committing their school to the study. In order to get the right numbers of each type of school we sent out e-mails to a total of 379 schools over an 18-month period. This strategy was largely successful in matching the types of schools to what we intended and to make the sample representative of the proportion of each type of school in Ireland. The main limitation is a lack of schools from the North of Ireland.

We cannot be sure that the schools that volunteered to participate in the study are truly representative in terms of the practices that they employ to support students with SEN. It may be that only principals who felt confident about the support arrangements in place in their school responded to the e-mails and volunteered to participate in the project. In line with our discussions with the advisory group and with NCSE, the sample includes Youthreach centres and post-primary students attending special schools. We think this is a valuable addition and helped to overcome the limitation imposed by mainstream principals opting in or out of the study on the basis of how well they thought their school was providing the most positive experiences for students with special educational needs.

Within each school, we then wanted a representative sample of students with different types of special educational need. Teachers played a role in the recruitment process and may have selected students who fit with our sampling frame but who were more compliant in school or more able to articulate the supports that they were receiving. This could mean that students who had more negative views about school are under-represented. In part this was addressed through the inclusion of students attending Youthreach Centres who are able to contrast current experiences with past experiences that led to them leaving mainstream education.

Parents were sent information sheets about the project and their consent for the involvement of their son or daughter sought. It may be that some parents wanted to protect students that they thought were more vulnerable by not giving consent and this might mean that some views are under-represented.

### **3.8.3 Type of special educational need represented**

There is a wide range of special educational needs represented in this research project. However, it is more difficult to obtain the views of students with some types of SEN than it is with others. Although we have developed a range of visual materials to help support some of these students in the interview and focus groups, there could be some views under-represented from students with severe communication disorders or with profound and multiple learning disabilities. Some of these students were able to present their views with the aid of teacher scaffolding their communication and observations of their responses and behaviour.

The reliance on schools to select students who might be suitable for the study also led to our not having many students who attended designated special classes, despite our attempts to include schools with special classes. We only have the views of six students from one special class for autism in one school. We did have students who spent some time in resource rooms and in small classes in other schools, but we cannot be sure that their experience is the same as that of students in designated special classes, as resource classes tended to have students with a mixture of special educational needs.

We recognise that not all students with special educational needs will have the same experiences of school and that their experience may be shaped by their type of special educational need. When we look at the numbers of students in each DES category, some of the categories only have small numbers of students (see Table 15). Consequently, we have not specifically analysed the data by subgroup. Instead we provide the type of SEN alongside the words spoken by the student and comment in more detail about experiences expressed that seem to be linked to the type of SEN.

### **3.8.4 How widely views are held and generalisability of the findings**

This is not a quantitative study and we cannot make any claims about the statistical generalisability of experiences represented in the views expressed by students with SEN in our sample. This is a qualitative study and it provides an insight into the range of views held by students who are discussing their experiences of post-primary education. The study does not tell us how widely held the different views were. We get some indication of whether a viewpoint was linked to a particular type of special educational need or was more generally held, but we cannot say that some views are more commonly held than others, or, that some are more important to students than others. The findings of this study largely agree with the findings from previous studies carried out over time and across the world and this allows a degree of theoretical generalisability and increases our confidence in the validity of the findings.

### **3.8.5 Selection of experiences to research**

The design of the research was adult-centred and needed to address a series of questions designed by commissioners who are also adults. This is an adult agenda and we have collected student views on issues that adults think are important. Nonetheless we are impressed with the frankness of views on student experience and the openness with which students were able to talk to us. It is clear that the students had a lot to say about their experiences of the issues raised for discussion.

We cannot be sure that the questions covered by the research would have had the same priorities for the students themselves. An alternative approach could have engaged the students as researchers in a piece of collaborative action research. There is no reason why this could not be done within school settings as a means to empower students further in the development of school communities.

### 3.9 Data analysis

Interview data was analysed using computer software to manage the data and allow for data to be assigned to codes. The package chosen was QSR nVivo which allows for transcribed and audio recordings to be used. In the initial part of the project the recordings that we had made by hand were transcribed to allow analysis to start and for important themes to become apparent. The process of analysis is a broad thematic analysis which started by using the research questions as *a priori* codes that allowed data to be organised and for new themes to emerge under the research question headings. nVivo allows for a description of each code used to be included so that different members of the research team were able to code different interviews.

For research question 3, the *a priori* codes and top level emergent codes were<sup>5</sup>:

- Experience of processes and structures
- Experience of other issues in school
- Experience of relationships
  - Experience of friendships and relationships with students
  - Experience of relationships with teachers
- Experience of school climate
  - Areas of school
  - Behaviour at school
  - Climate (other comments)
  - Reward system
  - School environment
- Experience of supports
  - Support and identification
  - JC to SC
  - Kinds of support received
  - Other kinds of support
  - Primary to post primary
  - Quality of support
  - Resource room support

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<sup>5</sup> These are presented alphabetically.

- SNA specific
- Special classes or unit
- When and how
- Experience of teaching methods
  - Learning
  - Class versus resource room or unit
  - Obstacles to learning
  - Things that help us to learn
- Experience of the curriculum
  - Choice and range of subjects
  - Course of study
  - Irish exemption
  - JC as preparation for SC
  - Subjects
  - Transition year

For research question 4, the *a priori* codes and top level emergent codes were:

- Formal outcomes
  - Aspirations including enablers and barriers
  - Exams
- Informal outcomes
  - Bullying
  - Independence
  - Well-being
- Participation and engagement
  - Attendance
  - Attitudes towards school
  - Clubs and extracurricular activities
  - Student council

The codes were driven primarily by the research questions which covered a broad set of areas that the commissioners were interested in. Sometimes a student was commenting in a way that the same comment could be coded onto more than one area reflecting the overlapping nature of the areas.

The aim of the research was to obtain a range of views reflecting the experiences of students. It is a qualitative piece of work rather than a quantitative analysis in which the question would be concerned with how widely held the views were. However, it became apparent part way through the analysis that some views were being repeated by many students. As more data from more schools were analysed, fewer and fewer new views were being presented and data saturation was reached after 20 schools had been analysed. The remaining school data was analysed using the audio files directly and coding onto the existing viewpoints and themes. Sometimes this led to an existing theme being articulated in a clearer way by another student. In this way, all of the data is used with later data being used to verify earlier themes. In the Findings part of the report, we don't comment on the frequency of themes being reported by students. (However, if a viewpoint is idiosyncratic and we only heard it from one student, we preface this by saying, 'one student ...'.) The first reason for not doing this is that of research paradigm and to understand how widely a view is held is best explored using a quantitative approach and survey based upon the themes that we have found in this study. The second reason is a pragmatic one. We had a limited amount of time with each student and could not follow up all of the questions. This means that a student may have shared a view held by another student or had the opposite view – we just do not know because there was insufficient time to explore all possibilities. The third reason is one of meaning. Some views may be presented many times but not mean much in the overall understanding. Another view may be presented only once and yet be very significant in its contribution to the understanding. Within these constraints, there are no universal views reported because we cannot know that every student interviewed thought 'X'. We distinguish using the terms 'some' to mean more than one student and 'many' to mean a view that is commonly reported.<sup>6</sup>

Additional data was generated through the use of research diaries in which the researchers completed field notes including casual observations of events in each setting to use as a means of comparing student experiences with adult perceptions of what was happening. This data is only used in a reflective way because the study is primarily about student experiences.

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6 As a rough guide, 'one' refers to an individual response; 'most' is for more than half of those responding. This guide needs to be treated with caution since it also depends on how many students were responding to that particular question or raising a particular point. The terms 'some' and 'more' are used to reflect this variability and simply imply points on the range between 'one' and 'most'. A qualitative study is designed to explore a range of experiences or views rather than to say how widely held these views are (see Section 2.8.4).

## 4. Findings: Making Sense of What Students Told Us

We were impressed by how well the students engaged with us and wanted to talk about their experiences of post-primary education. The students liked the opportunity to talk and to be listened to and have their views taken seriously. We also appreciated how students supported each other in expressing their views.

This part of the report is lengthy because we are going to present the students' own words to address the questions raised for this research project by NCSE. Often we will present the *exact* words used by students to help the reader imagine what the student is saying and to help give a sense of authenticity to the interpretation that we are making. Sometimes we had to insert a word to allow the reader to make sense when the quotation is taken out of the context of the conversation; we have put the additional words in square brackets [].

No student names are used in this report. Each student is anonymised by a code for the school, a student number and sometimes other information that helps us understand such as gender or type of special educational need. We put these details in round brackets () after each quotation.

We realise that sometimes the experiences reported by students may jar with adults who are working hard to provide a good educational experience within the constraints of the current system. The students often give specific examples of things that are not working. However, the main finding was that **most students reported positive experiences of their current educational placement.**

In some schools, we have been able to make some casual observations at unstructured times (e.g. breaks and transitions) and noted support being used. This sometimes differs from what students tell us is happening. In one of the most inclusive and supportive mainstream school that we visited, the teachers and students found it hard to articulate what supports were in place. Yet our observations showed many examples of teachers flexibly responding to student needs. It seems from a few examples that teachers are providing support in a fluid way that helps student inclusion without the student being aware that they are receiving more support than peers – this is a positive example of inclusive teaching practice. Inclusive teaching is about attitudes, beliefs and culture and many students talk about these aspects.

We are going to cover the three types of settings separately and in each one we will revisit the codes outlined in the methodology section (section 2.9) in turn. In the next chapter, we will use the main issues to reflect against the literature and models that we have presented in order to identify lessons for schools and policy-makers.

## 4.1 Mainstream settings

We visited 25 mainstream post-primary settings and gathered the views of 165 students with SEN through focus groups and individual interviews.

In the background information to this study we highlighted that mainstream schools vary in designation (secondary, vocational, community, comprehensive); location (urban, rural, county); size (small, medium and large); gender intake; and additional support (DEIS, non-DEIS; resource classes). In the methodology section we also highlighted the wide range of SEN covered in the study. We had originally intended to add the pen portraits of all of the mainstream schools to this section, because we believed at the start of the study that the views expressed by students would be very dependent on the school context. However, many of the views expressed cut across contexts. From what the students told us it seems that schools are more alike than different and what matters most is what happens in the classroom.

### 4.1.1 Experience of teaching methods

We coded students' experiences of teaching methods around subthemes of: learning; things that help them to learn; obstacles to learning; and, classroom versus resource room or unit. We discuss the resource room findings under supports to reduce overlap.

A similar finding to other studies (Hamill & Boyd, 2002; Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007; Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Parsons, *et al.*, 2007; Woolfson, *et al.*, 2007) was that of teachers understanding student needs. Well-trained teachers who know how to respond to specific learning needs were appreciated by students, *'Overall I like the school; I would recommend it to anyone; especially for dyslexia, they are very good, they know how to deal with it'* (MVoc01 05 TY female with dyslexia). Students talked about how their mainstream teachers were able to support learning through scaffolding and differentiation which included increasing the level of detail in the explanations that teachers gave to students or through simplifying explanations; changing the wording to make it more accessible to some students. *'Well some teachers would have to explain it to us if we don't get it... then we find it easier'* (GSec19 05 JC female with moderate GLD); *'The teachers are good, how they word the questions'* (BSec28 01 SC male attending a resource class). Teachers not fully understanding the nature of a student's difficulties or not making allowances for a slower pace of working were seen as obstacles to learning by some students. For instance a student with dyslexia talked about the pressure of being asked to read aloud in front of his peers, *'We have a projector and you read it [out] loud; and if you get stuck at a word and someone screaming at you hurry up, hurry up, hurry up! And that makes you ... and then kind of lose [your place]; it kind of makes it even harder to read. You can't think! You are, "oh I better hurry up"'* (BSec28 08 JC male with dyslexia and mild GLD). Another dyslexic student describes the effect of time pressure on enjoyment for learning, *'Generally [school is] very good, I enjoyed learning. It's just the whole learning a certain thing by a certain day that I don't enjoy. I like learning, but not being forced to learn by this time. I want it to be more personal'* (MSec01 01 SC male with dyslexia).

In common with previous studies (Groves & Welsh, 2010; O'Rourke & Houghton, 2009), practical lessons and interactive lessons and those with a more relaxed atmosphere were viewed more positively than lessons that involved writing or too much teacher talk. *'The atmosphere of the room makes a difference; if the teacher is constantly stressed and can't make you relax. If the teachers are serious the whole time it doesn't help'* (MSec01 05 SC male with borderline mild GLD). *'Some teachers make it easier than others; some teachers stick to the textbook and find it really boring'* (MSec01 04 SC male with dyslexia); *'more practical things instead of writing notes all the time; like activities and things; and group work'* (MVov01 07 JC male with dyslexia). *'In English things are very organised and we have group discussion which is interesting and it's fun as well'* (MVoc09 02 JC female with ASD). *'It can be very boring listening to the teacher; you have to concentrate for 40 minutes and trying to listen. I prefer more to learn by writing; or even better by practical subjects'* (MVoc18 07 SC male with dyslexia).

Students commented positively when teachers used specific strategies to promote independent learning that were related to the students' needs. These included focusing students on how to learn and where to put their effort; teaching approaches to reading; modifying the structure of the lesson to allow for breaks when needed. *'The teacher gives you tips on how to learn'* (BSec07 06 SC male with ADHD). *'With spelling, I divide the words, separate it into three different words; the resource teacher suggested this'* (BSec28 08 JC male with dyslexia and mild GLD). *'For me is concentration, although it has been increased in the last few years, I still get distracted very easily. If I am working for 10 or 15 minutes I can take a break, ... and I am able to learn'* (GSec19 02 SC female with ADHD).

Particular obstacles to learning included large classes and other students who disrupted the lesson and the ability of teachers to manage this. *'[One of the things that makes learning difficult is], just some people in the class like to be messing'* (MVoc18 04 JC female with dyscalculia). *'They're people who don't want to learn but they don't realise that other people want to learn. It's like frustrating. The teacher gets distracted and then repeats the same things over and over again and we never move on; but there are other teachers who deal with it'* (BSec07 03 JC male below average).

These views seem to be indicating that the students' experience of teaching methods is highly dependent upon the subject teacher's understanding of their needs and the teacher's ability to respond effectively and manage diversity in the classroom.

#### 4.1.2 Experience of the curriculum

We coded students' experiences of the curriculum around subthemes of: choice and range of subjects; subjects that are liked or are difficult; course of study; Irish exemption; Junior Cycle as preparation for the Senior Cycle; and the Transition Year.

Mainstream students were generally happy with the range of subjects offered within their school. They liked the possibility of choosing subjects, *'There are several subjects that you can choose, for the JC, some of the subjects split into two and three, business and science then split into three separate elements; it's a good system, it's a fair system the way they do it. Me personally, I think they*

are brilliant. I cannot think of any others that can be offered' (GSec19 02 SC female with ADHD). They did not like the fact that teachers often selected subjects for them (GSec 25 SC females), 'They have only one choice.<sup>7</sup> Try to pick one of them ... I don't know, I'd like to be more ... I probably I wouldn't have picked [that subject]' (BSec29 01 SC male who repeated a year). Some students talked about how their expectations of being able to choose certain courses were not always fulfilled when schools changed examinations due to numbers of students who would follow a pathway, 'That's the reason we did 4th year [the transition year], to do the LCA. This year the LCA is gone. [They are all disappointed] cause LCA helps you.' [Researcher asks how?] 'It is not so hard; in LCA you don't have so much exams and essays and all, they give you more time' (GSec25 08, 09, 10, 11 and 12 group of TY females with ASD, borderline GLD and mild GLD). However, some students found the range of subjects daunting, especially when these were linked to examinations (MSec01 01 SC male with Asperger's).

Sometimes subjects were chosen with a career in mind, but then found to be very difficult to access suggesting that some students may need additional support from teachers to be able to cope with particular demands. For instance, one student talked about being advised to do a subject and then not coping with subject specific language, '[My] worst [subject] is business. The teachers said if I picked it up, I would be able to go to college and get a better life. But I don't understand some of the words, 'cause [they] are very long and ... 'cause I have dyslexia. Because I don't understand, I lose interest because I can't relate and sometimes I am behind [it] doesn't stay in my head. If they put it in better words, easier words to understand or break the word down so it's easier to understand and remember' (MVoc01 06 JC female with dyslexia). Choice seemed less of an issue when it came to specific learning tasks. Some students were generally happy with teachers selecting work and tasks to help them learn within resource rooms, 'The resource teacher decides what we will do; at other times she'd say, "I'll let you pick". Other times, she decides. Most of the times she picks up the subjects that we would do [he went on to say that he is not "bothered" about whether the teacher would choose what they'd do or they choose]' (BSec07, male with ASD, male with dyslexia, male who is below average).

There were mixed views about being able to do foreign languages or Irish. Most of the students that we spoke to were exempt from Irish and told us that their school used the time flexibly to provide support, 'I am not so great with maths so it's good getting extra helps with maths; 'cause if I didn't I wouldn't be as good as I am now. I have maths here [in the resource room] I have double Irish, so I can have "double anything really", so I do double maths. The class is not as big, so the [resource] teacher can be explaining something on the board and then she would come down and explain' (BSec07 03 JC male below average). In some schools, Irish is a mandatory subject and students know that this is not the case in all schools and that it is possible to get an exemption from studying Irish. Some students wanted more choice over this (e.g. MSecF25 03 JC male with dyspraxia and specific speech and language disability). Some students had particular careers in mind and their perception of the choice of subjects available did not appear to them to match college entry requirements, 'I want to be a fitness instructor, 'cause for some colleges you need the language and we don't do languages' (GSec25 05 female with mild GLD).

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7 We think that the student is talking about one option stream with other subjects selected by the school. He then questions the intrinsic value of one of the subjects for him personally.

For other students, the ability of the school to respond flexibly in allowing students to drop subjects for further teaching of basic skills or to spend more time on one subject outweighed the loss of a curriculum subject. *'I do Irish and French but did chemistry in the 5th year and gave this up, so I have a free class – like three classes a week that I do resource, that's all I need'* (BSec28 03 SC male). *'I am not that good, I find difficult – mostly reading. I struggle with reading; she [the teacher] gives us a book and reading. Yes, [we go to a] separate classroom. And she gives us a book and we do reading; and every mistake I do, she goes back to it with me. I don't do metal work. Every metal work we go there. I like metalwork but I prefer to get extra help in maths and English'* (MVoc18 01 JC male with dyslexia). *'I just have English and Irish. 'Cause in first year you have computers and what is it called? Choir. And they are not as important as anything. So instead of computers I do Irish, and instead of choir I do maths'* (GSec31 04 JC female with specific speech and language disability).

Views about the transition year varied greatly and three different positions were held. Some students just want to get through school as quickly as possible and this is one of the influences of choosing not to do the Transition Year, *'No didn't do TY, I just wanted to do school over and done with, one things to get over and done with'* (MSec01 02 SC male with Asperger's). *'Because I wanted to get school over and done with. Friends [who had done the Transition Year] said that it was a waste of time. I cannot wait to get out of school; I want to do some course I enjoy, like mechanical engineers or something. I'll do something like apprenticeship, like ... mechanical engineer I applied; but I only need ordinary maths and that's great for me'* (MCC12 03 SC male with ADHD). Some students were ambivalent about the Transition Year, *'My sister done it and she didn't find it good. No, I am not sure if I am going to do it. You see it helps if you get to a place and do a job; and you'll be to that place already'* (MVoc18 01 JC male with dyslexia). Other students valued the Transition Year, *'yeah, for me yeah [I would be interested] otherwise I would be young when I leave school. I've got cousins they said it's good, it matures them'* (MVoc18 04 JC female with dyscalculia). *'I thought I would keep going; if I needed I would have this year as spare. My sister's done it. Yes, she says it's good, it was good to have the year out of exams'* (MVoc18 06 SC male with dyslexia). *'I did the TY, it was the best decision I ever made. It helped me finding who I was. TY is fantastic! Those who use it as a year for not work – it doesn't get them anywhere. You know, TY, you can use it for a lot of different things, doing Work Experience, help in the community, work for charities, we do projects for schools, and we have two weeks of Work Experience. And you do projects. And the ideal things you do are the performances and shows to get team building. But for me personally it went deeper than that 'cause it showed me that I have a deep love for drama and music, which I have been always good at...and I want to do my course in college which is going to be theatre and performance arts. I don't know it would have happened without the TY'* (MSec21 04 SC male with dyslexia).

What these views are indicating is that students with SEN in mainstream schools like the range of subjects on offer and like to be involved in decision-making about the curriculum but they may need guidance around subject choices and the transition year. Once a subject has been chosen, they may need subject teachers to be aware of their individual needs and provide support so that they can cope with the subject specific curriculum demands.

### 4.1.3 Supports

Comments from students in mainstream were coded onto: support and identification; Primary to post-primary transition; quality of support; resource room support; special classes and units; SNA support; support and identification; when and how support was provided; other kinds of support.

Students who had their SEN identified at primary school and provided with support via the general allocation model found that the level of support was not always the same when they got to post-primary education. In some cases, students who had SNA support at primary school found that they could cope in post-primary without it, *'She was really an SNA teacher [in primary], if I didn't know this work, she would tell me. When I came here I didn't have this resource here, I was my own man now. I thought it would be hard here, but I find it ok. I have had less support here but, feel that I am doing fine here'* (BSec07 01 JC male with Asperger's). In other cases, it may be that adults thought that students had made sufficient progress to be able to cope but the students did not share this view. For some students having less support in post-primary added to their perception of difficulties. *'We had more [support] in primary school, and then when we got here we were told that we were going to have some but we had none. We were put in a study class and everyone studies and nobody gets any help. In primary we had like a resource class to help us with spelling and that. In Irish we were taken out and did like a spelling class or grammar class. When we got here we didn't get any of that'* (MVoc01 02 SC female with dyslexia). *'I was in primary school; I had a resource teacher from juniors till near the end of sixth [year]. When the principal came and told me that you will not having any more, I was shocked. And then I found it very hard and I was very upset'* (BSec07, male with dyslexia). Sometimes students had to seek support outside of school, e.g. following a literacy course with the Dyslexia Association (BSec25 01 JC male with diagnosed dyslexia and ADHD). These reported experiences suggest that students need to be involved in understanding how support is arranged and how individual needs are to be met within the continuum of the support model (see Figure 3: Continuum of support for special educational needs).

One way that post-primary schools can provide support is through the use of resource rooms which allow small groups of students to receive more intensive teaching for a range of subjects, *'In the resource room I do maths, literacy, communications, and cooking and geography; the rest of the subjects we do here, in the main school'* (BSec28 08 JC male with dyslexia and mild GLD). *'I go there with [X], cause we kind of struggling. Just the two of us. And then in French, myself and another student, we did listening and practice 'cause I find it quite hard'* (GSec19 01 SC female with muscular dystrophy). *'There's me and two other ones. In maths, for additional help. English, there is only me. And history it's me and another girl. For Irish there is me and another girl for the additional support. There will be only a few, not a massive group'* (GSec19 03 SC female with dyspraxia). *'It's easier in a smaller group; in a bigger class people would fight for attention and to be noticed'* (BSec07 JC male below average). Students commented on how going to the resource room led to improvements in attainments, *'I'd say that I got extra help, my grades have been... I have done so much better; it did really actually help me'* (GSec19 03 SC female dyspraxia). *'Reading and writing is very bad. I am able to read, but when I read in class I get nervous and get struggle. My writing and spelling are very bad. I tried hard in lessons to pick up my writing in primary, but is just didn't. When I came to this school it was very bad; but because of the resource room I find it better and improved, especially long words [in spelling]'* (MVoc01 05 SC female with dyslexia). Students

commented positively about the smaller groupings having a more relaxed environment that seemed to help students feel that they could relate to teachers as shown by this student talking about relationships in the resource room, *'It just feels casual, it's a nice atmosphere, a smaller class [compared to the room next door], smaller, more cosy, you connect with people better, it has the comfy chairs, it's more colourful; you never get homework, you just do the work from the teachers; you feel better'* (MSec01 01 SC male with dyslexia). Resource rooms allow some students the opportunity to focus away from the distraction of other students in the mainstream classroom that they describe as 'messers' (BSec07 08 JC male). They can also be a sanctuary for dealing with emotional issues, *'If I get a bit angry one day, or having a bad day, I can come here and relax and it's nice'* (MSec01 01 SC male with dyslexia).

Not everyone had a positive experience of going to a resource room, *'We are not taught anything, the teacher is there to supervise us. No, the teacher doesn't tell us what to do'* (MVoc01 02 SC female with dyslexia). *'She was terrible, she used to give us spelling tests like for very very young – like we were in primary school, and made us feel really really stupid. And worksheets that were for very young people'* (MVoc01 04 SC male with dyslexia). Resource rooms in some schools provide good generalised support but teachers don't have subject knowledge to provide curriculum support in all cases, *'If I ask a teacher to help me with a subject they would help me, depending on what I want to learn'* (MVoc01 05 female with dyslexia). *'[The resource teacher] helps us with our needs. Like organise our school journal, write down the subjects, and planning. Yes, I find it useful; it's good to get planning, yes, and organisation skills'* (BSec25 05 SC male with dyslexia). Sometimes there is poor synergy between the work carried out in resource rooms and that needed to succeed in the mainstream classroom, *'I'd like just to change something here, the remedial. And I'd like to do here what I do in my normal class, and not what I do here, 'cause I don't want to do extra homework. I told her, "Are you going actually to help me with my current English?" I would like her to help me with my current English 'cause that's where I actually get stuck. More help with my current English!'* (GSec31 05 SC female with mild GLD). A more effective approach seems possible in some schools and there seems to be a link between subject specialist and support teachers, *'You get a resource class so if you have any trouble, they help us; they help us, we do an extra geography class, and they cover whatever we do in geography class and if we find it hard they'd help us'* (MComp25 04 JC female with dyslexia and dyspraxia). Schools can put a high level of support in for some students but motivation remains a challenge as commented on by this student receiving literacy support 10 times per week, *'yes, going to resource room; I am trying to learn how to read. I am not interested. I am leaving next year too'* (BSec28 05 JC with dyslexia).

Having special classes for particular groups of students did not always help with their inclusion in the school community. There were differences in opinion between those with SEN in the special class and those with SEN who were not part of the same class. The views of those in the mainstream part of the school suggested that there was a lack of inclusion, *'There is class for autistic [students]. We see them; they come to some classes, some classes they come in and some other times they came here. We see them walking around with the SNA. They don't mix with the rest of us. They don't go around with us. They keep quite separate; they are in their own special classroom'* (BSec25 11 JC male with dyspraxia). *'Last year we had two people coming from the autism unit to the English class, and they would read... and we would read, and they would read a paragraph and talk to us. No, I don't know any of them in person'* (MVoc18 05 SC male with dyslexia). We only managed to interview six students from a special class for autistic students,

their views were more positive. They acknowledged that the main classrooms were noisy but they appreciated the change from the special classroom (BSec25 07 male with autism). One of the students in this group found the mainstream classroom too threatening and said that he would have preferred to be in the special classroom all of the time (BSec25 05 male with autism). One of the group talked about how other students would threaten him with violence in the mainstream class, 'you will be in hospital for a week' (BSec25 09 male with autism). These experiences suggest that there is work to be done by teachers on challenging negative attitudes to inclusion and in thinking about how to support vulnerable groups.

The availability of SNAs depends on how they are allocated to students with significant care needs. This means that in some classes there may be no SNAs and in others the SNA is linked to a particular student. Students did not always know why some classes had an SNA and others did not. Some students commented on what this meant for them, *'The SNA would go with him [a student with learning disabilities] in every class and help him; and helps with homework. We don't have additional SNAs in our classes – they help students with learning disabilities. We see the resource teacher after school'* (BSec28 01 LC male undiagnosed). In some classes where there is a student who has been allocated access to an SNA, the SNA is used flexibly within the classroom, *'SNAs sometimes help particular individuals, but sometimes they help other people in the class. There is somebody who has an SNA for most classes, but if you raise your hand and ask they will help you'* (BSec25 03 JC male below average). *'We have an SNA in class; yes, she'd be helping anyone in the class, with the teacher; if we have an equation and if you stuck you can ask; it's quite helpful'* (MComp25 04 JC female with dyslexia and dyspraxia).

We have encountered students who do not want to have additional support seen as assigned to them personally because the students believed this made them stand out from their peers. *'I know some students have a class tutor in the class but I don't want that. The thing is it makes you stand a little bit out and makes you isolated ... from personal experience I don't want to be singled out. I don't think having a tutor in the classroom is a good idea socially or mentally. Yeah, going out from the classroom it's fantastic. The resource teacher would keep them up – maybe give them a bit different curriculum. Slightly different which is structured and easy to understand and also sort of slower for different students. Keep them feeling as normal as possible'* (MSec21 04 SC male with dyslexia). *'I have an SNA for English; they help us like I think the SNAs are great for people who need them; but me personally, I don't think I need an SNA, but I have one'* (MCC12 03 LC male with ADHD). We came across an innovative response to this, *'I forgot to say... because no one really knows that he is there. I have this extra maths teacher. He is my business teacher,<sup>8</sup> but no one ... like our class we are the lowest high level maths class; I mean I am not going to generalise here, but everyone in my class is not that great at maths. He is there in Monday and Thursdays; he helps everybody, but he is secretly helping me. It's pretty good to have somebody explaining things'* (GSec19 06 JC female with moderate GLD).

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8 We are assuming from the student's description that the teacher mentioned is her subject teacher for business who is helping out or co-teaching in the maths lessons.

Students talked about how teachers can provide support in flexible ways and is similar to findings in other studies (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, et al., 2007). Teachers can anticipate potential barriers to learning and then work out a solution to remove the barrier. Sometimes there are further barriers to remove, *'Yes, in most of my subjects I am given hand-outs which is great. Taking notes off the board is great but if you are a slow writer like I am, then you would miss certain sections of that. But if you just are given the hand-outs, and listen to the teacher then you can lose track too because you are focusing on listening'* (MVoc18 05 SC male with dyslexia). Small classes allow teachers to provide support 'in passing', *'I like to work out things. But if I can't do it, I leave it, wait till the teacher comes. I just wait and the teacher would come and help. They are fairly good, 'cause they are small class, you can ask questions'* (BSec29 01 LC male who repeated a year). Sometimes students felt that teachers did not help them when they should, perhaps because of time pressures. *'If you were stuck in primary, the teacher would come to you. While here, instead of going over it they would tell you to maybe skip it'* (MVoc01 06 JC female with dyslexia). Some schools have been able to place additional teachers in the classroom and students told us that this helped them to learn. For example, one boy told us that there had been too many students in his maths class so they had a *'main maths teacher'* and an additional teacher in the classroom (BSec07 01 JC male with ASD). Sometimes this was achieved using a resource teacher who explains to students individually what they need to do (BSec07 02 JC male with dyslexia). *'The maths teacher was able to go around to everybody because that's what the students need now, before the exams... special attention. [A second teacher in the class] comes over and corrects the homework, and if there are any questions, and if anyone has stuck'* (GSec31 05 JC female with dyslexia). But this does not always work out; a lack of communication or common approach between teachers who are team teaching to support students leads to confusion amongst students, *'like Wednesdays and Thursdays we have two teachers in the classroom for maths, and one teacher would explain it in the one end and the other in the other end, and you get totally confused'* (GSec19 05 JC female with Moderate GLD). Teachers who can give up their time flexibly to support students are appreciated and valued. *'We have a few [teachers] there is a room upstairs that you go for extra English, extra maths. There can be like 15 students, if they need work and help with certain subjects, and if teachers are free at that time they would organise it. If I am struggling with economics, I can go and ask the teacher and she'd say, "are you free at that time?" and she'd [arrange a time to] go to her classroom or go wherever. Teachers are really willing and would help you with extra classes. A lot of teachers are staying back – like it's before Easter, a lot of teachers would come after school and it's an option but they recommend it to you [to help with exams]'* (MSec01 01 SC male with dyslexia).

Some students thought that the processes for identifying the type of support needed was good, *'The school basically will identify and give you what you need. The school communicates with us and are good at helping us choose options; and ask us if we want anything else, e.g. a reader... I didn't feel that I needed a reader'* (MSec01 01 SC male with dyslexia). While for others, there appeared to be detrimental delays in the process of diagnosis. For instance getting an exemption from Irish may not happen until late into post-primary for some students, *'I had learning support all through my primary and secondary school. I did Irish in primary school. I started getting learning support in secondary school, when I was diagnosed, as I got an Irish exemption when I came here. I came here in the 4th year. I didn't get support in previous school; I found reading very hard and didn't get the support. I felt very bad, I felt like, dumb'* (GSecF25 SC female). *'Very glad I have the exemption, I had to do till 2nd class in primary, I struggled; now I have exemption, I am very glad as it is very hard as it is'* (MComp25 03 SC male with dyslexia). *'During my primary school years nobody picked up*

*I was dyslexic and in first year here the teachers picked up that I was a lot slower than ... in writing and she recommended that I was get tested. In primary nobody realised'* (MSec01 01 SC male with dyslexia). *'Yeah, it's much better here. I feel I'm getting the help I need but I didn't get help at the very start 'cause I only got diagnosed with dyspraxia in January and I got diagnosed with dyslexia and dyspraxia'* (MSecF25 04 JC male with dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia). Some students talked about how support was arranged informally between parents and teachers. For example, *'I think my parents said that I would need help in first year 'cause I didn't like going in and I didn't like primary school and I found it hard to talk at school'* (MVoc09 02 JC female with Asperger's). Some students talked about how the kind of support that they needed changed as they moved through the school, *'In 1st year, it was kind of get used to getting around and find my locker... and it's kind of got better and better. I needed it [support] more and more; and, I relied on the school more and more, especially coming to 5th & 6th year. I really needed in terms of new subjects and new course work'* (GSec19 02 SC female with ADHD). Crucially, the support provided did not always reflect the changing needs of the students, *'I think it's [the support] been the same. But I think that I would still like to get resource classes on things that I find difficult, not the ones I am good at...Like it has increased especially since primary school I only got once. But now compared to JC is the same, not exactly the same, it's like more help and stuff involved. But I'd like it in subjects that I find difficult, I think if I had resource class I'd be able to understand more. Like I'd say that I need in biology 'cause I am not good at that'* (GSec19 03 SC female with dyspraxia). *'We've gone up a level and everything is getting more serious now. Like last year has been really easy – everything is gone up harder and harder; it's really hard'* (MVoc18 08 SC female with dyslexia). This suggests that there is a need to review support available to students as they move through the school and to involve the student in the review process. The finding is in line with that of other studies (Leafstedt, *et al.*, 2007; Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007; Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Parsons, *et al.*, 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Vaughn, 1993; Woolfson, *et al.*, 2007).

Some students access specialist support outside of school and it is not clear how this links with work done in school. However, the students think that it is beneficial, *'I also go to speech test. She helps me to speak better. I think I need it. I did it outside the school [in primary] I went last year in the summer. Yes, I still need it. I still do it'* (MVoc18 02 JC male with moderate GLD and specific speech and language disorder).

#### 4.1.4 School climate

We defined school climate as referring to the quality of school life, the relationships between members of the school and the overall tone and attitudes of staff and students. The term is used to cover the subjective experience of the school's values, norms and interpersonal relationships. These qualities run throughout all of the sections of the findings.

Some students talked about a lack of inclusive teaching and a policy of tolerance of a lack of learning that did not always make sense to the students. This was well expressed by one student who contrasted her experience in primary with post-primary, *'[In primary] I did Irish until the 2nd class; but then in the 3rd and 4th class, I was told by the teacher that I had to pretend that I was doing Irish in front of the rest of the class. So when they were all doing Irish I would pretend to do it and do a paper, I was pretending to do it, but I had to get the book to pretend that I was doing it.'*

*[Researcher asks why?] I don't know, she was mad [laughing]. I would just pretend to do it, and if they did a test I would pretend to do it and then hand it and then she'd hand it back but she wouldn't mark it' (GSec19 04 JC female with cerebral palsy). This student's comments suggest that the teacher is acknowledging that she has problems but is not offering any direct support other than creating a pretence in the classroom. She goes on to explain how things changed when she started post-primary and how the school responded by allowing her to obtain support, 'When I got here [post-primary] I still had the exemption, only I was told I wasn't meant to be doing French, I wasn't meant to be doing it in secondary, so I was really concentrating the entire first year, it's really hard to pick it. I find it really hard. [When the others are doing Irish] I go down to the resource room, I have different subjects every day: geography, two English, one is English or history depending on the day, the other is English or history. I do also maths. It's been so helpful' (GSec19 04 JC female with cerebral palsy).*

#### 4.1.5 Processes and structures

We described the terms processes and structures to refer to the ways that schools are organised (structures) and how they are managed (processes). In this section we are going to report what students said with respect to transition from primary to post-primary; examination arrangements; and curricular arrangements.

Transition from primary school to secondary school caused some concern for some students in dealing with moving from one lesson to another. This had been identified in previous studies (Barnes-Holmes, *et al.*, 2013; Maras & Aveling, 2006; O'Connor & *et al.*, 2011; Repetto, *et al.*, 2011) with issues raised such as friendships, school geography, and teacher rules. The size of the post-primary school compared to the primary school was daunting for some students, 'yes I like school now, I didn't like it to start with because it was so hard, I couldn't get used to, I found it so big. It was so hard' (MVoc18 10 JC male with acquired brain injury). When asked what schools could do to make this better one student commented, 'Before school starts you, you go around the school, the teacher takes you around. This could be done better... [laughing] maybe give us maps of the school' (BSec25 10 JC with Dyspraxia). Transition also caused concern around friendships, 'it's a little bit terrifying when you leave primary and come to secondary. But then you make friends' (MSp14 02 JC male with ASD and GLD). Some students found support in peers who moved with them from one school to another, 'I went to x primary, most of students from there came here, so that was very useful, very nice; I came with my friends but made new friends here' (MComp25 03 SC male with dyslexia).

The processes around providing support for examinations seemed important for some students, 'I feel nervous and scared if I fail. I'd like maybe more time [for the exams], we do all the subjects, English, maths, etc. all of them' (GSec25 07 JC female with specific speech and language disorder). For some students the processes around arranging adjustments for examinations seemed to work well, 'For the JC I had a reader, yes, only for the exams, for every subject. Yes, and I had my own room, in a separate room and had the reader next to me and read the questions. No extra time. And I had an assessment and I was told that I'd be able to use the computer for my exams' (MSec01, 03 SC male with dyslexia). 'I got a waiver – somebody would read for me for all subjects. I was very happy for that because I am a slow reader. I got it for my JC and did very well.

*If I didn't have this help, I would not have done as well as I did'* (BSec28 04 SC male). The focus on diagnostic label in assessing the level of support needed for students rather than on the level of educational skill in deciding the level of support allowed for examinations leads to some worries for some students, *'Well, I got tested for dyslexia but I am not fully dyslexic; I just have a learning difficulty. Sometimes it's a bit of worry, especially with the Leaving Cert. Like everyone has put so much pressure [on me] last year that this year it means really everything. Sometimes I find it hard to keep up with pressure, and to keep track with all the work and then study and tests next day. But it could be a possibility that I would be tested for dyslexia again'* (GSecF25 06 SC female). Students appreciated the need to practise skills that would be required when making adaptations to the examination arrangements, *'We work on scribing, I practise scribing. With Ms [resource teacher] three times a week. Yes first time we are trying this, I've never tried it before, it's just new to me now. It was harder to start with, but is getting easier now. It's helping me; it's quicker than writing'* (MVoc18 10 JC male with acquired brain injury).

Flexibility around timetable structures was experienced as an effective way of helping students become more independent, *'And Mrs X [resource teacher] helped me with that – she would let me be five minutes late with every class if I needed to get through the corridors'* (MVoc18 09 JC female with visual impairment). Some schools used setting as a way of putting students with similar abilities together, students thought that this was a good idea (e.g. MCC12 05 JC female with dyspraxia). Organised homework clubs seemed beneficial in some schools, *'[You get] English and maths help. There are different teachers ... They separate you in different tables but there are about 20 of us; about five teachers; they are teachers and resource teachers. They do homework club twice a week so they'd help you if you struggle with anything you did in the class. And they'll help you with other things like reading'* (MCC12 06 JC male with specific learning disabilities).

## 4.1.6 Experience of relationships

We divided student experiences of relationships into two subthemes: relationships with peers and relationships with teachers.

### 4.1.6.1 Relationships with peers

Students talked positively about friendships; some talked about the importance of friends in school and how school provided an opportunity to form new friendships, *'school is great, I have lots of friends'* (BSec28 03); *'yes, I have friends, I have tonnes of friends. I am very popular at school'* (GSec31 02 SC with Down's syndrome); *'We are like a big family. We do get along. They are all very good. We are since the first year. There was just one girl that is gone, 'cause she chose music, and she moved, and every one misses her because she is like part of the family... I love my class, I wouldn't want to be in different'* (GSec31 04 JC with specific speech and language disorder). School friendships were seen by some students as enduring beyond school, *'I love the social aspect of the school; I can't wait to get out of school but will still see my friends. I have friends for many years, and I don't think that would change it'* (MCC12 03 SC male with ADHD).

Some students talked about missing friends from primary school when they made the transition to secondary, suggesting that they need time and support to settle in and form new friendships (e.g. BSec25 07). Many students talked about the general things that schools do to encourage positive relationships between peers, e.g.

- A boys school joined up with a girls school to produce a Christmas musical and included as many students as possible (BSec07 males 01,02 and 03).
- The school starts the year with a sports day and teachers encourage students from different primary schools to come together, *'if students come from the same school, teachers split them up in sports to meet new people'* (BSec07, 06).
- The school runs a summer camp (BSec07).
- Teachers actively mixing groupings and introducing students helped some students form new relationships, *'I found it hard [coming from primary school] 'cause there was only two students from my school who came. 'Cause it was hard to mix, it was a very small primary school; but then I met my friends and it was ok. [The school] try and mix you. They kind of introduce you to each other'* (GSec 19 04 JC with cerebral palsy).
- Cross-year mentoring, *'They don't leave anyone on his own. The first years will be sighting 6th years, and there'll be food and drink. The 6th years will be encouraged to meet young ones, and help them mix. When I was a 1st year, I had a buddy in 6th year if I got lost etc. That it's good for those that may be shy'* (MSec01 01 SC male with dyslexia).
- Providing access to counselling, *'It was hard for me, I went to the school counsellor for the first week, and everyone was ok, but it was hard to get the transition. Just to get used to the new place, I am not very good at ... And too many people! It was also very overwhelming. [The counsellor] talked to me and it was easier to handle. They could arrange a place if I wanted to sit and eat my lunch; so really useful. After that I got more the hang of it, and the classes, and I started making new friends, and it was easier after that'* (MCC12 05 JC female with dyspraxia).

The way in which the school organises classes can have an impact on friendships. Smaller group settings were seen as being more helpful than the larger classroom settings for some students. The use of resource rooms and teaching bases was seen as a way of forming small groupings in which friendships developed, *'I was very nervous coming to this school. I didn't know anyone [from the primary school], everyone was new to me. So I went there and have my lunch there; and met these guys from the resource room, and it was ok'* (BSec28 07 JC male with ASD). He contrasts this with the difficulty of forming friendships in larger groups, *'if I am in the class with other boys I wouldn't, they are kinds of friends, but you wouldn't talk to them; they are not exactly friends.'* However, different pathways that students can take through the post-primary phase were disruptive to friendships for some students. For example, one student commented on how the optional transitional year led to a loss of friendships, *'I did have a lot but after the TYI kind of lost some friends, lost interest and disconnection ... and kind of not trust people'* (MCC12 04 SC female with specific speech and language disability). A small number of students seem to need a more targeted approach to help them develop and maintain friendships and this might be evident prior to transition, for example, one student commented that he also had difficulty forming friendships in primary school (e.g. GSec25 07 JC female with specific speech and language disorder).

Other activity-based small groups also seem to help friendship development, *'School encourages friendships with extra-curricular activities like Gaelic soccer'* (MVoc01 05 TY female with dyslexia). Not all students saw the value of school organised activity clubs for them personally when they cited different types of clubs in their schools designed to improve engagement, such as: sports club, Lego club, homework club and breakfast clubs. Although they thought they were a good idea for other students, they did not go themselves because their friends did not go. This suggests that the activity-based groups have a beneficial effect on helping students form friendships but peer-based pressures may prevent other students participating and gaining potential benefits from the groups.

Some students talked more openly about the negative aspects of peer pressure during adolescence, *'Now I am 18, a lot of people start drinking and smoking and stuff like, I don't drink, like alcohol. And people going to disco and I am not interested, or having boyfriends and I am like not interested yet. It's kind of hard to connect with people and go out with people, and people smoke weed'* (MCC12 04 SC female with specific speech and language disability). *'I felt really left out and I had one or two friends that were like stealing stuff – I'm not very proud of it, but they were pressuring me into like stealing and I, like, didn't but when they got caught, they blamed it on me'* (MSecF25 04 JC male with dyspraxia, dyslexia and dyscalculia). Peer pressure can also undermine sanctions used by the school, *'it kind of not [fair] really, the people who like to be bullying they don't mind if they get detentions. They find it kind of cool and you know, blending with other people'* (MVov18 04 JC female with dyscalculia). Some students were able to say why they did not like certain students and difficulties with relationships related to expected norms, *'[be]cause he breaks the rules'* (BSec25 08), suggesting that good behavioural policies in school are seen as being important by students. Students saw the need for fair behavioural policies, *'some of the teachers don't really like me because I'm not the best behaved and well, like ... I never listened and last year my teacher was absolutely shocking and I didn't learn a word of Irish ... all I did was mess with my mates 'cause she was shocking – she was too lax and I thought I'd never say that about a teacher, that a teacher's too lax, but she was and I never learnt anything'* (MSecF25 04 JC male with dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia).

#### 4.1.6.2 Relationships with teachers

The way that teachers relate to students impacts on their learning experience. This student commented about what helped her learn, *'I honestly think that the personalities of all the teachers 'cause I get along with them'* (MVoc01 05 female transition year student with dyslexia). Another student said, *'Good teachers; if a teacher is easy to get on with then the subject is easier to pick up'* (MCC12 05 JC female with dyspraxia). *'I don't get on with the teacher now, so I don't like art now'* (GSec25 02 SC female with borderline mild GLD). Friendly, fair and supportive teachers were seen as providing the best support, *'it helps if the teachers are friendly, obviously they have to correct you from time to time; but overall the teachers here are fair, they give you a chance and I appreciate it'* (BSec07, male with dyslexia). Students often felt a closer more supportive relationship with the resource teacher compared to other subject teachers and this may be because the groupings are smaller and there are more opportunities for students to interact with the teacher.

Like other studies (Groves & Welsh, 2010) we found that good relationships with teachers were said by some students to foster a sense of trust that allow for other difficult issues to be dealt with. *'I was kind of nervous [on the first day], it was very good, the teachers were nice'* (MVoc09 01 SC male with hearing impairment and GLD). *'She is very accepting of you and ... and you can speak louder if you are nervous. I think the teachers are quite experienced and like what they are teaching'* (MVoc 09 JC female with ASD). *'Sometimes if I don't get a topic I am embarrassed to go and ask the teacher. I wouldn't put up my hand and say I don't get it, you just sit there, and then you just suffer the consequences. I guess and you end up failing, that's the way it is. But I think it's better this year 'cause I am closer to the teachers and you don't feel embarrassed to talk to teachers and say I don't get it'* (GSec25 06 SC female).

Not all teacher–student relationships are perceived as good by the students. Students get frustrated with teachers who do not understand their learning needs, *'like sometimes you are afraid to ask when you don't get it. Like some people don't get it and other people going "how you don't get that, this is too easy". Sometimes the teacher if they explain it a few times and you don't get it then they start getting frustrated and they might say it. Yes, for certain subjects like maths or geography, "how you didn't get that I explained it so many times!"'* (GSec19 05 JC female with Moderate GLD). Understanding social and emotional needs was also seen as important, *'If I get stuck like for business and stuff like that and we go over it. She asks me things for myself and stuff 'cause I don't for example, I can't accept praise and stuff like that. I don't know, I am really modest with people if they praise me and stuff like that'* (MVoc09 02 JC female with Asperger's). Some students recalled difficult relationships with 'scary' teachers in the primary schools, one student talked about what happened if he got something wrong, *'the teacher would roar at me'* and this had been very upsetting for him (BSec07, male with ASD). Another student talked about how a teacher scared her, *'I was petrified going to home economics class ... and doing homework, then I would go home and do it because I was petrified of the teacher'* (GSec19 07 JC female with dyslexia). Several students talked about teachers who attributed current attitudes to past behaviours and how this led to them feeling as if they were not trusted or treated fairly. This interaction between girls in one of the focus groups sums up this view:

- *G1: like teacher, if for example Student X was getting in trouble for ... Then all the teachers would know that she's getting in trouble and treat her differently*
- *G3: like if you have a bad record ... teachers would pick you up for the rest of the years*
- *G5: and even if it's not your fault, then you still are picked on, and you can tell that you are picked on like if you chance on the 5th year, you are still picked on, even if it is three years ago*
- *G4: like last year, there were a few people that would mess and teachers made them, and now the same people are picked on 'cause they think if they messed last year they are still messing...*
- *G3: yeah, they are saying like 'not messing' even if you are not*

(GSec25 SC females with mild or borderline GLD)

### 4.1.7 Participation and engagement

Participation and engagement seemed to be influenced by school systems such as the reward system, teacher attitudes, the physical environment and participation in decision-making processes such as the school council.

Some students with SEN thought that extrinsic reward systems would improve engagement for other students but not themselves, *'If you are good at school you get some prize at the end. There is ..., you get an award for best academic, or best effort in class. It makes people feel good about themselves I suppose. I wouldn't [do it], no, but it would for other people'* (BSec29 01 LC male repeating a year). Teachers can encourage students to learn and have a positive impact on engagement, *'[a teacher] changed my life for ever! The resource teacher provided compliments and praise when we were doing about George Washington'* (BSec07, male with dyslexia). *'I think teachers just like you better – if you work well and behave well they treat you better and they talk to your parents at parent–teacher meetings'* (MSecF25 04 JC male student with dyspraxia, dyslexia and dyscalculia).

Sometimes it was the physical environment of the school that helped students engage or not. In one school, female students complained that, *'it's cold and they sit by the window, and they don't take the coat off and the winter because is freezing. And teachers tell them they have to take their coat off'* (GSec25). *'It's just the school is falling apart'* (MComp25). *'People think it's like a jail 'cause someone broke a window before. So they say it's like a jail and we have bars on the windows now'* (MVoc09). One student reinforced the importance of a school being physically accessible to all, *'I think for me this is a great school, but I think for me is mainly the people in this school. But also, for me, the only toilets I can use it's in the sports centre which is actually outside and in the wet weather you get soaked'* (MComp25 07 male with a physical disability).

Technology can help students participate more fully. In this example a girl with dyslexia is talking about her involvement in the School Council, *'it's very good; I am secretary; taking notes; sometimes I find it hard cause of my spelling; I don't let anyone see and then type it up cause I am, am embarrassed but then put it in my laptop and correct it; cause I am embarrassed cause if a teacher sees it'* (MVoc01 05 TY). *'Also have a laptop provided by the Department of Education [and Skills] for my use whenever I need it to take notes and do mind maps and things like that'* (GSec19 02 SC female with ADHD). *'We have laptops. We prefer to work on laptop, it makes it more enjoyable and writing is faster'* (MVoc02 SC 05 male with visual impairment and 06 male with specific learning disabilities). *'Cause I have such bad eyesight I use a laptop and I use a telescope for some of the classes. I have kind of a resource teacher outside school and she gave me the telescope and the laptop. She works for the National Council of Blind. And I can use that up to the college, but it is my choice if I want to use it or not. I chose not to for the last two years because I just find it easier to write with my telescope. I use it for Irish and the teacher gives me power point notes – big power point notes. I am going to use a CCTV it's like a TV that magnifies books and makes them bigger'* (MVoc18 09 JC female with visual impairment). *'A notebook was given to me 'cause when I write my hand usually gets really tired, after long periods of writing, so to keep up with the class I was given a notebook ... a mini-computer to use to type up homework'* (MSecF25 03 JC male with dyspraxia, dyslexia and speech and language disabilities).

Many schools had a student school council. In some schools students are elected to the council, in other schools there is a selection process run by teachers. In some schools, every class has a representative on the school council. Some students with SEN were council members in their schools. Students generally thought that school councils, *'they help out', 'make the school better'* (MVoc02); Some students within the same school were sceptical about the ability of the school council to influence school policy, *'this would never happen. 'Cause once they [teachers] make up their mind they wouldn't change'* (MVoc 09 LC males). *'Somehow the student council barely has any effect'* (MSecF25 03); compared to those who thought, *'the students talk about how it can improve and go and talk to the principal'* (MVoc 09 LC male with hearing impairment and GLD).

#### 4.1.8 Attendance

Students talked about attendance. Some said that teachers encouraged attendance by making school interesting, *'you kind of looking forwards to come to their lesson'* (MCC12 01 JC female with dyslexia and a specific speech and language disability). Others saw school as being the centre of their social world, so attended for that reason, *'it's ok and you see your friends'* (MCC12 06 SC female with mild GLD). Some students saw the social aspect of the school as being their only reason for attending, *'I do enjoy school. I enjoy the community aspect of school, and playing with my friends and the relationship aspect, my honest opinion I don't like all subjects but I am learning a lot of things'* (MSec21 04 SC male with dyslexia).

Some students talked about reward systems linked to attendance, *'Yes, you get a certificate but you have to come every day (laughing)'* (MVoc18 01 JC male with dyslexia). Other students talked about punitive approaches to ensure good attendance. *'Well it's law actually, but if you miss 20 days or more they send a letter at home to see why'* (MCC12 05 JC female with dyspraxia). *'If you come late you get detention, for half an hour'* (MVoc02 05 SC male with multiple disabilities and visual impairment).

#### 4.1.9 Formal outcomes

Students were able to talk about their aspirations and hopes which included going into employment and going on to complete further qualifications. Students felt that schools prepared them for examinations with revision lessons and practice test papers. Some students talked about the contrast between the stressful lead-up to examinations in the Junior Cycle compared to the relaxed pace of the transition year, *'I am looking forward, 'cause we put so much effort in the JC and we can relax for a little while and come back and start again'* (BSec07 03 JC male unidentified SEN, below average). The frequency of tests and exams added to some students overall stress levels, *'to be honest I don't really see the point of it; having regular tests, and sometimes in Christmas, it's not real point of it unless they really want to make you feel inferior or agitated or worried about these tests, they don't essentially do much; maybe they should be four big tests per semester or year, then you wouldn't really feel as worried'* MCC12 02 JC female with dyslexia). There was a fear about running out of time, *'I feel nervous and scared if I fail. I'd like maybe more time'* (GSec25 07 JC female with a specific speech and language disorder). The anticipation of the exams was in itself stressful, *'I am nervous but I want them now, we have been preparing for the last two years. I am like, "give me the tests now to sit them". The most nerve racking is waiting'* (GSec19

02 SC female with ADHD). *'Just waiting is kind of killing me'* (GSec19 01 SC female with muscular dystrophy). *'JC doesn't prepares you and puts too much stress on you; we are only 14'* (GSec25 09 TY female with borderline GLD). Examination support and good revision were seen as steps to deal with stress from examinations, *'done my study and my revision, so I am not like dreading it. I am not like other people like really scared. If I do my revision and my study, I know I am going to be fine. I get extra help in science and Spanish, and then get extra...; I might be getting the spelling waiver and a reader; the spelling I am really struggling and the reader I will get'* (GSec25 01 SC female borderline GLD).

#### 4.1.10 Informal outcomes – wellbeing and independence

Bullying was a question that we asked all students about. As in other studies (Daly, *et al.*, 2007; Due, 2005; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Repetto, *et al.*, 2011), bullying was seen as the main threat to wellbeing in mainstream schools, *'Some students pick on me or threaten me'* (BSec25, 07 male with ASD). *'There is a specific boy who ... D is one of them! He has got, he has got a really ... He really bullies everyone, yes, in resource class, he scream at us, raises his fists at us'* (BSec28 08 JC with dyslexia and Mild GLD). Some students talked about how their new positive friendships helped to protect them from bullying. For example, one boy was bullied for eight years while in primary school but, in his post-primary, his friend stood up for him and the bullying stopped (MVoc24 03 JC male with physical disabilities). Some schools respond by having anti-bullying weeks, friendship weeks and mentoring systems (BSec28 01) and teaching students strategies, *'I just ignore him and stay calm, he has a big temper'* (BSec28 07); *'don't panic...if everything is everywhere and students say, like throw everything out of door and just concentrate; even if people come to you and say stuff, just ignore them, don't panic'* (GSec 19 04 JC with cerebral palsy). Some strategies were not helpful to all students such as attempts to rebuild relationships, *'the worst thing is when they sit you down and you shake hands. Like the person that has been mean to you, you have to be friends with; and you are like "no"! Yes, the other person has to say sorry, but you don't really want to be friends with them'* (MVoc01 02 SC female with dyslexia). The use of peer mentoring and buddy systems where older students are linked up with younger students was reported to be helpful, *'The school put big brother, and big sister last year... It's only if you want to do it'* (MVoc18 02 JC male with moderate GLD and a specific speech and language disorder). Anonymous ways of reporting bullying seemed to be used in some schools, *'Ooh, I like the idea that there is a box. If there is a worry, if something happened, the teacher will read and sort it out and it's anonymous'* (MVoc18 03 JC female with dyslexia). Students had clear views on bullying and also commented on the difficulty of distinguishing between joking that goes too far, horseplay and bullying, *'there would be a bit hard to tell when it's a bit of fun or not. I've seen a couple of people locked in the lockers, the person outside the lockers is laughing, I don't think it's funny. It's hard to know'* (MComp25 04 JC female with dyslexia and dyspraxia). Students felt that those who bullied should be punished, but they also felt that sometimes schools over-reacted with suspensions or expelling culprits. At the same time, in some schools there seemed to be a process that teachers went through to explore the circumstances that students felt led to lengthy delays between the event and the follow-up action. Students were not always confident that if they talked to teachers about bullying that anything would be done. They were also worried that, by telling teachers, they would make themselves a target for further bullying, *'I wouldn't like to go and tell the teacher that this happened this and blah, blah, 'cause they would come back and do it to you'* (MVoc09 02 JC female with Asperger's).

Some schools structured the degree of independence that students were allowed to experience so that older students were more autonomous, *'I suppose if I could just do my own thing [in SC]. The teachers are always on your back [in JC]. You have to tell them where are you going, otherwise big trouble! If I want to... I have to tell someone, if for example I want to leave the class to go to ... or maybe, I want to do my own things. I don't like that controlling. I could just do my own things, that's it, I will be 16 then'* (BSec28 08 JC male with dyslexia). Some students saw the Transition Year as being a time for them to become more mature and improving independence before starting their LC courses, *'I should be a lot more mature when I go to the LC, that's the main role, to make people more mature'* (BSec07 03 JC male below average).

#### 4.1.11 Summarising the views of mainstream students with SEN

We have collected a range of student views on the issues underpinning the two research questions and, although we have presented them under different headings, many of the issues are inter-related. The students do not always agree with each other and this is important in the way that teachers and adults plan for their support. A view that comes across in relation to many of the issues is that students want to be involved in decision-making and in helping teachers to understand how support can best be organised for them. Students value well trained teachers who understand their needs and can flexibly adapt their teaching to make learning tasks more accessible. They were satisfied with the range of subjects offered but wanted to be more involved in selecting options with realistic expectations set and teachers understanding what support was needed for success to be achieved. Students liked the flexibility that schools had to allow them to drop some subjects in order to be able to concentrate on others. There were mixed views on languages, Irish and the transition year. This suggests that a more student-centred approach might help with engagement in these areas, particularly for those students who were ambivalent.

Support requirements seem to change throughout the educational pathway and, while some students appreciated that they needed less support as they became independent learners, others felt that teachers did not fully understand the amount or type of support that they needed. Students appreciated practical flexible arrangements that encouraged independence. Smaller groupings for teaching and the use of resource room were valued by most students for helping them make progress, being a more relaxed teaching environment, enabling help to be given more promptly when needed, and being a safe haven for vulnerable students.

Some students highlighted the need for good links between resource teachers and subject teachers and some commented on the need for support to be meaningful and at the right level. Special classes have the potential to be a barrier to inclusion, *yet also* offer many advantages to some students with SEN. Students valued the contribution made by SNAs when these were available within their classroom but sometimes having an SNA had a stigmatising effect and made the student feel as though they stood out.

The process of arranging support for examinations went well for some students but not for all students and tended to be around diagnostic label rather than educational need. When support was granted, students appreciated the opportunity provided to practise using support arrangements.

Transition from primary to post-primary caused concern around friendships and around the geography of the larger school building, although these concerns were short-lived for most students. Friendships were valued and, for some students with SEN, endured beyond school. Transition points, subject choices and class sizes all impacted on friendship opportunities. Schools were seen as being proactive in helping students develop new friendships. Activity clubs were seen as a positive way that schools can encourage new friendships. However, peer pressure sometimes meant that students with SEN did not take up new opportunities. Peer pressure also has the potential for negative experiences and for undermining school systems.

Relationships with teachers were described as being important for developing a sense of trust and providing support to students. Smaller groupings were reported to allow more opportunities for positive relationships in a more relaxed atmosphere. Students reported that some teachers did not understand their learning, social or emotional needs.

Participation, engagement and attendance were influenced by school systems, teacher attitudes, the physical environment of the school and by student involvement in decision-making processes.

Bullying was reported by many mainstream students with SEN. Some of the strategies used by schools were seen as helpful (such as friendships and peer support) while some students reported that other strategies were not helpful.

## 4.2 Special schools

We were asked to explore the views of post-primary students with special educational needs attending special schools. We visited three very different special schools and obtained the views of 42 students. This is approximately a quarter of the number of students compared to mainstream schools and consequently may not provide the same breadth of views. The number of students in this part of the sample is still larger than that found in some of the studies cited in the literature and consequently makes an important contribution to understanding the views of these students. As we pointed out in section 2.8.4, we are not conducting a quantitative study so are not concerned with statistical generalisability of the data. The views of these students are compared in the discussion section to those of mainstream views and those found in the literature to provide theoretical generalisability and to increase our confidence that these views might also be found amongst other students.

We expected students at special school to have more severe needs and to be less able to communicate their views; however, they were able to share their experiences with us to a limited extent. Some students were able to express their views with the help of key visuals such as sorting curriculum tasks into likes and dislikes. On a few occasions some students naturally took the role of 'proxy' interviewers; they were helping the interviewer to simplify questions and spoke the language of the students and mainly 'translated' the students' messages to the interviewer. For example, in one of the focus groups in one of the special schools, a girl who according to the teachers liked to 'mother' other students, helped in translating the messages between the interviewer and a student with down syndrome and limited speech. She naturally took the role of

'facilitator' to pass sometimes questions to other members of the focus group who had limited speech or speech and language disorders.

All special schools are designated as primary schools although they cater for a wide age range of students. In our study, some of the students that we spoke to in special schools will have had all of their education in those schools. Other students would have made the transfer from mainstream primary schools at the time when their peers transferred to post-primary schools. This last group of students were able to contrast their current educational experience of special school education with their previous mainstream experiences. At the time the study was undertaken, we did not seek information about prior educational experiences and can only comment therefore when students told us about their previous schooling.

### 4.2.1 Context

We invited 22 special schools to participate in the project and three schools responded. There is a higher ratio of staff:students in special schools compared to mainstream schools. Some students transfer from mainstream primary school to the special school because they are not coping with a differentiated curriculum in primary. Some students transfer at the end of the primary phase because they will not cope with the size of the post-primary setting. Sometimes a lack of space in classes prevents students from transferring from mainstream to special school. Students usually go to the special school that is closest to where they live. The three schools were very different in type:

- MSp14 – post-primary classes have a ratio of 14 students to 1 teacher. The school also gets a fixed number of 'co-operation hours' to provide specialist teaching for certain subjects. The additional teachers are not employed by the school and often are not trained in special education. The school includes these staff in any in-house teacher training that is taking place. In the sample of 22 students for this school we had 9 with mild general learning disability, 3 with Down Syndrome, 3 with moderate general learning disability, 2 with mild general learning disability and ASD, 1 with Prada Willi Syndrome, 1 with borderline emotional disturbance or behavioural problems, 1 with spina bifida, 1 with epilepsy and 1 with cerebral palsy.
- MSp24 – All students have been identified as having moderate learning disabilities. The school has a high number of students with emotional and behavioural disabilities. Some of the students might be excluded from mainstream because their behaviour was perceived as aggressive or violent or challenging. There are two classes for post-primary students with ASD and some of these students are non-verbal. There are three other post-primary classes arranged by age. In the sample of 16 students for this school we had: 3 students with emotional disturbance or behavioural problems and moderate general learning disability, 3 students with Down's Syndrome, 2 with severe emotional disturbance or behavioural problems, 2 with moderate general learning disability, 2 with ASD, 1 with oppositional defiant disorder and ADHD, 1 with Fragile X syndrome, 1 with severe speech and language disorder and 1 whose type of SEN was not identified to us by teachers.

- MSp25 – The school is resourced with specialist equipment to deal with complex needs; there is one teacher and two SNAs for every six students. A high number of students need specialist feeding. There has been a move to take students with more severe and profound disabilities who would otherwise not be in school. In the sample of 4 students for this school we had 3 students with severe learning difficulties and one student whose type of SEN was not identified to us by teachers.

#### 4.2.2 Experience of the curriculum

Many of the views of students in special schools echoed those of students with SEN in mainstream. All of the students that we spoke to were able to identify subjects that they enjoyed doing at school; a few said that they enjoyed everything. Sometimes the reason for liking a subject was linked to its perceived relevance outside of school, *'cause maths is important in shops or ... in jobs'* (MSp24 02, male, Year 6, Severe EBD, LC). Some students who had transferred from mainstream schools preferred the choice of subjects in special schools, citing more practical subjects than they had at their previous school, *'I like this school more, because you get woodwork and soccer'* (MSp24 04, male, Year 2, Moderate GLD, JC). Students with severe learning disabilities were able to tell us that they enjoyed music and using computers. This echoes a preference for practical subjects found in mainstream students in this study and in previous studies (Groves & Welsh, 2010; O'Rourke & Houghton, 2009).

Some students were able to identify subjects that they did not like but were unable to explain why, *'I hate maths. Just don't like it'* (MSp24 01, male, Year 6, Severe Speech & Language Disability, LC); *'we like everything except maths'* (MSp24 08, male, EBD and Moderate GLD). Sorting cards allowed some exploration of which subjects students enjoyed and which ones they did not like. In this example, subjects involving lots of sitting down seemed less liked than more active subjects, *'[likes: history, science, sports] [doesn't like: art] because I don't really like painting or colouring; we do computers but I don't like it, I don't really like sitting down'* (MSp24 16, male, SC, Year 12, Fragile X syndrome).

In common with previous studies (Prunty, *et al.*, 2012), students who had experienced both mainstream and special school preferred the special setting. Some students compared the curriculum in mainstream to special school and cited a perception of easier work as one reason for going to special school (e.g. MSp24 13, female, aged 18, EBD). However, other students thought that the level of curriculum was not that different although the range of options might be more limited, *'same books... the same things, yes, we have woodwork, one thing they don't have here is metal work but I don't like metal work. I think they should have a form of subjects like options in other schools they have options: art, technology, and languages and ...'* (MSP24 10, male, EBD suspected ASD). Other students talked about the lack of an appropriate curriculum in mainstream, *'I didn't like my old primary school, we did Irish and I couldn't do Irish. I just couldn't do it! We did colouring and stuff. And my mum asked my nanny about this school and they got me assessed and then came here'* (MSp24 14, female, SC, EBD, ODD and ADHD).

The main concerns expressed around transition to special school from mainstream schools related to friendships and to changes in the curriculum from primary. These worries seemed to be similar to those noted in mainstream students, with the exceptions of moving from lesson to lesson or the size of the school. *'[There are] some things you think that you can't do but find out you can do when you go to secondary; you think you can't do Home Economics but when you go to secondary you can do; we do cooking'* (MSp14 03, female, Year 1, Prader Willi Syndrome, JC & JCSP).

### 4.2.3 Supports

In the three special schools visited the number of members of staff available to students was higher than in mainstream. As with mainstream students, special school students talked about SNAs being used flexibly to support teaching as well as meeting care needs. Like previous studies (Daly, *et al.*, 2007; Sellman, 2009), students talked about the benefits of having additional support staff in class, mentioning additional one or two SNAs in different subjects. *'If you do the maths, she can copy and help you, and shows it to you, and cuts out for you, and if you are not well she takes the temperature and if you cut she puts plaster on & that sort of thing'* (MSp14 01, male, Year 1, Mild GLD, JC & JCSP). *'You get more help from other people; like if I ask for help, there are more teachers to help'* (MSp24 05, male, EBD & Moderate GLD, JC). In line with previous studies (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Parsons, *et al.*, 2007; Lightfoot, *et al.*, 1999), having the correct technical supports helped students feel that they had greater access to learning. Technical supports were mentioned and demonstrated by students and these included:

- Using a visual magnifier and roller ball mouse (MSp25 02, male, Severe GLD)
- Concept boards linked to computers with text to speech software to sound letters or words (MSp25 03 female Severe GLD).

Students who had transferred from a mainstream primary school were able to contrast their experience of supports in the special school with that of their primary schools. Some students told us that they had enough support in primary school before switching to special school. Others told us that, although SNAs were in their primary school, they did not have access to support. This is similar to the finding for students with SEBD in Scotland (Hamill & Boyd, 2002). Some students did not like being taken out of class by resource teachers, *'in my old school I had this teacher. She used to take me out of the class, and I didn't really like this. She took me out of the class to do work; I don't like that. I like being in the class'* (MSp24 14, female, SC, EBD, ODD and ADHD). This student's view is similar to that in a UK study that found that students wanted flexible approaches to how and where support was provided (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007).

#### 4.2.4 School climate

The main discussion around issues related to climate came from one school where not all of the teachers are trained in special education.<sup>9</sup> The students focused on the behaviour policy in the school. They told us about the reward system which included a token economy system, in which appropriate behaviours are rewarded, *'If you are good or do homework, or are good at Home Economics you get 5 cents; when you get 5 euro you get to have a vouchers for any treats you want; you have to get 5 euro; if you are good or do homework, you get 5 cents in paper money and then gets to real money; yes I like the system cause it rewards you for good behaviour'* (MSp14 01, male, Year 1, Mild GLD, JC & JCSP). They also told us about the sanctions system used to reduce inappropriate behaviours. Punishment systems included detentions for not completing homework although some students thought it would make more sense just to have an additional lesson to do homework. Although some students did not think that detentions were a good thing, others thought that they were helpful, *'because it is good for people to sit in silence to learn'* (MSp14 08, female, Year 2, Assessed Syndrome and Moderate GLD, JC & JCSP).

#### 4.2.5 Relationships with teachers

As in previous studies (Harris, *et al.*, 2006; Lightfoot, *et al.*, 1999; Nielsen, 2011; Nind, *et al.*, 2012; Repetto, *et al.*, 2011; Sellman, 2009), the relationship between students and teachers was found to be important. All of the students in special schools talked positively about their relationships with teachers whom some students described as more caring than those teachers that they had experienced in mainstream, *'In this school they help you way more and they are nicer'* (MSp24 02, male, Year 6, Severe EBD, LC). *'In my old school, I never trusted my teachers. They didn't care, but in this school the teacher cares'* (MSp24 14, female, SC, EBD, ODD and ADHD). One student described difficulties relating to his teachers at primary school, *'[Primary school was] hell. Teachers [were] very annoying'* (MSp24 01, male, Year 6, Severe Speech & Language Disability, LC). Students with severe learning disabilities thought that the best thing about school was the staff.

We can speculate that the smaller class sizes may allow teachers to build better relationships and to understand the needs of students better and so seem more caring (as described by mainstream students in this study and in previous studies) but we do not have data from special school students to support this.

#### 4.2.6 Relationships with peers

As with mainstream students, some special school students were happy in school and made good friendships in school, some of which they were able to see out of school. *'I just like everything; I do like everything; yes, have lots of friends; yeah, I am happy. I see a few, sometimes [at weekends]'* (MSp14 08, female, Year 2, Assessed Syndrome and Moderate GLD, JC & JCSP). *'I have more friends here than I ever had in my previous school'* (MSp24 14, female, SC, EBD, ODD and ADHD). However, this was not the case for all students and some talked about the difficulties

<sup>9</sup> This was indicated by the link teacher in the contextual data. It may be that this reflects the finding that 40% of teachers in special schools have "restricted recognition" (Ware, *et al.*, 2009, p. 8).

of maintaining friendships with peers when they moved from one school to another and how this might lead to social exclusion, *'I have friends from previous school [primary] but they don't talk to me any more cause I moved school; they don't talk to me; [yes, I am sad about this] they are happy without me; I said "hi" to one of my old friends in previous school and they said "I don't remember you"'* (MSp24 14, female, SC, EBD, ODD and ADHD). The potential for social isolation was raised by several students who talked about having friends in school but not being able to see them out of school. This may be more acute in special schools than mainstream because they draw students from a wider geographical region, e.g. MSp25 has students picked up by bus that leave home at 7:30 in the morning and return home at 4:30 in the afternoon. In this school, one student told us how the adults have supported his peer friendship development and cited being helped to text and Skype his friend when she was in hospital (MSp25 04 male Severe GLD).

#### 4.2.7 Participation and engagement

There were different degrees of engagement with school. Some students talked positively about school, *'I live in the hills, I miss it when it snows a lot, I am very sad when I miss school cause I love school; other than that I've been here every day'* (MSp24 14, female, SC, EBD, ODD and ADHD). Others hinted at not liking school, *'sometimes I get up in the morning and I don't want to come [laughing though]. If you give them a letter you don't... they don't mind, if you are sick'* (MSp24 15, female, JC, EBD and Moderate GLD).

#### 4.2.8 Formal and informal outcomes

Older students were able to talk about their aspirations and how examinations would help them. There seemed to be less opportunity to do the Leaving Certificate with FETAC being offered as an alternative. The link teacher confirmed that this was the case for one of the special schools (MSp24); while in another special school both JCSP and FETAC were available (MSp14). Students seemed positive about this, *'I did my FETAC, in food and cookery and personal health, computers, swimming. I did my JC, we don't do LC; but we do a few of the exams from JC'* (MSp24 14, female, SC, EBD, ODD and ADHD). Another told us that he was studying for the FETAC and that this would help him become a mechanic, *'yes, want to drive machines. I will do straight after finishing school. I will do a mechanic's course'* (MSp24 02, male, Year 6, Severe EBD, LC). Another student talked about wanting to be a Chef and how exams would help.

Like their mainstream counterparts, some students were concerned about bullying and offered comments on this in relation to the question, *'Is there anything that you don't like about school?' 'What I don't like is the bullying, you know, bullies pushing you and picking on you. I don't like this outside school and inside school. It's a bit scary; I have told teachers some times. Most of the time I am worried. [School would be better if there were] less bullies and more happiness'* (MSP14 02, male, Year 1, Mild GLD, JC & JCSP). However, other students who had transferred from mainstream primary schools saw the special school as a safer environment from being bullied, *'I was bullied in my old school; one day I was bringing my bag upstairs, and this girl said, "Oh, where are your glasses?" I didn't have glasses in my old school; I was only wearing them for the board. It was lunch time, so she said, "miss I feel sick", so she stayed inside and broke my glasses. The teacher told her she could stay in and she stayed and broke my glasses. In this school they don't, if I was*

*bullied here, I know I could tell the teachers. I trust the teachers and I could tell them'* (MSp24 14, female, SC, EBD, ODD and ADHD). *'I didn't get along with my previous school and my mum told me and came to this school; 'cause I used to get bullied [in my previous school] by the students. They like hit me and stuff like that. I told them [teachers] and the girls would lie to get away with it; and I told my mum I wanted to move schools'* (MSp24 15, female, JC, EBD and Moderate GLD).

## 4.3 Youthreach centres

### 4.3.1 Context

Youthreach is described as a 'second chance programme' for students aged 15–20 who left school without formal qualifications and are unemployed (DES, 2015). The students receive weekly payments for attending amounting to €40 for those under 18 and €160 for those over 18 (DES, 2012a). Attendance is full time and operates throughout the summer period when schools would normally be closed. Holiday entitlement is similar to that in the workplace. Other similarities with employment conditions apply. For instance, if a student does not attend they lose a day's money; if they are late, then they may not be allowed in or have money docked from the training allowance. *'It prepares them for the world of work, in that you can't just show up when you feel like it'* (Link teacher).

The centres are small units which can accommodate up to 25 students. While Youthreach centres are set up to work with students who could be described as Early School Leavers, the reason for leaving formal education is unknown. Many of the students had behavioural problems in the mainstream school and were asked to leave or were excluded, although others left of their own accord having 'had enough'<sup>10</sup> of the mainstream education system. Students attending Youthreach Centres were included in the sample because it was felt that, by only interviewing students in mainstream, we may have excluded the views of students who had fallen out of the mainstream system for a variety of reasons, including SEN. In talking to the students we asked them about their recollection of mainstream experiences as well as their current experiences. In this section we have the views of a group who had dropped out of mainstream education for a variety of reasons being contrasted with their views on second-chance education.

We were able to look at two centres and gain the views of 16 students who attended these centres. This is about one-tenth the number of participants from mainstream schools and the students are talking about their experiences in both settings. This reduces the breadth of views that we might have encountered. The number of students in this part of the sample is still larger than that found in some of the studies cited in the literature and consequently makes an important contribution to understanding the views of these students. As we pointed out in section 2.8.4, we are not conducting a quantitative study so are not concerned with statistical generalisability of the data. The views of these students are compared in the discussion section to those of mainstream views and those found in the literature to provide theoretical generalisability and to increase our confidence that these views might also be found amongst other students.

<sup>10</sup> '...had enough' is an expression that came from one of the students and summarised his view that at that particular point in his life, he did not seem to be benefiting from the mainstream education on offer.

Two of these students had attended a resource class in mainstream, one had emotional disturbance or behavioural problems and three had specific learning disability (dyslexia). We don't specifically know what types of SEN each of the remaining 10 students that we spoke to would be identified as having, if they were to be assessed.<sup>11</sup> However, all of the students that we spoke to talked of problems with their education. For some it was literacy or numeracy problems; for others it was attentional difficulties; most discussed behavioural difficulties, *'I wasn't an angel of a student at school, but my grades were good, teachers were good'* (MYR27 02 male). Staff at the centres visited told us that they believed that many of the students had literacy problems and although they had some support in mainstream it was insufficient. *'The students became frustrated or got behind with their work and this led to the behavioural difficulties'* (Link teacher). This is in agreement with a previous screening study of two Youthreach centres by the psychological service that had found high incidence of low reasoning ability indicative of undiagnosed general learning disabilities and a high number of students with low self-esteem (Gordon, 2005). Both of the centres that we visited were in receipt of an SEN grant that had been piloted in 20 centres (Gordon, 2009). Staff at the centres told us that the grant had allowed a high level of resourcing within the centres. This means that the same level of funding might not be available in other centres.

### 4.3.2 Experience of the curriculum and teaching methods

As with students in special schools the students in Youthreach liked the familiarity of the curriculum and told us that the curriculum subjects were very similar to those covered in mainstream schools, making transition from mainstream to Youthreach easier. *'It's like the mainstream; if you do LC 1 in the mainstream you do LC 1 here. I'm doing LC 2 here'* (MYR27 01 female). Just like students in special schools in this study and those in previous studies (Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Prunty, *et al.*, 2012), they preferred their current educational setting to previous settings.

As in previous studies for students without SEN in mainstream schools (Repetto, *et al.*, 2011; Sammons, *et al.*, 2011), they considered the relevance of subjects to their lives or future careers as being important. This was similar to the views of students with SEN in mainstream schools and in special schools in this study. The main difference was of a perception of increased relevance to the world of work at Youthreach, *'Up there we did subjects that we would have no use for once we left school, but all the subjects that we do down here, we would need – they are more realistic – things that you need...I want to do child care or hairdressing, I have my options like. I have had work experience. It was grand, I loved it – but I want to keep my options open so that if I can't get one then I'll get the other one. We went out to the hairdressers because we all had some kind of interest in hairdressing. Then I did my work experience with child care and I loved it. So there are two courses I could do next year'* (MYR27 05 female).

<sup>11</sup> The link teachers in the Youthreach centres had the same information as teachers in mainstream schools about the study. We had explained that the study was about gaining the views of students with special educational needs. It may be that they are using a wider interpretation of SEN than that needed to meet the criteria for a DES category of disability.

The pace in the Youthreach centre was more relaxed and not as pressured with a more flexible approach taken to the curriculum that allowed students to catch up if they missed work. *'... if you are in mainstream school and struggling, then you have to get out of it. You can't put up with it, it's the worse if you put up with it because you are just going to get bad grades and being depressed and miserable. As soon as you feel that mainstream is too much, or that you are falling behind, then get out of it as fast as you can and get into somewhere like this. Because this gives you the help that you need when you are not working in mainstream'* (MYR27 02 male).

Just like students in mainstream with SEN in other studies (O'Rourke & Houghton, 2009), those with SEN in mainstream or special schools in this study, students liked the emphasis on practical subjects compared to those involving writing. They preferred building a portfolio of work for assessment compared to having more formal examinations. *'We do one exam every few months, we don't do them all at once... it's easier that way'* (BYR25 01). *'No exams – you do it throughout the year – no stress. There was a lot of stress in my other school'* (BYR25 02).

Class size was considered an important factor for some students because it reduced disruption and allowed quicker access to teacher support, and students perceived the teachers in smaller groups to be more responsive than those in larger mainstream classrooms. This is similar to the views of mainstream students about resource rooms but differs in that there were no concerns about integrating knowledge from different teachers. *'School is too big and too crowded. Youthreach is better than a normal secondary, the classes are smaller and you get more done. In a normal secondary there is up to 25 in a class, here there is only 9. Music was the only class that I actually liked [in mainstream], because it was the only class that was small'* (MYR27 05 female).

### 4.3.3 Supports

Being singled out and appearing different came up as a theme for Youthreach students as it had for mainstream students and this had made them reluctant to ask for extra help in mainstream. Support that targeted one area of need without considering the whole student was sometimes rejected by the student. Students were able to talk about the support that they got in mainstream. When support was available it was mostly appreciated and contrasted with times when no support was available. *'Sometimes I had someone sitting beside me to help me read the question and to spell and sometimes they would just write for me – that was fine. I was never in a small group. Sometimes a teacher would take me out, that was alright. The rest of the time I was in the big class trying to keep up – it was a big pressure. I didn't like it at all, having to do all that work an all'* (BYR25 06).

Teachers in mainstream schools were often cited as being too busy or not being sensitive to the needs of students who were struggling; this was similar to the views of some students in mainstream but contrasted with the views of others. *'There are 8 in a class here and there were 12 in a class at school. The teachers were always busy on their computers. I'd ask for help, they'd explain it to you and it doesn't necessarily go in your head though, so you'd ask and they'd say, I've just explained it to you. They wouldn't give you the help you needed'* (BYR25 05).

One student echoed an experience that we found in mainstream students with SEN who had transferred from primary to second-level schooling. She reported that she was not involved in discussions to withdraw small group support in mainstream and she attributed this to a lack of financial resource. *'I was just in the main class, where everyone does the same work. I needed the extra help because I wasn't the smartest student. They did what they had to do, they broke us up into little groups, and that really worked out. The resource class was a great help and there were just two students in the class and it was brilliant. I could learn and I could listen to what the teacher had to say. There was no one else to talk to. It was really a help. I went to a resource class, which was excellent, but it just stopped like. For half of my second year I went to resources classes, and in my third year it just stopped'* (MYR27 01 female).

In contrast to mainstream, Youthreach was seen as being a place where anyone can ask for help. A high level of resourcing means that help is accessible, flexible and responsive to a wide range of individual needs. Those who need additional support feel able to obtain it. Students talked about academic support and emotional support. *'We can ask for help in our studies through the one-to-one [mentor]. You can talk about anything. If you have a problem at home, you can talk about that. If there are problems in here, like in class. If someone is picking on you, you can talk about that. You can talk about what you want to do when you leave here or finish college. It's a great system to have. Most schools should have it'* (MYR27 06 female).

#### 4.3.4 School climate

The way a school acts as an organisation and responds to individual members of the school plays an important role in learning and engagement. As one student compared Youthreach to mainstream, *'The way they do things here seems to work better for me'* (MYR27 08 male). A theme common to mainstream students and special school students was that of having a caring environment. Teachers who seemed to care and take an interest in students had a great influence on how well the student engaged with their learning. When thinking about one thing that her mainstream school could have done, this student said, *'Care, and think about people who did not have it so good. Don't just look at the bad side of people; think about why they are behaving like that'* (MYR27 01 female).

One area that students were keen to discuss was the different ways that good order was maintained at the mainstream school compared to the Youthreach centres. Students also talked about power differentials and teacher-centredness in mainstream settings. From most of the students' perspective on this topic, many of the mainstream teachers came across as inflexible, petty, unfair and unresponsive to individual student needs. Discipline policies seem punitive and rewards unattainable. There are clear cultural clashes between the way some students thought they should react and the ways that educational systems influence social order. For some students, this perception may have led to them leaving education, *'In the last place there were only six people in the class to do my Junior Cert. I got thrown out of the second year. I couldn't get on, I did not like school. Teachers were too aggressive. Too strict'* (BYR25 04). However, the view was not that all teachers in mainstream were like this and some students were able to differentiate between teachers that they had encountered, *'We had three principals – the first principal was alright, but the second principal was, if you talked loud on the corridor, he'd just lay*

*into you – he was a bit [difficult]. The third one was an old PE teacher, he was strict but, you knew that you had done something wrong – that was fairer’ (BYR25 05).*

Students with behavioural disabilities seemed to find it hard to achieve rewards used in their mainstream school and consequently found the rewards systems ineffective. *‘In my school, there was a green card that was sent home to your house if you did something good. I got two green cards. I tried to get the green cards but it never worked’ (MYR27 02 male).* Mainstream schools were reported as having poor discipline and order by most of the students with whom we talked. Students described how other students messing about interfered with their learning. This was cited as one of the reasons for leaving mainstream and starting at the Youthreach centre. *‘I couldn’t handle it in the classroom, because they were just monsters in the classroom because they were so immature and just throwing stuff around – it stopped me getting my work done’ (MYR27 04 male).* *‘If people want to learn then it’s hard if there are messers in the class’ (MYR27 06 female).* Other students reported a mainstream school splitting troublesome groups into more manageable teaching units and they felt that this had a beneficial effect on learning.

The way in which sanctions are used by some mainstream schools was felt to have been undermined by the peer culture within the school or the culture of the surrounding area. *‘Then if you behaved really badly you got a report card. A report card is a big deal; your mam had to sign that. That wasn’t successful because everyone was like, “oh I’m on my third report card”. It’s a bit cool. The one who had the most report cards was the coolest. Because of where the school is placed... everybody wanted to be everybody. It’s like they’re all clones of each other’ (MYR27 01 female).*

Students were accepting of the need to have discipline and they talk about a more relaxed approach in Youthreach centres where appropriate behaviour is engendered through positive relationships between staff and students. Students talked about how staff at the Youthreach centre treated them with respect and this made it easier to accept instructions and, if necessary, sanctions. *‘They can be strict. They can send you home if you don’t do what they tell you. But they treat you like a friend, so if they ask you, you will do it. They respect us back’ (BYR25 07).* Sanctions were perceived as meaningful and appropriate lessons, for example, students at the Youthreach centres get paid and their pay is linked to attendance and punctuality. Being sent home is a sanction that affects their pay. Some students consider that this is a useful analogy to having pay docked when losing a day’s employment. *‘You have to be in on time at 9:00 if you are not here then you’re not allowed in. It’s like if you are on a job’ (BYR25 06).*

The ultimate sanction at the Youthreach centre is not being allowed to return. Students consider this as being appropriate for major offences and compared it to mainstream school systems where minor offences could mount up in a tariff system to lead to exclusion. *‘[In mainstream] you get a bad note, then you had a Year Head who could give you a detention or a Saturday detention, or you could get suspended for a week – all depending on how bad you were...but you should only get a detention for doing something bad. You shouldn’t get a detention for not having your homework – that’s a bit unfair. Say you have seven different subjects and you do six and leave one out then you get a bad note for one subject. If you get three bad notes you get a detention’ (BYR25 05).*

### 4.3.5 Processes and structures

Students talked about the identification processes for providing support, the formality of schooling, the use of over-age retention or repeating a year. Most of their views were about mainstream education. Sometimes students succeeded academically but found the formality of post-primary mainstream school difficult to deal with.

Students talked about the arrangements for identifying special educational needs, providing support for learning and providing support for progression into adulthood. Some students told us that they thought that mainstream schools had resources to support students but they were not used in a flexible way. Some students talked about how the process around individual assessment and intervention in mainstream school did not always work. Unnoticed learning difficulties led to students not being able to complete the work and consequently getting into trouble. Students reflected on the more flexible learner-centred approach available at the Youthreach. *'Only if you were assessed in primary, you would get taken out for all sorts from the class for one-to-one for about 20 minutes or something. Then you are back into a big class again...Down here everyone has one-to-one and everyone gets taken out for 40 minutes every week and if you are struggling with something then they help you do it'* (MYR27 05 female).

Class size was cited as being an important factor in whether students felt that they had been able to cope in mainstream or not. As with mainstream students the main reasons for this seemed to be around access to support and freedom from distraction by peers. *'It might have helped if I could have been in a room with a few people so that I could concentrate better. Back in mainstream, I was a lot more of a messer than I am here, so I can't really say whether it would have helped'* (MYR27 08 male). *'I had to work in the big class and found it very hard – it was very hard to keep up. I needed help with most things. But here the teachers help you and the work gets done'* (MYR27 06 female).

Average retention was used by some mainstream schools to provide cognitively appropriate teaching to students with learning disabilities. However, this presents problems for some students around other areas of development and around how students are perceived. *'In primary school, I went to school when I was seven but I got kept back in the 5th class. So when I went to secondary school, I was 15 when they were 12 and 13. I wondered what is going on here'* (MYR27 04 male). Other students saw repetition of an educational stage as being less of a difficulty, so long as the final goal was clear.

### 4.3.6 Experience of relationships

Like students in mainstream there was an emphasis on friendships. Some of the students in Youthreach mentioned troubled relationships in mainstream and more supportive relationships with peers in Youthreach. Students cited the smaller settings as the main reason for this and referred to it as a 'team', or 'family'.

Similar subthemes came through in discussion with Youthreach students that had been found in mainstream students. These included being able to trust teachers, having friendly and supportive teachers, some teachers not being able to understand individual students. The commitment of

the teachers to engage with teaching was viewed as an important motivating factor. Smaller class settings in Youthreach were seen as a means for developing good relationships because it allowed for a more relaxed working environment. *'You can have a conversation with teachers here but you couldn't do that in school. There were a couple of good teachers in mainstream. Most were grumpy – I don't think they liked me either'* (MYR27 08 male).

Students reflected on positive relationships with teachers in mainstream who seemed to know the student well and appeared to care about them. *'My English teacher was my favourite teacher. When she thought I was leaving she was crying, where I thought she was leaving I was crying. She was really disappointed in me when she found out I was leaving. But I didn't want to be there because there were only one or two teachers who were nice to me, the rest were just – they didn't have a clue what was going on, they didn't understand me'* (MYR27 01 female).

### 4.3.7 Participation and engagement

As with mainstream students the students in Youthreach thought that teacher attitudes contributed to their participation and engagement in school. Mainstream teachers treating students in a respectful way without undermining their attempts at learning impacted on how students felt about school and about particular subjects. *'One of my teachers in art, we were doing sewing and all of the other girls in the class were doing Winnie the Pooh and Disney characters or really good things. So I thought I'd do a cross, a memorial for one of my cousins who had just passed. My teacher said I didn't have the ability to do that...so I just left'* (MYR27 01 female).

Being treated well and as adults helped students engage with their education, *'They treat us really well. They take us out on trips and they get a beautician in for the girls and go and play soccer with the boys. It is brilliant and they care!'* (MYR27 01 female).

The way that teachers tried to engage and motivate students in mainstream was described by one student, *'There were some teachers who really wanted to learn us and made it an adventure for learning. If every class was like my English class or like my business class, then I would have loved it. In my English class, we had to learn the book; my teacher read a page each day and really helped us learn it. She really emphasise that each word and sometimes we watched a DVD of the book just to try and get more understanding. And it was a very sad book. At the end of every class she had every girl in the class crying. That was brilliant and that was just amazing!'* (MYR27 01 female).

Students highlighted how a lack of support in mainstream led to them disengaging with school. *'I missed a lot of classes and I couldn't keep up. The school didn't do nothing – they just handed me extra work to catch up – I told them I wasn't doing it and then I got sent home. They could have given me a bit of extra help with catching up'* (BYR25 05). In contrast, they appreciated the use of learning targets and being able to approach these flexibly. Perceiving the possibility of successful academic outcomes motivates students, *'I much preferred to come here, complete the LCA and get good results rather than stay in mainstream to complete the LC and fail'* (MYR27 02 male).

Engagement is indicated by better student attendance. Helping students feel that they are in a safe environment is important, *'When I didn't go into school, I used to stay at home. My Dad didn't know – 'cause if he'd known, he would have killed me. But I knew what time my dad went to work, so I would walk up the road, wait for him to leave and then go back. The school told him, my Dad went mad, because he did not know what was going on. The principal didn't do anything anyway. I told him what it was like after a while. The school didn't really bother. Fights went on at break time, lunchtime and in class'* (BYR25 08).

Students talked about how they are able to influence what happens at the Youthreach centre through the student council.

### 4.3.8 Formal and informal outcomes

Students at the Youthreach centres had dropped out of education but have returned to second-chance education so it is not surprising to find that they are aspirational and value education. They see qualifications as being important to gaining employment. *'When I leave school I want to go to college and do electronics. I want to work with computers. It's a new idea since I have been here. At school I wanted to be a chef. In electronics you need a full FETAC at level 4 to get into college'* (BYR25 05). Many were dissatisfied with their opportunities in school compared to those available in the Youthreach centre, *'If you were still up there you wouldn't get the opportunity to go to college because you wouldn't know nothing. I passed my BTEC course last year in the space of 3 months and it is a year long course. I wouldn't have got that done if I was up there. See, here they push you to go to college 'cause they want what's best for you when you leave here. But up there, once you are out the door, you are on your own'* (MYR27 05 female).

Students appreciated the encouragement and support to move from education to the world of work. In some cases, students needed more support for this to be successful. *'I have done two work experiences. I did the local shop and it was a disaster! I started early before my work experience because he asked me to, he needed help. He had me sweeping the road outside the shop and lifting the heavy crates of Coke. They were really heavy and my back got too sore. So I thought, I'm not finishing this work experience. For the summer I worked at the resource centre and it was brilliant! I went back a few times and volunteered, it was brilliant! I love sports. I'm going to get to college and going to study social care. And if I can, I am going to get a job because when you come here you get paid. The resource centre [staff] have told me that if they need me they will call me back and pay me. They have put me on the system already; I have my tax forms already. After social care, I going to stay in college and do as much as I can, so I can be smart'* (MYR27 01 female).

## 4.4 Summarising student experiences around research questions 3 and 4

This section of the report has been dealing with two research questions which will be summarised here across the settings of mainstream, special and Youthreach. This is a synthesis of the ideas that have been interpreted by the research team from what students have told us. Inevitably it is an adult interpretation of what the students experience.

#### **4.4.1 RQ 3 How do Irish students with a broad range of special educational needs and across a range of second-level school types, experience curriculum, teaching methods, supports, school climate, processes and structures, relationships with teachers and peers, and other issues at school?**

The majority of students like school and those who have changed settings prefer their current setting. This finding is common to other studies (Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Prunty, *et al.*, 2012; Sammons, *et al.*, 2011).

The school climate encompasses many aspects of this question in that it describes how the school is organised, how well school discipline is managed, the values of the school community and their stance on inclusion. One common theme that emerged in response to many of the questions that we posed is that students value teachers who care about them as individuals. This can be contrasted with the comments of Youthreach students who perceived some mainstream teachers who were inflexible, petty, unfair and insensitive to individual needs. Some mainstream students also commented on their perception of a lack of inclusive teaching and what ranged from insensitivity to intolerance of individual needs. Students talked positively about how post-primary settings were able to be more flexible than primary settings, e.g. in some schools it was possible to miss some subjects in order to be able to build up skills in another. Attempts by schools to manage behaviour were felt to be important to students in reducing disruptive behaviour that interferes with learning. Reward systems that encouraged positive behaviour were valued in special schools. Mixed responses came from mainstream students who sometimes indicated that they did not think that the reward system allowed them to be successful in attaining rewards. Students in all settings reflected on their experiences of sanctions used by schools. Students thought that the punishment system had to be meaningful and systems that used punishment instead of helping students learn did not make sense. Systems that used an increasing tariff system in which small transgressions can lead to a sanction that would be expected for a more major infringement of school rules were ineffective. Equally, students talked about peer pressure being used to undermine school systems to manage behaviour.

The choice of subjects was valued by mainstream students and those students in Youthreach centres appreciated that the range of subjects available to them was similar to that in mainstream with access to a similar range of qualifications. A more restricted choice of subjects was mentioned by students in special schools. There were mixed responses from mainstream students about being able to do Irish or foreign languages. Students wanted to be involved in decision-making around subject choice and across all settings they placed importance on the relevance of the subject to future aspirations and to career choices or college access. There was an expectation from some mainstream students that they would have access to a range of courses and accreditations and disappointment if they found that some routes were not available to them.

Mainstream students found that larger classes with disruptive pupils ('messers') interfered with learning. Students in Youthreach also contrasted these classes with smaller classes in which support was more easily accessed and there was less disruption.

Some students found the pace of the curriculum in mainstream moved too quickly. Students in Youthreach valued a more relaxed pace that was available to them compared to their experience of mainstream. Students in all three settings indicated that a relaxed atmosphere was more conducive to learning.

Across the settings, teaching methods were linked to experiences of individual teachers and students found creative teachers, who could respond flexibly and were sensitive to individual needs, helpful to learning. For example, helpful teachers were those who could scaffold learning, e.g. they could simplify explanations to the level needed by the individual student. Teachers who know students well and can focus on how individual students learn and make an effort to teach the students were valued. Particular teaching methods mentioned as being helpful included: having interactive lessons (rather than teacher-centred lessons); having practical lessons; making use of co-operative group work where students can support each other's learning; and, allowing concentration breaks for students to regain focus.

Students in mainstream schools talked about the use of resource rooms as a means of providing support. They were seen positively as being able to provide more intensive teaching. The smaller teaching group allowed some students to focus better and other students to see them as an emotional sanctuary. The atmosphere in resource rooms was generally reported to be more relaxed than the mainstream classrooms. Some students differentiated between the general support that was available through resource rooms that was successful in helping students develop basic skills, from the more subject specific support that they needed that resource rooms did not always provide. Some students indicated that there was poor synergy between what happened in the mainstream classroom and what happened in the resource room. In some schools this was overcome by subject teachers who were able to drop into the resource room to provide additional help to individual students. Some of the basic skill teaching occurring in resource rooms was experienced by some students as demeaning and not age appropriate.

Some of the students in mainstream schools that had special classes told us that the students who attended the special classes were not effectively included in the school community. We were only able to talk to a small number of students from an ASD special class who valued being able to move into mainstream classes, however, these could be threatening for some students. This indicates that there is more work to be done to promote inclusive attitudes for the whole community.

In some schools, additional teachers are available in some classes and this is valued by students when there is good communication between the teachers. Students had a negative experience when the teachers did not communicate well and used different teaching methods.

The use of SNAs in some mainstream schools and special schools seems to be more flexible than the scheme intended and students report that they find this helpful. Some students in mainstream and those in Youthreach reflecting on their mainstream experiences commented that they did not want to be singled out for individual support within the classroom. This sometimes made them reluctant to ask for help. Students talked positively about teachers who were able to anticipate barriers to learning and adjusted their teaching so that students did not need to seek

additional support within the classroom. Mainstream and Youthreach students reported negative experiences of mainstream teachers who seemed too busy or disinterested and were not able to respond to individual needs.

Some of the special school students who had transferred from mainstream primary schools indicated that they did not think that they had enough support when they were at primary school. Several mainstream and Youthreach students talked about how support reduced as they moved from primary to post-primary settings.

The processes and structures in operation affect student experience of their setting. Some students talked about how the transition from primary to post-primary settings had initially been difficult due to the geographical and social size of the post-primary setting. A tension exists in the way that support is identified with some students reporting delays in the formal assessment process that would lead to them receiving individual support or allowing examination arrangements to be put in place. Other students had a more positive experience where schools identified individual support in a flexible way. In some cases, students talked about informal support arrangements being made between schools and parents. Schools had a variety of ways of organising how needs were met and these included:

- Setting into ability groups for some subjects
- Organising homework classes
- Over age retention – although this was not always seen as helpful by students

Students in special and Youthreach thought that these were more flexible than mainstream settings in organising support and carrying out individual assessments to produce learner-centred approaches.

How students experience their education is largely affected by their experience of their social environment, that is to say their relationship with teachers and their relationship with their peers. Students thought that the teachers who could provide the best support were those that were friendly, fair and knew the student well. Good relationships with teachers was reported to foster a sense of trust and allowed difficult issues to be dealt with. Students valued teachers who were sensitive to the student's learning needs, social needs and emotional needs. Students in Youthreach centres thought that their teachers were more caring than those in mainstream. A few YR students were able to reflect on particular mainstream teachers that had been more caring than others. Some students in mainstream and Youthreach had negative experiences of mainstream teachers and described poor relationships. Students in all settings reported the importance of friendships. Mainstream students talked about the enduring nature of friendships that existed beyond the bounds of the school premises. In contrast, special school students talked about the difficulty of maintaining friendships outside of school because they tended not to live near their school friends. There were positive examples of how special school teachers helped students to use technology to overcome geographical limitations to maintain friendships outside of school. The transition from primary to post-primary and from primary to special was reported to be a challenge to maintaining friendships for some students who missed their old primary

school friends. Some students talked about the approaches that their post-primary school had used to help them form new friendships. Some of the mainstream students talked about negative experiences with peers who did not conform to the expected norms and school rules. Some of the students in Youthreach reflected on how they had experienced troubled relationships with peers and how this had changed when they moved to smaller settings. The impact of friendships on examination pathway choices was mentioned by some students as was the reverse process of pathway choices interfering with established friendships.

#### **4.4.2 RQ 4 How do these experiences impact on their participation and engagement in education and how are different student experiences linked with formal and informal educational outcomes (e.g. attainment, early school leaving, certification, well-being, independence etc.)?**

The impact of the experiences on some aspects of engagement has already been addressed in dealing with RQ 3. It is clear that teachers can have a positive impact on encouraging students to learn and to engage with education. The approaches to teaching and teaching style featured in discussions with students in Youthreach who reflected on how this had influenced how well they engaged with lessons. Teachers who made school interesting were cited by some mainstream students as a way of encouraging attendance. Teachers who show that they like the student and treat students respectfully are seen as encouraging students to work harder and behave better. Some mainstream students talked about the clubs that the school organised to encourage engagement with learning and school and thought that they were a good idea. However, they did not go themselves because their friends did not go.

The optional transition year was viewed differently by different mainstream students. Some wanted to avoid it all together; some were ambivalent; while others valued it highly. For some students the transition year was seen as a time to become more mature and improve independence.

Students in all settings were aspirational and talked about how formal examinations would help them enter employment or onto college. Students in Youthreach perceived better opportunities for this than they had experienced in mainstream. Students in Youthreach centres also commented on the support that they received through work experience in moving toward employment. Mainstream students talked about how they thought that teachers prepared them well for examinations and helped them with revision and practice examination papers. Some students talked about examinations and the processes around examinations as being stressful. Others talked about how they could be supported in examinations through waivers. Technological aids were helpful to engagement with the curriculum for some mainstream students and some students in special schools.

Views about school councils were ambivalent. Some students thought that they encouraged involvement and made the school better. Other students were sceptical about their ability to participate in the school council or the school council's ability to influence school policy.

Bullying was mentioned by students across settings. Students valued strategies used by schools to tackle bullying and prevent bullying. Not all strategies were valued by all students (e.g. attempts to rebuild relationships) and some were valued more by younger pupils (e.g. use of buddy systems). When there was an incident that required school involvement, students did not like it when there seemed to be delays between the event and follow-up. Some students in special schools compared their experience with mainstream school and thought that special schools were safer environments where they were less likely to be bullied. Youthreach centres were also cited as being perceived as safer than mainstream by some students.

## 5. Discussion

Throughout this study we have been concerned with what students with special educational needs think about the types of supports that are in place and how this influences their experience of post-primary education. We have taken 'supports' to mean all of the things that are done to remove barriers to learning and to encourage active participation in education.

The research team were asked to address the following research questions:

- RQ 1** What does the international and Irish research literature tell us about the views and experiences of students at second level school, the particular experiences of students with special educational needs and the comparative experience of these two groups?
- RQ 2** What are the lessons for policy and practice that arise from an analysis of this body of work?
- RQ 3** How do Irish students with a broad range of special educational needs and across a range of second level school types, experience curriculum, teaching methods, supports, school climate, processes and structures, relationships with teachers and peers, and other issues at school?
- RQ 4** How do these experiences impact on their participation and engagement in education and how are different student experiences linked with formal and informal educational outcomes (e.g. attainment, early school leaving, certification, well-being, independence etc.)?
- RQ 5** How does this new data on the experiences of students with special educational needs build on or extend the analysis of the existing literature about the experiences of students with and without special educational needs at second level school?
- RQ 6** What are the key lessons from this study which might improve educational experiences and outcomes for second level students with special educational needs?
- RQ 7** What are the possible limitations associated with this study and the lessons arising?

The questions are inter-related and RQ 1 and RQ 2 were covered in the literature review section; RQ 3 and RQ 4 have been covered in the findings section; RQ 7 is covered in the methodology section. In this section we are going to bring the different components together to address the RQ 5 and RQ 6 which we are going to reframe as the overall study aims:

- What does the research tell us about the experiences of students with special educational needs across a range of second level settings: curriculum, teaching methods, supports, school climate, processes and structures, relationships with teachers and peers, other issues at school? How does this link with participation and engagement?
- What are the key lessons from this study which might improve educational experiences and outcomes for second level students with special educational needs?

In contrast to many of the small-scale studies in the literature, this study has gained the views of a large number of students with SEN (N=223). Many studies in the literature looked at particular sub-groups of students with particular types of SEN; we have obtained the views of a diverse group of students. As would be expected in a study that is interested in gaining the views of students through interviews and focus groups, we sometimes find that views are very personal and idiosyncratic. This means that two different students in the same school may have very different experiences. Equally, across the whole study, we have found similar views coming up time and time again. In the results section, we dealt with this by placing contrasting views together and grouping views into general themes about educational experience. Although aspirations varied, all of the students to whom we talked wanted to do well and saw their education as a means to a successful adult life. This may be a limitation of our design and study and we have not included students that were disengaged with learning and not in school.

The most obvious thing that comes across in the results chapter is the way that we have artificially divided up the things that students say into discrete areas matching the main headings from the literature review and the research questions. Each of the areas is related to the next, but in order to discuss the topics and views we need to organise the material in a logical way. We will continue to do that in this section but we are also mindful of the Person-Process-Context model (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1999, 2005) which highlights how different layers of a system may influence others. In the literature review section we highlighted how student experience was at the centre of the system, at the micro level. Irish policy was at the outer edge of the system, at the macro level. Our view was that the further away you move from the centre to the edge, the less direct influence there is on student experience. While we still think that this is the case, we have found some examples in the students' comments of how peripheral structures and processes at the macro level can influence student experience at the micro level. This means that we do find Irish policy being reflected in some of the students' views about their experiences and some of the students' views have implications for how supports are delivered to schools. Most of the views expressed seem to be at the level of the school, teachers, peers or culture.

## 5.1 RQ 5 How does this new data on the experiences of students with special educational needs build on or extend the analysis of the existing literature about the experiences of students with and without special educational needs at second level school?

In this section, we are going to use the main theme headings to compare the experiences of students in this study with the findings of studies outlined in the literature review. Where findings are similar this adds to the analytical generalisability of the finding by providing external validity (Yin, 2009). We are also going to look across the three settings.<sup>12</sup> As we have already pointed out, the different sections are inter-related.

### 5.1.1 Experience of the curriculum

The curriculum offered and the range of examination routes suited most students in the setting in which they were placed. Students commented on the choices available:

- They liked to be involved in making choices and preferred this to when teachers made choices for them.
- They wanted courses to be meaningful in terms of their aspirations to college and employment. This applied to students across all settings who placed a high premium on subjects having relevance to their lives. This echoes the findings of previous studies (Repetto, *et al.*, 2011).
- Some examination types suited some students more than others. Many students preferred accreditation that involved a portfolio rather than a written examination. In some cases the choice of qualification was an important contributing factor for motivating students, e.g. some talked about expecting to pass the LCA but fail the LC (Established). Students in Youthreach centres thought that the portfolio of work was preferable and more attainable than preparing for written examinations.
- Many mainstream students, students in special schools and students in the Youthreach centres emphasised a preference for practical subjects or active subjects rather than traditional academic subjects or those that involved writing. This is similar to findings from other studies (O'Rourke & Houghton, 2009; Sammons, *et al.*, 2011).
- A wide range of subjects examined in a short space of time was seen as particularly stressful for some students.
- Students who had left mainstream thought that the work they received in special schools or Youthreach centres was easier than that in mainstream. The reasons for this varied but tended to be about appropriateness of learning tasks for special school students. The pace

12 The three types of settings (Mainstream, Special and Youthreach) differ in a number of ways and we are comparing students' experiences across the settings while acknowledging that the capacities of the different settings to provide support varies as does the severity of special needs catered for within the setting. Similarly mainstream schools differ in their organisation and structure (see section 1.3.6).

of the curriculum in special schools and Youthreach centres was considered to be more relaxed and allowed a more flexible approach to be taken. Those who had left mainstream thought that the fast paced curriculum in mainstream had a detrimental effect on mental health.

- Some students not attending mainstream thought that they did not have the same range of subject opportunities. Other students thought that the range of subjects covered was similar enough to provide the same examination, further education and career opportunities.
- Flexibility around the curriculum – allowing some subjects to be dropped so that additional skills lessons could take place; allowing the curriculum to be meaningful to the students. Sometimes students wanted to do the subject that was dropped but they mentioned that the benefits of the teaching of specific skills they received instead outweighed the loss of the subject.
- Flexibility around timing – e.g. allowing students with physical disabilities to avoid the hustle of the corridor during lesson changes by arriving at lessons five minutes later.
- Flexibility around groupings – more resources are allocated to groups that need more support or large groups become split into smaller more manageable groups.

A previous smaller scale study found that Irish students tended to value the Transition Year (Daly, *et al.*, 2007). We found more mixed results. Positive experiences and anticipations focused on: how it helped students mature; how it linked with the world of work; how it was less pressured than both the Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle. It was perceived negatively by students who saw it as getting in the way of them leaving school. Some students were ambivalent – seeing the positive aspects but then deciding it was not for them. Work experience as part of the Transition Year or as part of the programmes followed at Youthreach were generally well received by students and seen as helpful in considering post-education employment. In some cases, students had been able to continue with paid employment once the work experience finished and this had motivated them to consider further training related to their work experience. In some cases, there seemed to have been some less successful placements, perhaps arising from misunderstandings on the part of students and work experience providers.

Although we asked students about targets and goals, they tended to tell us about overall educational goals rather than more specific learning goals. Our impression (which may not be the case in practice) is that students are not actively involved in the process of developing their Individual Education Plans or do not have them because they are not mandatory. A few difficulties were noted:

- Some students receive support from other agencies outside of the school setting. It is not clear how this links with the support provided in school.
- Some students commented on how the support that they had received in mainstream had focused only on one area of their development and had not been holistic in meeting their needs.

- Some students commented on delays in being able to access support when they were in primary school, only becoming available when they moved to secondary, special school or Youthreach.
- Some students who had been over-age retained reported the difficulties that this presented to them. The reason for over-age retention had been based on cognitive development but did not take into account social development or maturity. The repetition of a year was less problematic when the final goal was consistent with the students' aspirations.

### 5.1.2 Supports

Some students reported that their settings were able to use support to ensure that help is accessible, flexible and responsive to a wide range of individual needs. Support can be provided in a variety of ways and includes smaller class sizes, increased adult support (such as team teaching, resource teachers or SNAs), development of resource classrooms and resource bases, and the use of special classes. Students can be supported academically, emotionally, physically, socially and behaviourally.

Smaller classes were found to be more helpful to students with SEN than being part of a large classroom. Partly this was because there was less disruptive behaviour; partly because they could access teacher help more quickly; and, partly because students felt that they could relate to teachers better. They felt more confident and less embarrassed to ask for support in small classes; perhaps because the group as a whole had better cohesion, or the ability level between students might have been comparable. Positive experiences were reported by some students of teachers who provided support 'in passing' and without the need for the student to ask for help. Across the different post-primary settings, it is clear that it is easier for teachers to form good relationships with students when the group size is smaller. Students reported closer relationships with resource teachers than mainstream teachers; students in special schools thought that their teachers were more caring and related better to them than mainstream teachers. Youthreach students cited the importance of knowing the adults better and feeling that they can trust them. Small groupings also mean that the adults can get to know the students better. This adds to the view that students who had experienced mainstream school and then moved to special settings thought that teachers were more supportive and had more expertise to help them (Prunty, *et al.*, 2012).

Resource rooms developed by schools allowed students the opportunity to focus on particular skills or to receive more intensive teaching to support learning taking place in other classes. Resource rooms provided a sanctuary for some students and a place to get away from distractions or disruptive students in mainstream classes. They also provided an opportunity for emotional support.

Difficulties which occurred in resource room teaching and special class teaching:

- Good generalised support included helping students improve attainments in maths, reading, spelling and writing and in wider areas such as personal organisation and planning. Resource teachers could provide good generalised support but not specialist support. Some schools solved this problem by having subject specialist teachers also provide support in resource rooms. Teachers who gave up their time flexibly to support students in this way were appreciated by students.
- There was poor synergy between what was being done in resource rooms and what went on in mainstream classes for some students. Some schools seemed to have good links between resource teachers and support staff to avoid this problem. There might be a need for some schools to strengthen the role of Resource Teachers by revisiting Circular Sp Ed 08/02 (DES, 2002a).
- The level of teaching and approach to teaching needs to be age-appropriate. When students considered the work that they were doing in resource rooms they felt that they were not being treated as mature and this added to their poor self-image as independent learners. This suggests that students need to be more involved in decision-making around their support arrangements (Groves & Welsh, 2010; Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007; Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Parsons, *et al.*, 2007). It may also be that the work is seen as repetitive or boring as in a USA study (Leafstedt, *et al.*, 2007) or not related effectively to the students' interests (Groves & Welsh, 2010).

Although the allocation of SNAs is operated under the DES scheme for students with care needs (NCSE, 2011b), students use this term for adults fulfilling a range of roles. There were many practical examples of SNAs supporting students and this included academic, emotional and physical support. The use of SNAs in a flexible way beyond supporting specific students so as to support students more generally in the classroom was welcomed by many students. Some students reported that they did not know why the SNA was in the classroom – but it was beneficial to have the additional help and support. Some students commented on how in some mainstream schools the use of targeted support that was not used flexibly led to some students feeling unable to get help. Being able to use support flexibly and provide it when it is needed rather than when it is prescribed has featured in other studies (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007).

Targeted support for some students is important but needs to be reviewed frequently with the student and presented in a way that is sensitive to development and social needs. Some students no longer needed SNA support; some students no longer wanted SNA support. The use of SNA support at a younger age seemed to help some students develop sufficient skills to be able to be more independent learners as they moved through the education system. The comments from students seems to suggest that good monitoring systems are not in place for all students to assess how well they can access the curriculum and the extent to which teaching needs to be adapted to meet their learning needs (For example see the principles of RTI in Dickman, 2006).

For some students the presence of an SNA specifically for them interfered with the development of peer relationships (see similar findings in Jenkins, 2008; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). There was some evidence of students who needed SNA support but did not want to be seen to be having SNA support by their peers – an acceptable solution for one student was the 'secret helper' – an SNA specifically for her but in the classroom and working more generally. Other students preferred to have support outside of the mainstream classroom and away from their peers (in common with Scottish children who preferred a designated 'resource base' to individual support; see Woolfson, *et al.*, 2007). For some students, continued engagement with school was helped by withdrawing support that was not needed so that students could be more autonomous and independent.

Some schools have special classes attached where students with more severe special educational needs can be integrated into the school premises. These students spend some time in the special class and some time in mainstream lessons. The views of many other students with SEN suggest that the students in special classes are seen as being very different and are not socially included in the mainstream school. The students from the special class saw the mainstream class as a change from their special classroom but this was not without risk of being bullied.

An alternative to small groups and to relying on additional SNAs has been to have additional teachers in the classroom and to use team-teaching approaches. Many students reported this working well. Students' experiences of this not working well suggest that the problems can be solved through:

- Effective communication between teachers about the lesson content, pedagogy and specific skills to be taught. Teaching from two teachers in the same classroom has to be consistent. Students get confused when two different teachers tell them to use two different approaches to the same learning task.
- There need to be clear roles for the two teachers and shared values on the development of positive relationships with students and classroom management of behaviour.

Developments in technology seem to improve engagement for students and allow wider participation and increased independence echoing the findings of other studies (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Parsons, *et al.*, 2007). For example, a dyslexic student embarrassed by her poor spelling was able to act as secretary for the school council by using a laptop to make notes. An important element to the successful use of technology seemed to be student involvement in making choices about what to use and when to use it. The examples that we heard about from mainstream were positive, but did not always reflect developments in technology and alternative ways that students could record their ideas or participate in learning (e.g. using speech to text software; presenting blogs or video diaries). There may be a gap between what is technologically possible and what is pedagogically done as has been evident in previous studies (e.g. Lightfoot, *et al.*, 1999; Nielsen, 2011; Woolfson, *et al.*, 2007) – but we don't know for sure. We heard about the much wider use of technology to support students with more severe difficulties in special schools.

### 5.1.3 School climate

School climate is a term that refers to the quality of school life, the relationships between members of the school and the overall tone and attitudes of staff and students. The term is used to cover the subjective experience of the school's values, norms and interpersonal relationships. A school climate that is supportive of the diverse range of needs of students with SEN arises from a culture of tolerance to difference and a willingness to act flexibly and responsively.

It is clear in listening to the views of most of the students that we talked to that they have a positive experience of the arrangements made for them in their current educational placement. Those students who had experienced mainstream and then a specialist setting or Youthreach were more in favour of their most recent placement. This is in line with other studies (Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Norwich & Lewis, 2005; Prunty, *et al.*, 2012). Students in special schools and those in Youthreach could point to positives in the mainstream settings as well as perceived shortcomings.

The strongest message that came across from all post-primary settings was that students wanted a climate in which teachers cared about them as individuals. Students wanted to be treated with respect; this particularly applied to teachers not undermining their attempts at learning or ridiculing them when they made mistakes. Older students wanted to be treated as adults. This echoes the identified need for an 'aura of trust' between students and teachers and mutual respect found previously (Groves & Welsh, 2010; Repetto, *et al.*, 2011). Many of the students comments suggest that the Support for All (NCSE, 2011c) can be implemented in mainstream schools, but the principles are not always reflected in practice or climate.

Some of the mainstream students talked about a lack of inclusive teaching and a tolerance of a lack of learning. This was also evident in students in the other settings. They also focused on the way that reward systems were used to encourage learning, however some commented on the use of punishments for not doing homework rather than teaching or supporting when homework was difficult. Students in the Youthreach centres contrasted their experience of mainstream as emphasising power differentials and teacher-centredness whereas the climate in Youthreach was more student-centred. This contrast seemed most apparent when discussing rewards and sanctions used to manage behaviour.

An over-rigid, teacher-centred culture with teachers that were too busy, or did not seem to care, led to disengagement for some students. This found echoes in the response of students without SEN in a previous study (Groves & Welsh, 2010). Some students had very negative experiences of teachers whom they perceived as being insensitive to their needs, aggressive, attributing current attitudes to past behaviours, not trusting students or treating them unfairly. Teaching approaches in mainstream classrooms that created difficulties included: a pace that was too quick for learning to be consolidated or that included a high level of demand on the part of the learner; not being sensitive to particular learners' needs, e.g. asking a student with reading difficulties and low self-esteem to read out loud to the class. A few students commented on teachers that they thought were lazy, disorganised or did not help them when they needed it. The commitment of teachers to engage with the act of teaching and learning was seen as important to students. Students did not like teachers who did not respond to their questions or provide help when it

was needed. Being treated unfairly was cited as a trigger for behaviour that the school found difficult to manage (also found in a Scottish study of children with EBD; Hamill & Boyd, 2002). A difficulty 'fitting in' or clashes between home culture and school culture were also cited. There were tensions between the need to belong with a common identity and the need for adolescents to form their own individual identity.

Most of the students in Youthreach reported negative experiences of mainstream education but this was not the case for all students or for those who had moved from mainstream into special schools. While the Youthreach experience is similar to students in a UK study (Norwich & Kelly, 2004) the experiences of students in the special schools is different. It could be that the transition to the special school occurred for some of these students when they would otherwise have transferred to post-primary school and is seen as a positive decision compared to the transition to Youthreach which usually follows a failing in mainstream post-primary education.

The physical environment of the school was important for student engagement and learning. Partly for meeting basic needs (e.g. adequate warmth) and partly for aesthetics and associations with other institutions (e.g. bars at the window reminded students of prison). For some students there was a more fundamental difficulty about the ability of the school building to accommodate their physical needs with dignity and without stigmatisation (see similar findings for students with physical difficulties in Daly, *et al.*, 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

#### 5.1.4 Processes and structures

In the literature review we discussed how the DES has categorised SEN into 14 types of disability and how this is in tension with the EPSEN definition of SEN and NCSE guidance that emphasises that a condition is only important if it leads to a student learning differently to other students (NCSE, 2011a, this is implicit on p.19). However, support is attached to students on the basis of their categorisation and type of difficulty, not on the extent of how this difficulty impacts on learning. One effect of this is that many students in our study had multiple diagnoses – sometimes the different diagnoses would not result in different difficulties in the classroom as there are overlaps in symptomology. It also means that two students with the same learning needs may not get the same support if only one of them has a diagnosis. Several students talked about delays in obtaining a diagnosis in order to be able to access support. In the worst cases, diagnosis only came when the student had been failed by the mainstream system and entered the Youthreach system.

The continuum of support model emphasises how high incidence needs can be addressed by teachers directly and this leads to a loosening of the term 'Special Educational Needs'. This is similar to what is happening in other countries such as the UK or USA. In our study, one effect of this was noted in the way that teachers categorised students as having SEN and they tended to have a much wider definition than that used by the DES for low incidence needs, for example, including students with English as an Additional Language or those with eating disorders. This looser use of the term SEN has also been found in our previous research (Humphrey & Squires, 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Squires, 2012; Squires, *et al.*, 2012). It may explain the variation in estimates

of the number of students who have SEN in Ireland noted in Banks and McCoy's study (Banks & McCoy, 2011). The benefits of the continuum of support are that it makes all teachers responsible for the learning of all of the students in their classroom. Schools engaging in learning needs-based assessments and curriculum-based assessments seem able to meet student needs and lead to a positive educational experience. Positive examples reported by students included: informal arrangements made with parents; and, discussing needs with students. There were positive examples of teachers anticipating potential barriers to learning and working out different approaches to teaching so that they were more inclusive and provided a better educational experience for some students. Teachers were able to adopt specific strategies needed for some individuals, e.g. providing students with concentration or attentional difficulties the opportunity to take breaks and to re-focus attention. A flexible learner-centred approach was easier to achieve in smaller groupings such as resource rooms and Youthreach.

A challenge that arises out of the identification of need is that access to support can be difficult for some students. A lack of accessible support for learning was cited as a reason why some students attending Youthreach disengaged with learning in mainstream. The level of support that schools can provide for students, who do not meet the specific criteria, depends on how flexibly the school can manage its own resources. From the students' perspective, this can lead to individualised support that was available in primary not being available in post-primary; support that is available one year withdrawn the next; or, a higher level of support becoming available on transfer from primary to post-primary. Even within the same setting, support can sometimes be seen to be rationed so that students feel supported in some lessons but left to struggle in others.

### 5.1.5 Relationships with teachers

In common with other studies (Groves & Welsh, 2010; Harris, *et al.*, 2006; Lightfoot, *et al.*, 1999; Nielsen, 2011; Nind, *et al.*, 2012; Repetto, *et al.*, 2011; Sellman, 2009), we found that students consider the relationship with teachers to be crucial. A positive relationship between teachers and students impacts positively on learning. Students were able to talk about how specific teachers had engaged them, motivated them, developed a sense of trust and showed that they cared. Caring, being friendly and being supportive were features of good teachers that were commonly reported. The headline quote from mainstream was a boy saying, '*A teacher changed my life for ever*'. Students with severe general learning disabilities cited teachers as being the best thing about special schools. A Youthreach student reflected on how she had experienced a single mainstream teacher that was '*brilliant and that was just amazing!*'.

Teachers were seen as the key factor in student engagement. Students were more engaged in subjects and worked harder when the teacher seemed to like them. Teachers who could make the lesson interesting led to students looking forward to going to school and to the lesson. Creative, engaging teachers that made lessons 'an adventure for learning' were cited as positive examples of how students became motivated to learn. Teachers who understand how to teach effectively, respond to different students' needs and who can manage their classroom were cited as being the most helpful for students with SEN. Students were able to identify many ways in which teachers were able to respond to a diversity of learning needs and examples included:

- Helping students understand how to learn.
- Scaffolding learning so that learning tasks were presented at the right level for the student.
- Allowing peers to support each other's learning through co-operative group work.
- Teaching specific skills to allow learners to become more independent.
- Modifying explanations and increasing detail to a level that students understood. The extent of modification required may exceed the level that teachers think is necessary (O'Rourke & Houghton, 2009).
- Using a variety of teaching methods to make their lessons interactive, interesting and engaging. Students did not like 'boring' lessons or lessons that heavily relied on books or involved lots of writing. As in an Australian study the students cited a combination of learning experiences as being preferable to simply writing or copying from the board (see Groves & Welsh, 2010).
- Promoting a relaxed atmosphere in which learning can take place.
- Creative teachers who want students to learn and try many approaches to help students understand were particularly valued by Youthreach students.
- The flexible use of individual learning targets *set alongside* expectations of successful academic outcomes that were appropriate for individual students also contributed to student motivation for learning.

### 5.1.6 Relationships with peers

School is a place where people from different backgrounds and experience come together and students cited this as a positive aspect of school. Students talked positively about their relationships with peers and the importance of friends at school. Most students reported positive friendships echoing previous studies (Sammons, *et al.*, 2011). For some students, seeing their friends was the main reason for going to school. Some students reported the maintenance of friendships beyond the school setting as important. It seemed easier for this to happen in mainstream schools which drew from the local community than special schools which drew from a much wider geographical range. Several students attending special schools talked about their social isolation from peers. Students in Youthreach talked about how they were sometimes able to maintain friendships with peers at their previous schools and how friendships had sometimes led to them finding a successful place at Youthreach.

Our findings agree with previous studies that periods of transition can cause concern and issues arise that need resolving (Maras & Aveling, 2006; O'Connor & *et al.*, 2011; Repetto, *et al.*, 2011). The transition from primary school to post-primary had raised concerns for many students in our study and their responses reflected their worries:

- Geographically large school – finding the way from one room to another for each lesson change.
- Socially large school – many more students and teachers to get to know.
- Changes of friendship groupings. This affected students in mainstream to some extent but was more of a worry for students moving from mainstream primary to special school for their post-primary years.

Students reported many of the strategies that schools had used to help them make the transition from primary to post-primary and to form new friendships. There were many general approaches taken to actively encourage positive peer relationships; however, some mainstream students still reported difficulties forming friendships, suggesting a targeted approach was needed for them. Students attending special schools talked about the additional lengths that teachers went to in order to support friendships, especially during periods of illness or hospitalisation. This additional effort in special schools seemed beneficial and countered the struggle to maintain friendships found in a previous study of students with physical and chronic illnesses (Lightfoot, *et al.*, 1999).

Established friendships sometimes affected the choices that students made when it came to choosing curriculum subjects or examination pathways. There were some examples of students reporting that big choices, such as doing the Transition Year or not, affected the pathway through the post-primary setting and could disrupt friendships. Friendships also influenced whether or not students would attend organised clubs or activities.

Tensions exist for some students between engaging fully with school and mixing with peers that do not conform to expectations of school or society. Some students talked about not wanting to mix with particular students. Others talked about peer pressure to engage in risky behaviours. Some students talked about how a peer subculture could undermine the sanctions system of the school by making it 'cool to break the rule'.

### **5.1.7 Participation and engagement**

School councils were seen by many students as a means of participating in the way the school was organised and run. School councils were seen by some as being empowering much in the same way as a study in England had shown (Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, *et al.*, 2007). Some students were, however, more sceptical of the ability of the school council to influence decisions made by teachers. This last viewpoint in many ways is similar to that expressed by students with SEN in Scotland who felt that their views were not always heard or taken into account (Children in Scotland, 2002).

### 5.1.8 Formal outcomes

The lead-up to examinations was a stressful time for many students and this was exacerbated for some students by having a lot of subjects which all had formal examinations. For some students it was the anticipation of the examinations themselves and the expectancy from others that they should do well. For other students there was an acknowledgement of their own learning difficulties and fears expressed such as running out of time. Schools helped in preparing students with revision lessons and practice test papers, students reported that this helped deal with some of their anxieties. Support in examinations was reassuring to many students and worked well when there was an existing diagnosis of a condition. Contrary to a study in the USA, students with dyslexia in our study wanted to have 'waivers' for examinations (see Vaughn, 1993 for the USA views of students with dyslexia). However, we agree with Vaughn that the kinds of adjustments made in examinations need to be discussed and planned with students. Students who were given support found it useful to be able to practise the skills that they would need in using the support before the examinations. It did not work well where there was no diagnosis but there was an equivalent educational need. There seems to be an over-focus on diagnostic labels rather than assessment of educational skill and some students did not get the support that they thought they should.

### 5.1.9 Informal outcomes

Many students with SEN experienced some form of bullying and positive examples of how school can help included: Anti-bullying weeks; Strategies to promote friendships – friends were seen as a way of protecting against being the victim of bullies; Teaching students particular strategies for coping or responding; Having peer mentoring systems and buddying systems so that support came from other (usually older) students; Having anonymous ways of reporting bullying; Teachers actively intervening when there had been reported cases of bullying. Things that were unhelpful included: forced attempts to mend relationships; over-reactions by teachers or schools to perpetrators of bullying; lengthy delays by teachers in responding to claims of being bullied. Although the special school was seen as an environment that was safer from being bullied than mainstream, some students at special schools were still concerned about being bullied.

The need for good behavioural policies in schools was cited many times and this included:

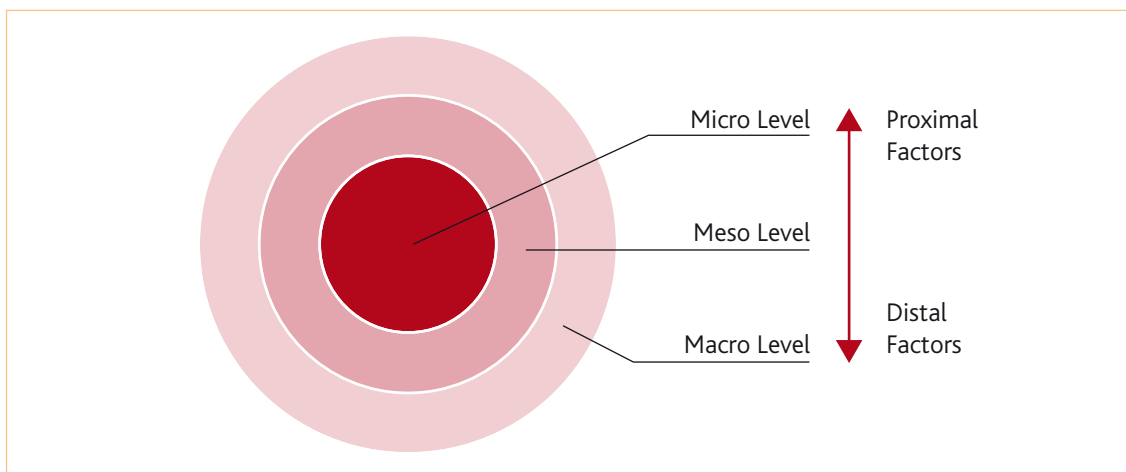
- Good classroom management of behaviour to reduce the number of disruptive instances (to deal with the 'messers'), so that students could focus on their learning.
- Appropriate behaviour was seen as being engendered through positive relationships between teachers and students.
- Reward systems used in mainstream schools often did not seem to engage students with SEN because the rewards were unattainable. The students liked the idea of rewarding positive behaviour but the rewards had to be meaningful and achievable. This also applied to the use of rewards and incentives to improve attendance and this finding is consistent with previous research (Humphrey & Squires, 2011b).

- Reward systems used in special schools tended to be more individualised, based on token economy systems, and liked by the students.
- Rules that were clearly explained and made sense to students were seen as preferable to rules that seemed absurd or arbitrary.
- The use of sanctions for not completing homework seems counterproductive from the comments of students in special schools and Youthreach and previous research that suggests that they need help to complete homework and that parents are not always able to provide this (also found in a USA study; Bryan & Nelson, 1994), though students appreciate it when parents can help (see also Barrie Wade & Maggie Moore, 1993). The use of sanctions for non-completion of homework reinforces the students' belief that teachers do not understand that they struggle with homework (also found in a English study; Woolfson, *et al.*, 2007).
- Some sanctions were not seen as meaningful to the students in mainstream and Youthreach and these were easily undermined by peer pressure.
- In the Youthreach centres, sanctions were made more meaningful because they were related to workplace ethics and linked to financial costs to the students.
- Often students were very clear about sanctions and punishments but not for rewards; or they felt there was an imbalance between rewards and punishments (e.g. bad points add towards detentions, but good points add to nothing).

Students reported that, in some schools, the student was labelled problematic rather than teachers focusing on the behaviour itself. This led to teachers making unfavourable attributions to students who felt they always got the blame for misdemeanours even when they were not involved.

## 5.2 RQ 6 What are the key lessons from this study which might improve educational experiences and outcomes for second level students with special educational needs? Mapping influences onto the Person-Process-Context model

**Figure 11: Outline of the Person-Process-Context model**



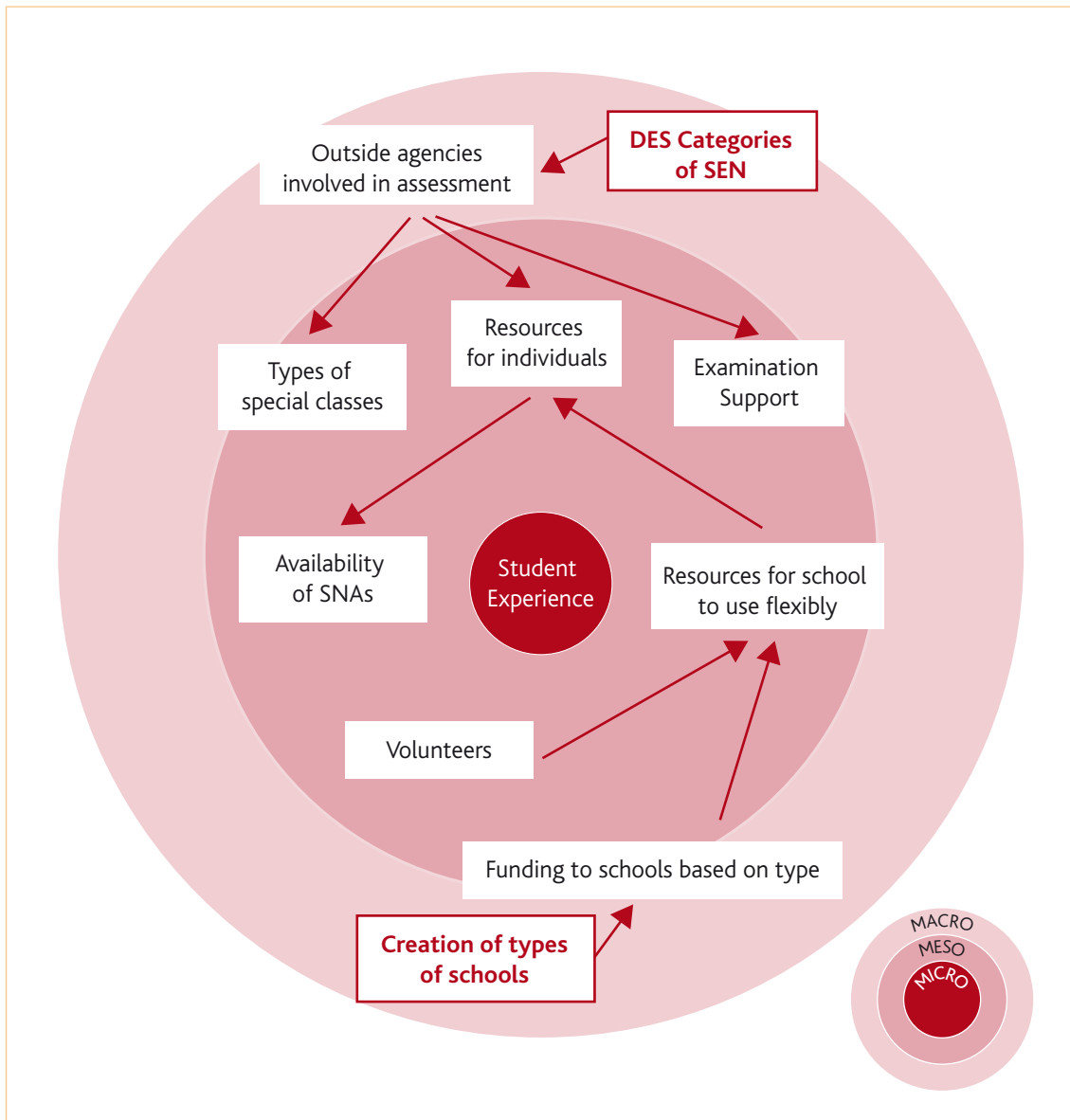
We presented this model at the beginning of the report and subdivided it into several more layers within each boundary to show the different levels of organisation within the educational system. International policy was at the extreme outer edge and student experience at the very centre. Those things closer to the centre we referred to as proximal factors and we considered that these would have greatest influence. Those things further from the centre we referred to as distal factors and we thought that these would have least influence on student experience.

At the macro level, different policies have led to a tension between using categories of SEN and having a continuum of SEN and a corresponding continuum of support. The category approach leads to a system of identifying students who match the category labels and then allocating resources so that individual support can be provided. This approach is also taken for the allocation of special classes to schools and it influences which students are able to have adjustments in examinations and which students do not get adjustments. The continuum approach requires teachers to respond more flexibly to individual need and has an emphasis on teaching and learning rather than on type of SEN. Policy also influences the types of qualifications that are available and how these are assessed. It influences the way in which additional resources are allocated to some schools but not others (e.g. DEIS schools compared to non-DEIS; some Youthreach centres have enhanced SEN funding others do not). Schools with greater resources can use these more flexibly. Schools can creatively make use of external agencies and volunteer support.

What we have learnt from the students is that schools mediate these factors and develop a culture and climate that directly impacts on individual student experience. At the beginning of the study, we had imagined that school type and locality would be more important and we took steps to include this in the study design; however, many of the views expressed by students seemed to be found across schools and are consistent with those found in the international

literature. This may be because the students only know one school context. Where students have moved to special schools or to Youthreach, they prefer their new setting to mainstream.

**Figure 12: Policy influences on student experience**



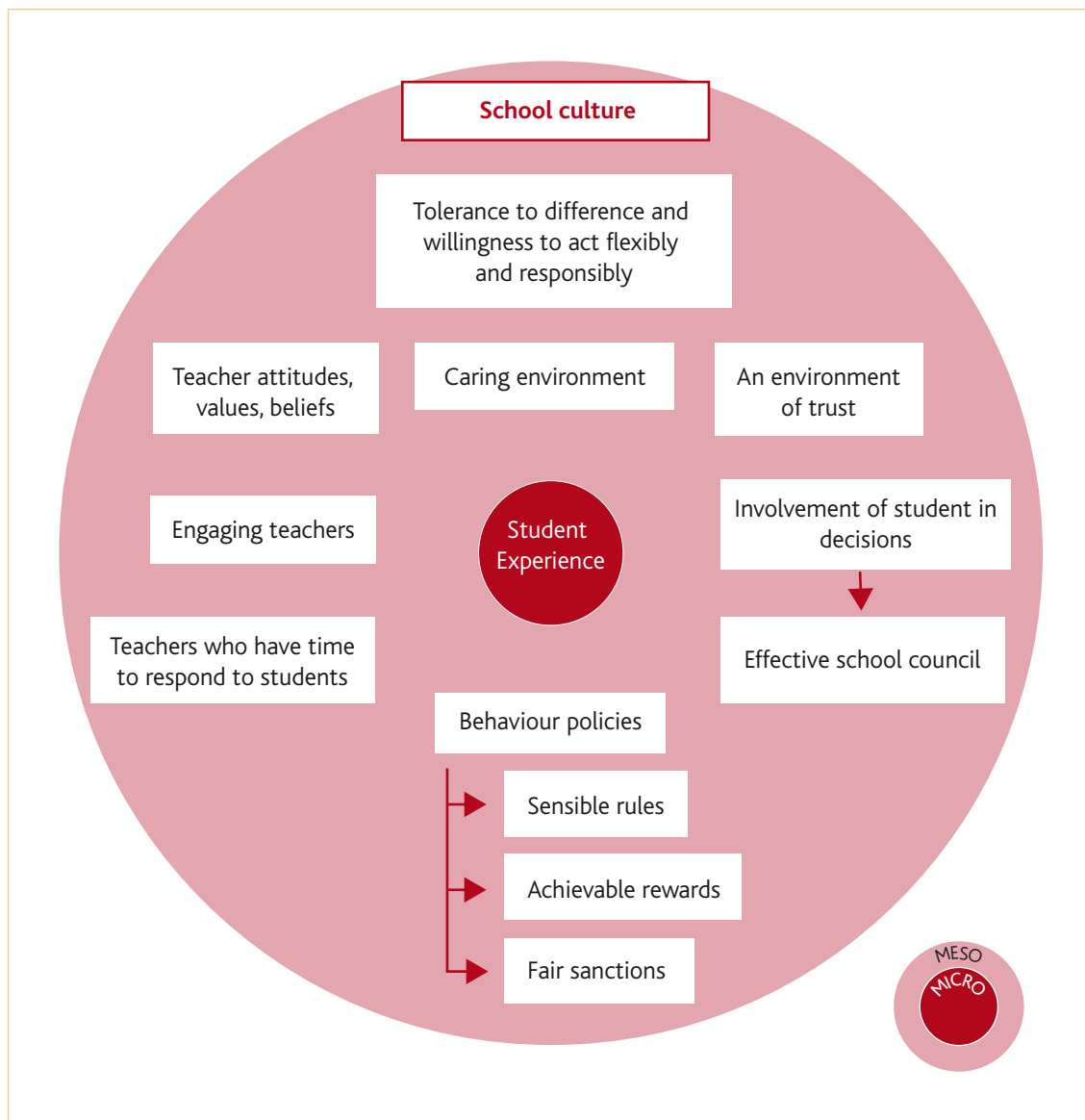
Looking at Figure 12, we can see how DES categories lead to an importance being placed on assessment in order to allocate resources or define who has access to some types of classes, examination support or additional SNA support. This can mean that delays in assessment lead to delays in support being provided. Schools can make use of existing resources to respond more flexibly to individual need, e.g. creating their own classes, using team teaching or by enhancing adult support.

Most of the student comments were about things closer to them and about their direct experience of schools. At the start of the study, we thought that type of SEN might be important in thinking about the ways in which students experienced barriers to learning. We did encounter some specific examples of this; however, most comments were common across types of SEN. The school culture and climate in terms of teacher attitudes, values and attributes were important.

**Table 16: Student views about positive and negative teacher qualities**

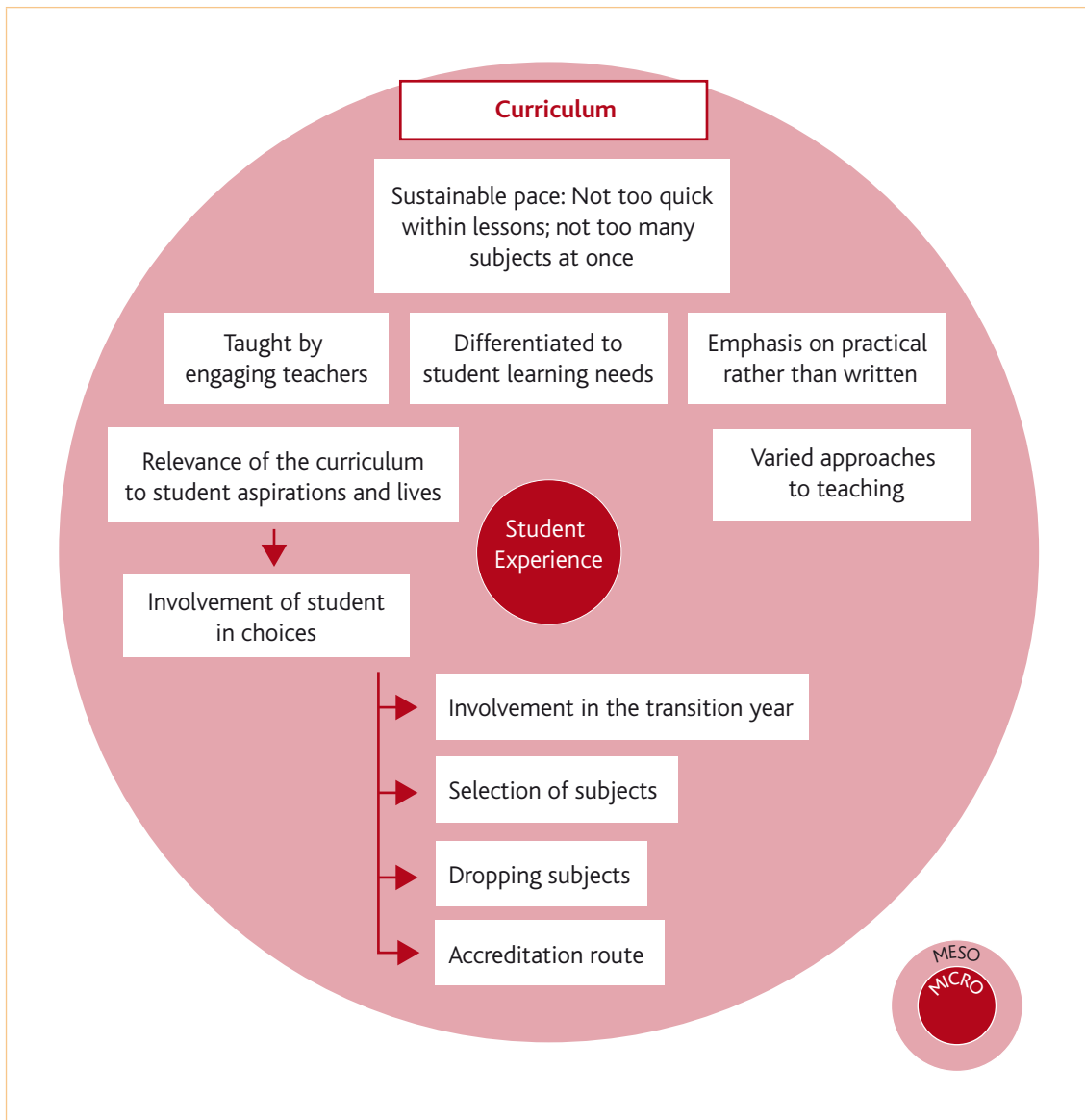
Positive teacher qualities	Negative teacher qualities
Teachers who show that they care	Over-rigid teachers
Teachers who can be trusted and who trust students	Aggressive teachers
Teachers who are sensitive to student learning needs	Insensitive teachers
Teachers who are committed to teaching and learning – who make a visible effort	Experience of teachers who seem lazy or disorganised or too busy to respond to students
Teachers who encourage students	Teachers who treat students unfairly
Friendly, approachable and relaxed teachers	Teachers that only focus on one aspect of the student, rather than thinking about the whole person
Teachers who show that they like the students as individuals	Teachers who label students based on past behaviour rather than current behaviour
Creative and engaging teachers	Teachers who do not help when students need it
Teachers who use a variety of teaching methods	Boring teachers who always use the same dull approach
Teachers modifying their explanations until the student is able to understand	Teachers who do not understand that the student 'does not get it'

School culture also includes a sense of order and discipline that was developed through clear, relevant behaviour policies that were fairly but flexibly applied.

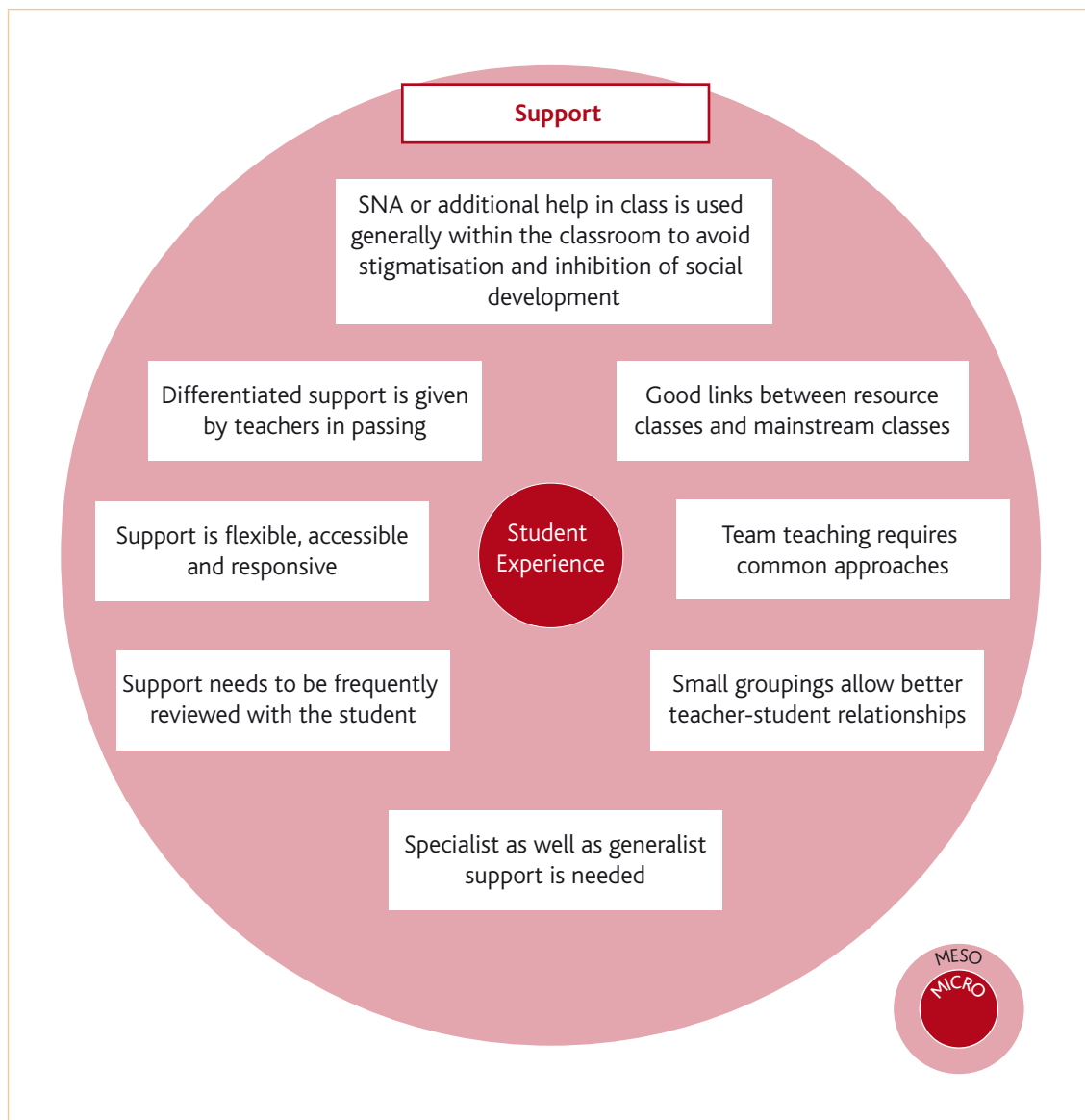
**Figure 13: Meso level – school culture**

Students also talked about how the mainstream curriculum could be taught in an engaging way by teachers who differentiated teaching according to student needs. Students talked about an appropriate pace that did not cause them to feel anxious or stressed. They found a variety of teaching methods helped them learn. Many preferred an emphasis on practical subjects rather than those that required writing. Students liked to be involved in choices about the curriculum and about qualification routes. Subjects had to have relevance to the lives of the students. The appropriateness of the accreditation process has to be matched to the student, with many preferring portfolio approaches to assessment.

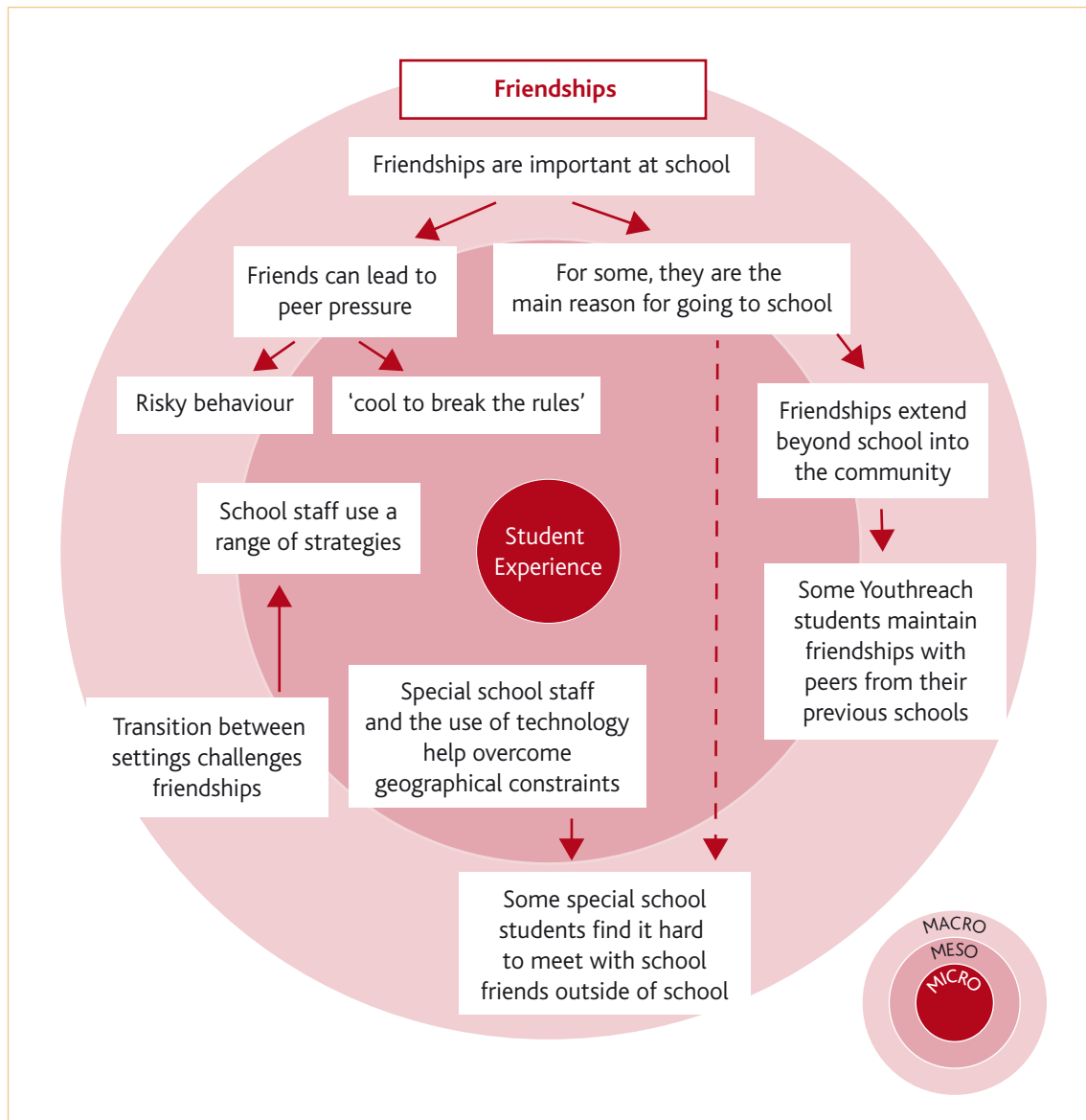
**Figure 14: Meso Level – curriculum**



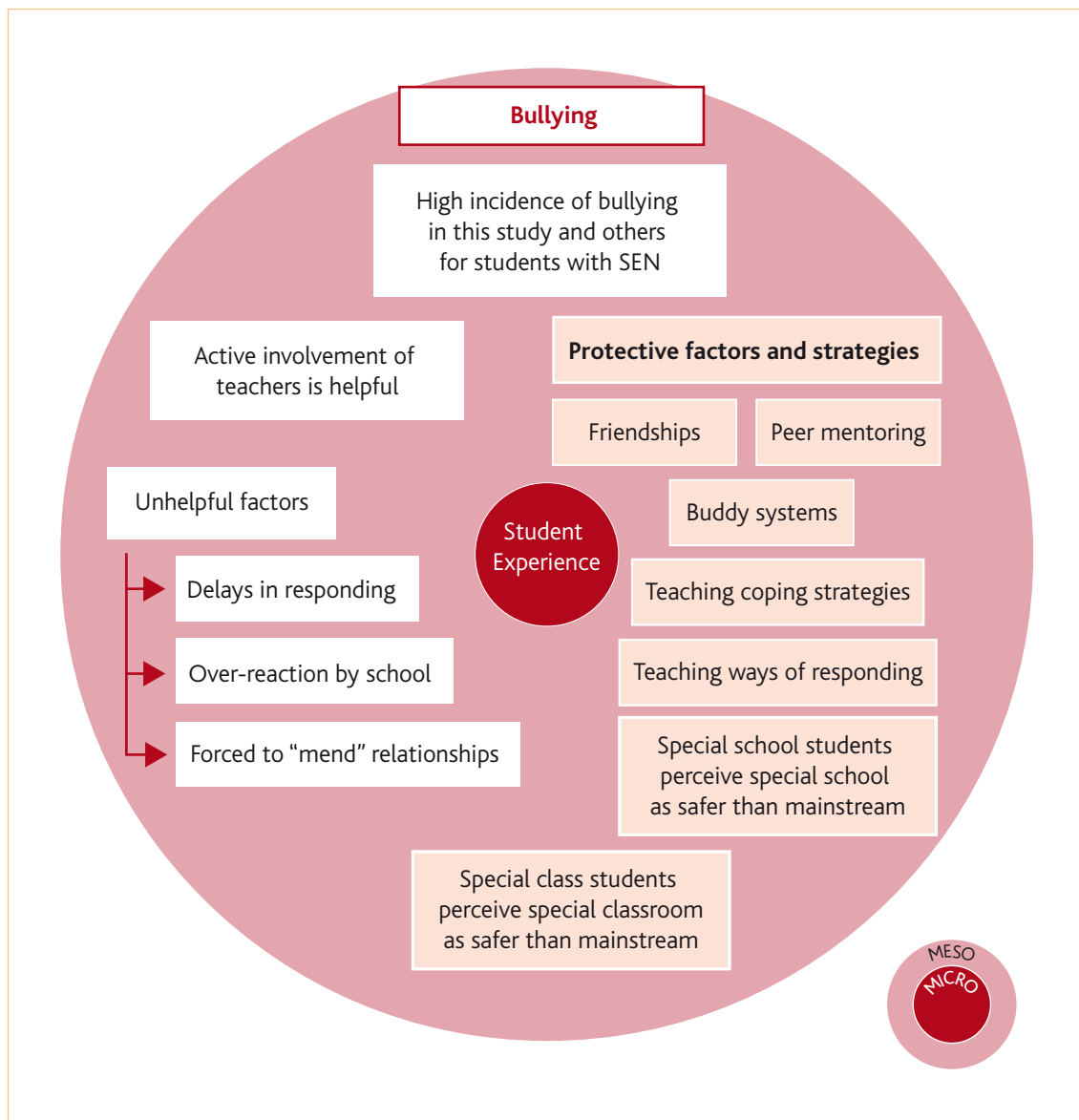
Individual support needs to be co-ordinated and planned to sensitively respond to students' needs (including their social and emotional needs). Support needs to be well co-ordinated.

**Figure 15: Meso level – support**

Students talked about the importance of friendships and how these extended across the school–community boundary. For some students seeing their friends was the main reason for going to school. Some of the Youthreach students stressed how friendships established at their previous school were maintained in the local community, even though they no longer attended the school. Some special school students talked about the problem of seeing school friends outside of school due to the large geographical area covered by the school. They also talked about some of the ways in which their teachers helped and technology helped to maintain contact outside of school. Changing settings seemed to pose a particular threat to friendships at transition points such as primary to post-primary and students in many mainstream schools were able to discuss strategies that teachers used to help them develop new friendships. For a small number of students, transition between the junior cycle and either the transition year or the senior cycle presented similar challenges to existing friendships when their friends may have made different curriculum choices. The potential for friendships to lead to peer pressure and inappropriate risk-taking or undermining the school behaviour policy was also raised by some students.

**Figure 16: Meso level – friendships**

Students in this study, like those in other studies, mentioned that bullying was a concern. They said that the active involvement of teachers was helpful. Those in special classes and special schools considered their settings to be safer than mainstream classes and we can speculate that this may have been because of the higher ratio of adults to students. Protective factors included friendships, peer mentoring systems and buddy systems involving older students. Other strategies that were cited as helpful included being taught coping strategies or being taught ways of responding. Unhelpful factors included school staff over-reacting to situations, which a small number of students thought made things worse. One student was resentful of being forced to mend a relationship with a student who had bullied him.

**Figure 17: Meso level – bullying**

### 5.3 Lessons arising for policy and practice

This study has explored the views of Irish students with SEN and found that these are consistent with the views of students with and without SEN reported in the international literature. Most post-primary students with SEN are able to express themselves well and have definite views about what contributes to a positive educational experience. A few post-primary students with low incidence SEN are able to express their views with the assistance of adults who know them well.

Central to most parts of this report has been the need to listen to students and to involve them in decision-making. The finding from the international literature that student views should be obtained and taken seriously for a range of things is also echoed by the students in this study.

Students with SEN are able to articulate their views about a range of important issues including: educational placement; how support is provided and co-ordinated; the types of teaching methods used; how adult support is used in the classroom; and, aspirations for education and employment. The curriculum has to be relevant to students, have an appropriate accreditation route, be presented at an accessible pace, preferably be practical rather than written and be taught by engaging creative teachers. Students want to be involved in making curricular choices. To make these choices, students may need support to understand the options available and the pros and cons of different choices that they could make in terms of both short-term goals and long-term aspirations. The key lesson is that **students should be at the centre of decisions made about them and actively involved in the process.**

The policy section of this report set out the context for education in Ireland and how this has led to different types of schools. Historically, special education has been different to general education but there has been a continual move towards a more inclusive education system in line with what has been happening in other countries. There is a range of types of schools and support arrangements that have to be managed by the principals of the schools. A key finding is that the way that schools are organised mediates between policy and school experience. School culture and the climate in terms of teacher attitudes, values and attributes are very important in promoting student engagement and encouraging participation. The majority of students report that their experience of the supports available in their current setting is positive. The key lesson is that **school leaders need to consider how they can create a culture and climate in their schools that are supportive of all students, especially those who are vulnerable or have special educational needs.**

Teachers seem to be defining SEN more broadly than the DES categories of disability to include students for whom there are potential barriers to learning that need to be addressed through support (also found in other studies, e.g. Banks & McCoy, 2011; Farrell, 2012; Jimerson, *et al.*, 2007; Squires, *et al.*, 2012). A flexible response is possible under the continuum of the special need model. Some students in this study have commented on how the difficulty of accessing formal identification of SEN and allocation of resources had adversely affected their educational experience. It is worth noting that during the time this study has been conducted there have been moves to explore how resources are allocated to individuals and schools. Getting access to appropriate help when it is needed is an important issue for students, with most students wanting the help directly from the subject teacher or a flexible use of resource teachers and SNAs. Schools can consider how additional adult support within a classroom can be used flexibly. This allows help to be given to a wider range of students; help to be given more quickly; reduces the stigmatisation of having help; reduces inhibition of social development and peer relationships. The key lesson that emerges is when **different teachers are involved in teaching an individual student or group of students there needs to be good communication between the teaching team so that consistent approaches are used and opportunities for skill generalisation are developed.** This applies equally to team teaching; links between resource teachers and class teachers; links between support staff and class teachers, links with outside support services and class teachers. Consideration should be given as to how to use teacher expertise in special schools to help develop teacher knowledge and skills in mainstream. This would particularly apply to the use of technology but could also be a wider pedagogic discussion about responding to individual needs.

Friendships are important at school and extend across the school-community boundary. In this study, students identified particular problems related to developing and maintaining friendships and some students identified positive steps that teachers had taken to overcome these difficulties. For students in special schools the geographical area from which the students are drawn is larger than a mainstream school and this poses additional challenges. The key lesson is **friendship development and maintenance is harder for some students with SEN and particularly challenged at times of transition when existing friendships may change. Schools need to continue to explore how they use a range of strategies with vulnerable students.**

Across the literature there is evidence that bullying is more prominent amongst students with SEN. Students in this study identified several protective factors and strategies (friendships; peer mentoring; buddy systems; teaching coping strategies; teaching ways of responding; active involvement from teachers; smaller groupings such as special classes or special schools). The key lesson is that **schools should reflect on how they manage bullying in their schools and pay particular attention to students with special educational needs.** In particular, having systems that show that students have been listened to and action has been taken quickly seem important to students. Preventative approaches help students to feel safe and can include teaching social skills and encouraging the development of supportive friendships.

There is evidence in the international literature (e.g. Lightfoot *et al.*, 1999) that how the physical environment of the school prevents inclusion is not always considered for students with physical difficulties and this was echoed by one student in our study. The key lesson from this is that **school buildings need to be audited in terms of accessibility with the aim of improving access for different groups of students.**

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Invitation Letter to Principals

Dear Principal

### **A Study of the Experiences of Students with Special Educational Needs at Post-Primary School**

We would like to offer you the opportunity to contribute to a new national research study. The study is unique in that it attempts to gain the views of students with special educational needs about their education. This is not an evaluation of your school. We will be looking at student views across many schools. The findings will be used to inform educational policy in Ireland.

We will be recruiting 30 to 40 Post-Primary Schools to take part in the study and have carefully selected schools to represent a range of school types that will give us an understanding of the different circumstances in which schools operate.

More information is provided on the attached information sheet. In brief:

- We will first produce a picture of your school using available documentation to help us understand context and provision for students with special educational needs. We will then send this to a link teacher in the school and follow-up with a telephone conversation to make sure that our description is right and fill in any gaps. A revised context description will be sent to you for further validation. You may use this description for any purposes that promote your school. We will use it as part of our case description of an anonymised school in our study.
- We will ask your link teacher to identify 8 students to participate in two focus groups (4 in each) and 2 students to be interviewed. The interviews will take place sometime during the spring and summer terms 2013.

At the end of the project, we will send you a summary of the research findings. We hope that the insights from trying to understand student views will be of value to teachers and policy makers.

We very much hope that you will consider taking part in this study, and would be grateful if you could confirm whether, in principle, you might agree to this by contacting Joanna Bragg (email: [joanna.bragg@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:joanna.bragg@manchester.ac.uk)).

If you have any queries, please feel free to contact any member of the team.

With very best wishes

Dr Garry Squires  
Tel: 0044 161 275 3546  
E-mail: [garry.squires@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:garry.squires@manchester.ac.uk)

## **Appendix 2: Participant information sheet and consent for link teachers**

### **A Study Of The Experiences Of Students With Special Educational Needs At Post-Primary School**

#### **Participant Information Sheet**

You are being invited to take part in a research study undertaken by the University of Manchester on behalf of the National Council for Special Education. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

#### **Who will conduct the research?**

The research is being led by Dr Garry Squires, School of Education, University of Manchester, UK.

#### **What is the aim of the research?**

This part of the project is designed to find out how Irish students with a broad range of special educational needs and across a range of second level school types, experience curriculum, teaching methods, supports, school climate, processes and structures, relationships with teachers and peers, and other issues at school. We are interested in how these experiences impact on their participation and engagement in education and how the different student experiences are linked with formal and informal educational outcomes (e.g. attainment, early school leaving, certification, well-being, and independence).

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

We are speaking to a link teacher in each school to find out what kind of support arrangements are in place for children with special educational needs and how this is influenced by school policy and organisation. Your headteacher has nominated you to participate as the link teacher.

#### **What would I be asked to do if I took part?**

We will look at school documentation that is publically available and start to build a description of the school. Link teachers will be asked to send us additional information such as school policy documents.

We will then write a description of how we think the school is organised to support children with special educational needs and then ask link teachers to check the description for accuracy. We will then hold a telephone interview to discuss any changes that are necessary and to add new information to the case description. We will also ask questions about how the support arrangements work in practice for pupils with different types of Special Educational Needs. The telephone interview will last up to 40 minutes.

We will ask link teachers to identify up to 8 pupils with special educational needs and two pupils who do not have special educational needs<sup>13</sup> to take part in group discussions and individual interviews about the support provided. We will supply consent forms and information sheets to be sent to parents.

We will arrange a time to visit the school and during this time we would like the link teacher to arrange a place for us to hold a group discussion with up to 8 pupils and then two individual interviews with 2 pupils (each will last up to 30 minutes).

### **What happens to the data collected?**

Data collected from the school will be anonymised and used to build a case description. Quotations that illustrate practice and convey the experiences of the pupils in the study will be used in developing an understanding of how support for special educational needs is impacting on their participation and engagement in education and how different student experiences link with formal and informal educational outcomes (e.g. attainment, early school leaving, certification, well-being, and independence).

### **How is confidentiality maintained?**

The name of the school will not be used in any reports that we produce and will not be used in the data analysis. Each school will be represented by a letter.

Interviews and group discussions will be recorded so that we can accurately capture the views expressed. We will not use names in the interview process or group discussions and each person will be referred to by a letter.

All anonymised data will be kept secure in encrypted files located in a secure folder at the University. Once the project has been completed the data will be kept for 5 years for audit purposes and then destroyed.

### **What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself.

### **Will I be paid for participating in the research?**

There is no payment for taking part in this research.

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<sup>13</sup> In the original design of the project we had envisaged collecting the views of a small number of students without SEN and the letter was designed with that in mind and checked for ethical clearance. As the project got under way, discussions with link teachers focused on only obtaining the views of students with SEN.

### **What is the duration of the research?**

Teachers will be asked to take part in a telephone interview that will last up to 40 minutes.

The group discussion for pupils will last up to 30 minutes.

The interviews for pupils will last up to 30 minutes.

### **Where will the research be conducted?**

The research will take place in school.

### **Will the outcomes of the research be published?**

The findings of this research will be written into a report for the National Council of Special Education, Ireland. We will also want to publish academic papers and present findings at international conferences so that other people can benefit from what we learn.

### **Criminal Records Check**

All of the researchers involved in this project have had an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check to clear them for working with children.

### **Contact for further information**

Further information can be obtained by contacting:

Dr Garry Squires

By post: Room A6.6, Ellen Wilkinson Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK.

Tel: 0044 161 275 3546

e-mail: [garry.squires@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:garry.squires@manchester.ac.uk)

### **What if something goes wrong?**

If you feel that something has gone wrong as a result of the research, then please contact Dr Garry Squires.

If a participant wants to make a formal complaint about the conduct of the research they should contact the Head of the Research Office, Christie Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL.

## A Study Of The Experiences Of Students With Special Educational Needs At Post-Primary School

### Link Teacher Consent Form

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below

		Please Initial Box
1.	I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above project and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to any treatment/service	
3.	I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded	
4.	I agree to the use of anonymous quotes	

I agree to take part in the above project

Name of participant	Date	Signature
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

## **Appendix 3: Participant information sheet and consent for parents**

### **A Study Of The Experiences Of Students With Special Educational Needs At Post-Primary School**

#### **Participant Information Sheet**

Your son or daughter is being invited to take part in a research study undertaken by the University of Manchester on behalf of the National Council for Special Education.

Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

#### **Who will conduct the research?**

The research is being led by Dr Garry Squires, School of Education, University of Manchester, UK.

#### **What is the aim of the research?**

We want to know about pupils' experiences of school. We want to ask pupils what they think about the support arrangements that are in place for children with special educational needs.

#### **Why have has my son or daughter been chosen?**

We want to know what your child thinks about their school and the level of support that they receive. We are asking for the views from a range of pupils with a wide variety of different needs. A member of staff has selected some pupils that will be able to tell us what it is like in their school. Your child is part of this group.

#### **What would my son or daughter be asked to do if they took part?**

We will talk with your child at their school for between 30 and 40 minutes. They might be part of a small group of pupils, or they might be asked to talk to us alone. They will be asked questions about what they think about school and about the help they receive.

It would help your child to know that they will be asked to do this. You may want to help them discuss their ideas or views before meeting us.

#### **What happens to the data collected?**

We will use some of the things that your child says to understand what it is like for them in their school. We need to use their exact words to get their point across. To help us do this we will record the conversation.

### **How is confidentiality maintained?**

Only the research team and the pupils with your child will know what they said. We will not use your child's name in any material or reports that we write. Comments made by your child will not be reported back to school staff.

All anonymised data will be kept secure in encrypted files located in a secure folder at the University. Once the project has been completed the data will be kept for 5 years for audit purposes and then destroyed.

### **What happens if I do not want my son or daughter to take part or if I change my mind?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not your son or daughter is to take part.

If you do decide that they can take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to return a signed consent form.

If you decide that they can take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself or to your son or daughter.

### **Will I be paid for participating in the research?**

There is no payment for taking part in this research.

### **What is the duration of the research?**

The group discussion for pupils will last up to 40 minutes.

The interviews for pupils will last up to 30 minutes.

### **Where will the research be conducted?**

The research will take place in school.

### **Will the outcomes of the research be published?**

We will be writing a report to explain what we have learnt. The report will go to the National Council for Special Needs Education. We will also want to publish academic papers and present findings at international conferences so that other people can benefit from what we learn. We will not name your child or their school in any of these reports or papers.

### **Criminal Records Check**

All of the researchers involved in this project have had an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check to clear them for working with children.

### **Contact for further information**

Further information can be obtained by contacting:

Dr Garry Squires

By post: Room A6.6, Ellen Wilkinson Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK.

Tel: 0044 161 275 3546

e-mail: [garry.squires@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:garry.squires@manchester.ac.uk)

### **What if something goes wrong?**

If you feel that something has gone wrong as a result of the research, then please contact Dr Garry Squires.

If a participant wants to make a formal complaint about the conduct of the research they should contact the Head of the Research Office, Christie Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL.

## A Study Of The Experiences Of Students With Special Educational Needs At Post-Primary School

### Parent Consent Form

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below

		Please Initial Box
1.	I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above project. I have had the opportunity to consider the information. I have been able to ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that taking part in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw consent at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to any treatment/service	
3.	I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded	
4.	I agree to the use of anonymous quotes	

I agree to my son or daughter taking part in the above project

---

Pupil's name

Name of parent	Date	Signature
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

## Appendix 4: Participant information sheet and pupil assent form

### A Study Of The Experiences Of Students With Special Educational Needs At Post-Primary School

#### Pupil Assent Sheet

[Researcher] *Read the additional assent information to pupils*

Thank you for meeting with me today. I am from the University of Manchester and my name is...

Before we start, I am going to tell you what we are doing and what will happen to what you tell me.

We want to know what pupils like you think about school. We want to know what you think about how the way that you are taught and supported.

We are meeting as a small group to take part in a discussion with me to find out your views and experiences. [Focus group pupils]

OR

We are meeting together to have a chat to explore your views in more depth. [Individual interview pupils]

I will write down some brief notes about what we say. I will record the session to listen to later. This is to make sure that I am able to get what you say right.

I will want to use some of your words in reports that I write about the project. Only the research team will hear what you say. We will not let anyone in school hear what you say.

When we write the report we will not use your name or the name of the school. To help with this, I am going to call you by a letter instead of using your name.

You are going to be [give letter name to each]. This may seem a bit funny – would you like to call me by a letter as well or would you like to use my name?

Although I will not tell anyone what you say about your experiences about school, I must tell someone if you tell me that you are being hurt or made to do something that you do not want to do.

Are there any questions that you want to ask me about the project?

I am going to ask you to write your initials to show that you understand and are willing to take part. If at any time you want to stop or to drop out of the project, that is OK, just let me know – you do not need to tell me why.

[If the child is unable to sign then an adult in school will be asked to witness assent being given]

## A Study Of The Experiences Of Students With Special Educational Needs At Post-Primary School

### Student assent form

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the form below

	Please Initial Box
I have heard about the project. I was asked if I had any questions and had my questions answered	
I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. I will not be in trouble if I leave the project	
I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded	
I agree to my words being used without mention of my name	

I agree to take part in the above project

Pupil name	Date	Signature
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

## Appendix 5: Interview and focus group questions for each cycle

There was at least one focus group in each school for the senior cycle and one for the junior cycle. In each school there were a small number of individual interviews.

There was a progressive focus: Policy context helps to define school context; school context offers particular opportunities and supports to students; the focus group allowed a broad exploration of the experiences of students in responding to these opportunities for support; individual interviews allowed for more specific detail to be explored.

All of the questions outlined below were adapted according to the student's age, primary need, provision etc. Key Visuals, prompt sheets, rating scales and a range of approaches were developed. In some cases not all of the questions were asked.

There are many questions and to ensure coverage across the research project, each school started with a different area being explored.

### Individual and paired interviews – Junior Cycle

#### Introduction

Thank you for meeting with me today. I am from the University of Manchester and my name is...

What the research is about

Before we start, I am going to tell you what we are doing and what will happen to what you tell me.

We want to know what you think

We want to know what students like you think about school. We want to know what you think about how the way that you are taught and supported.

We are meeting as a small group to take part in a discussion with me to find out your views and experiences.

#### Confidentiality

I will write down some brief notes about what we say. I will record the session to listen to later. This is to make sure that I am able to get what you say right.

I will want to use some of your words in reports that I write about the project. Only the research team will hear what you say. We will not let anyone in school hear what you say.

When we write the report we will not use your name or the name of the school. To help with this, I am going to call you by a letter instead of using your name.

### **Use letters instead of names**

You are going to be [give letter name to each]. This may seem a bit funny – would you like to call me by a letter as well or would you like to use my name?

### **Child protection**

Although I will not tell anyone what you say about your experiences about school, I must tell someone if you tell me that you are being hurt or made to do something that you do not want to do.

Are there any questions that you want to ask me about the project?

### **Signed consent**

I am going to ask you to write your initials to show that you understand and are willing to take part. If at any time you want to stop or to drop out of the project, that is OK, just let me know – you do not need to tell me why.

[If the child is unable to sign then an adult in school will be asked to witness assent being given]

### **Warm up question**

So, do you like school? – general feelings – What's good? What's not so good? What do you like? What don't you like?

**Activity:** Put subjects into the **Like** or **Don't Like** boxes – discuss reasons, OR

**Activity:** Sort subjects into priority order as a group – discuss what might raise a subject higher up the list

## Area 1: Curriculum

How easy was it coming here from your primary school? Did you get any help in primary school? (what kind?) Do you get the same amount of help here? Is there anything that is different about this school compared to your primary school? Where do you think was better, here or in the primary school? Why?)	<b>Transition from primary</b>
What do you think about the choice of subjects available? Do you do Irish as a subject? What do you think about studying (or not studying) Irish?	<b>Choice of subjects</b>
<i>[Depending on school context]</i> Are you studying the Junior Certificate or the Junior Certificate Schools Programme? Who decided which course you would follow? What do you think about your course compared to people who are doing the other course?	<b>JC course</b>
In what ways do you think the Junior Cycle prepares you for the Senior Cycle? At the end of the Junior cycle, you get a certificate. What do you think about this? Why?	<b>JC certificate</b>
Do you have any help in exams (e.g. being allowed to take a bit longer than others)? What do you think about this?	<b>Exams &amp; help</b>

## Area 2: Support and identification

What is your best subject? Why is it your best? What kinds of things do teachers or other adults do to make this the best subject for you? What is your worst subject? Why? What about other subjects, can you rate them/ put them in order of preference ( <i>Scale &amp; subject visual</i> – How come this gets an 8 and this gets a 2?	<b>Best/worst subjects</b>
What would teachers have to do to make this a (score+1)? What kind of support would help you in this lesson?	<b>What helps to learn</b>
<i>(Pre-check with link teacher re resource or SNA or none)</i> : Do you work with a resource teacher/helper adult)? Is this on your own or with other students? What is good or bad about this?	<b>Resource teacher/SNA</b>
Do you have an adult help you with care needs? What is good or bad about this? [SNA]	<b>Help from teachers/ SNA</b>
Tell me about any other support in school. Which subjects do you get help in? ( <i>Rating scale as to how helpful</i> ). What about other subjects, how do you cope/manage?	<b>Help in school</b>
Do you set targets for your learning? Who helps you decide on these? Do other people set targets for you? In what ways are these targets good or bad targets?	<b>Target setting</b>

### Area 3: Classes

<p>Students from special classes: I would like to ask you about the time you spend in a special class. Why do you go there? What do you think about the class? What is good about going there? What is not so good?</p> <p>What happens when you are back in the other classes? (<i>check whether in special class FT</i>)</p>	<b>In special classes</b>
<p>Students not in special classes: Are there any special classes in your school where students sometimes go for some of their lessons? Why do you think they go there? Do you go to one of these classes [check question]? What do you think about that? Where do you like it more?</p>	<b>Not in special classes</b>

### Area 4: School generally

<p><i>[Dual placement]</i> Do you spend some time in this school and some time in another school? What is good about this? Is there anything that is not good about this?</p>	<b>Dual placement</b>
<p>Tell me about rewards used in school. What are they for? Do you get any rewards? What do you think about them?</p>	<b>Rewards</b>
<p>Do you like going to school? What do you like/dislike about going to school? Do you have many days off school? Do you know what the school has done to try to make students want to come to school more often? What kind of things help you to come to school? What kinds of things make it hard for you to come to school? <i>[prompts – supports, belonging, identity, friendships]</i></p>	<b>Liking/ disliking school</b>
<p>Some awards like the leaving certificate (senior) or the junior certificate school programme (DEIS) are only given if your attendance is good – what do you think about this? Why?</p>	<b>Attendance</b>
<p><i>[Breakfast club]</i> Do you use the breakfast club? How come?</p>	<b>Incentives</b>

**Area 5: Wider outcomes**

Do you have friends? How are friendships encouraged in school? How do friends support you? What things might stop you from making friends?	<b>Friends</b>
What happens at break times & lunchtimes? What do you do? Are there any lunchtime clubs? Are there any clubs that you attend before or after school?	<b>Free time</b>
Do you manage to get to lessons easily and on time? What kinds of things help you to do this? Is there anything that makes this hard for you?	<b>Getting around places</b>
Can you tell me what bullying is? Do you know if there is any bullying going on at your school? Do you know what the school has done to try to stop bullying? If somebody was bullied, what the school would do? How do you know? What do you think the school should do in such a case? Do you think the school has a good way of dealing with bullying?	<b>Bullying</b>
How do you manage to have your say about what happens in school?	<b>School council</b>

## Individual and paired interviews: Senior Cycle

### Introduction

Thank you for meeting with me today. I am from the University of Manchester and my name is...

### What the research is about

Before we start, I am going to tell you what we are doing and what will happen to what you tell me.

### We want to know what you think

We want to know what students like you think about school. We want to know what you think about how the way that you are taught and supported.

We are meeting as a small group to take part in a discussion with me to find out your views and experiences.

### Confidentiality

I will write down some brief notes about what we say. I will record the session to listen to later. This is to make sure that I am able to get what you say right.

I will want to use some of your words in reports that I write about the project. Only the research team will hear what you say. We will not let anyone in school hear what you say.

When we write the report we will not use your name or the name of the school. To help with this, I am going to call you by a letter instead of using your name.

### Use letters instead of names

You are going to be [give letter name to each]. This may seem a bit funny – would you like to call me by a letter as well or would you like to use my name?

### Child protection

Although I will not tell anyone what you say about your experiences about school, I must tell someone if you tell me that you are being hurt or made to do something that you do not want to do.

Are there any questions that you want to ask me about the project?

### Signed consent

I am going to ask you to write your initials to show that you understand and are willing to take part. If at any time you want to stop or to drop out of the project, that is OK, just let me know – you do not need to tell me why.

[If the child is unable to sign then an adult in school will be asked to witness assent being given]

### Warm up question

So, do you like school? – general feelings – What’s good? What’s not so good? What do you like? What don’t you like?

*Activity: Put subjects into the Like or Don’t Like boxes – discuss reasons, OR*

*Activity: Sort subjects into priority order as a group – discuss what might raise a subject higher up the list*

## Area 1: Curriculum

[Depending on school context] Did you do the transition year? What do you think about this? Did it help you prepare for your courses this year? Did you get a certificate at the end of the year?	<b>TY</b>
[Depending on school context] Are you able to mix Leaving certificate courses with ASDAN or FETAC? Is so, how does this work and what do you think about this?	<b>Mixed courses</b>
What do you think about the course that you do? What do you think about the choice of subjects available? How well do they prepare you for work? What do you think about the range of qualifications and the route that you are following?	<b>Subject choice</b>
Do you have any help in exams (e.g. being allowed to take a bit longer than others)? What do think about this?	<b>Help in exams</b>
Do you do Irish as a subject? What do you think about studying (or not studying) Irish?	<b>Irish</b>

## Area 2: Support and identification

What is your best subject? Why is it your best? What kinds of things do teachers or other adults do to make this the best subject for you?	<b>Best subjects/help</b>
Rate each subject (Use scale and subject visual). How come this gets an 8 and this gets a 2? What would teachers have to do to make this a (score+1)? What kind of support would help you in this lesson?	<b>Support needed</b>
(Pre-check with link teacher re resource or SNA or none) Do you work with a resource teacher? What is good or bad about this? Do you have an adult help you with care needs? What is good or bad about this? [SNA]	<b>Help from teachers/ SNAs</b>
Which subjects do you get help in? Rating scale as to how helpful. What about other subjects, how do you cope/manage?	
Tell me about any other support in school	<b>Other support</b>
Do you set targets for your learning? Who helps you decide on these? Do other people set targets for you? In what ways are these targets good or bad targets?	<b>Target setting</b>

## Area 3: Classes

I would like to ask you about the time you spend in a special class. Why do you go there? What do you think about the class? What is good about going there? What is not so good?  What happens when you are back in the other classes?	<b>Special classes</b>
Are there any special classes in your school where students sometimes go for some of their lessons? Why do you think they go there? Do you go to one of these classes [check question]? What do you think about that?	<b>Not in special classes</b>

### Area 4: School generally

[Dual placement] Do you spend some time in this school and some time in another school? What is good about this? Is there anything that is not good about this?	<b>Dual placement</b>
Tell me about rewards used in school. What are they for? Do you get any rewards? What do you think about them?	<b>Rewards</b>
Do you like going to school? What do you like/dislike about going to school? Do you have many days off school? Do you know what the school has done to try to make students want to come to school more often? What kind of things help you to come to school? What kinds of things make it hard for you to come to school? [prompts – supports, belonging, identity, friendships]	<b>Like/dislike school</b>
Some awards like the leaving certificate (senior) or the junior certificate school programme (DEIS) are only given if your attendance is good – what do you think about this? Why?	<b>Attendance</b>
[Breakfast club] Do you use the breakfast club? How come?	<b>Incentives</b>

### Area 5: Wider outcomes

Do you have friends? How are friendships encouraged in school? How do friends support you? What things might stop you from making friends?	<b>Friends</b>
What happens at break times and lunchtimes? What do you do? Are there any lunchtime clubs? Are there any clubs that you attend before or after school?	<b>Free time</b>
Do you manage to get to lessons easily and on time? What kinds of things help you to do this? Is there anything that makes this hard for you?	<b>Getting around school</b>
Can you tell me what bullying is? Do you know if there is any bullying going on at your school? Do you know what the school has done to try to stop bullying? Do you think the school has a good way of dealing with bullying? Have you ever been involved in bullying? Can you tell me about it? How did it make you feel? Who bullied you? (Older/younger students?) Why do you think these other students bullied you? What happened at school when you were bullied?	<b>Bullying</b>
How do you manage to have your say about what happens in school?	<b>School council</b>

## **Junior Cycle Focus Group**

### **Introduction**

Thank you for meeting with me today. I am from the University of Manchester and my name is...

### **What the research is about**

Before we start, I am going to tell you what we are doing and what will happen to what you tell me.

### **We want to know what you think**

We want to know what students like you think about school. We want to know what you think about how the way that you are taught and supported.

We are meeting as a small group to take part in a discussion with me to find out your views and experiences.

### **Confidentiality**

I will write down some brief notes about what we say. I will record the session to listen to later. This is to make sure that I am able to get what you say right.

I will want to use some of your words in reports that I write about the project. Only the research team will hear what you say. We will not let anyone in school hear what you say.

When we write the report we will not use your name or the name of the school. To help with this, I am going to call you by a letter instead of using your name.

### **Use letters instead of names**

You are going to be [give letter name to each]. This may seem a bit funny – would you like to call me by a letter as well or would you like to use my name?

### **Child protection**

Although I will not tell anyone what you say about your experiences about school, I must tell someone if you tell me that you are being hurt or made to do something that you do not want to do.

Are there any questions that you want to ask me about the project?

### Signed consent

I am going to ask you to write your initials to show that you understand and are willing to take part. If at any time you want to stop or to drop out of the project, that is OK, just let me know – you do not need to tell me why.

[If the child is unable to sign then an adult in school will be asked to witness assent being given]

### Warm up question

So, do you like school? – general feelings – What’s good? What’s not so good? What do you like? What don’t you like?

**Activity:** Put subjects into the **Like** or **Don’t Like** boxes – discuss reasons

Or

**Activity:** Sort subjects into priority order as a group – discuss what might raise a subject higher up the list

## Area 1: Curriculum

What do you think about the choice of subjects available? Do you do Irish as a subject? What do you think about studying (or not studying) Irish? <b>(links to special classes)</b>	<b>Choice of subjects</b>
[Depending on school context] Are you studying the Junior Certificate or the Junior Certificate Schools Programme? Who decided which course you would follow? What do you think about your course compared to people who are doing the other course?	<b>Course of study</b>
At the end of the junior cycle, you get a certificate. What do you think about this? Why?	<b>Exams and help</b>
Do you have any help in exams (e.g. being allowed to take a bit longer than others)? What do you think about this?	
How easy was it coming here from your primary school? Do you get the same amount of help? Is there anything that is different about this school compared to your primary school? What is better or worse?	<b>Transition from primary</b>
In what ways do you think the Junior Cycle prepares you for the Senior Cycle? Do you get enough information? What course do you think you will take in senior cycle? Will you take the transition year?	<b>Preparation for senior cycle</b>

## Area 2: Support and identification

What kinds of things help you to learn in different subjects? Or do you get any help with your learning in any particular subjects?	<b>Help</b>
Are there any things that seem to make it harder for you to learn?	<b>Hard to learn</b>
Does everyone in your class have to do the same work? If No – in what ways does it differ? What do you think about this?	<b>Same work or different</b>
Do you think that teachers or anyone else can help you to learn? What kinds of things do they do? Do they do anything that does not help you learn? Does everyone get the same amount of help? Is this good or bad? Why?	<b>Help from teachers/ SNAs</b>
I think that you are all getting some support in school, is that right? Which subjects do you get help in? <b>Activity:</b> use rating scale for how helpful. What about other subjects, how do you cope/manage?	<b>General support</b>
I wonder if you can tell me how help was arranged. [Probe – who assessed/ arranged support (which professionals)? What do you think about the way in which this was done? What do you think other people think about this (e.g. friends)]	<b>How is help arranged</b>
Do you set targets for your learning? Who helps you decide on these? Do other people set targets for you? In what ways are these targets good or bad targets?	<b>Target setting</b>

## Area 3: Classes

I would like to ask you about the time you spend in a special class. Why do you go there? What do you think about the class? What is good about going there? What is not so good?  What happens when you are back in the other classes?	<b>In special classes</b>
Are there any special classes in your school where students sometimes go for some of their lessons? Why do you think they go there? Do you go to one of these classes [check question]? What do you think about that?	<b>Not in special classes</b>

### Area 4: School generally

<p>Tell me about rewards used in school. What are they for? Do you get any rewards? What do you think about them?</p>	<p><b>Rewards</b></p>
<p>Do you like going to school? What do you like/dislike about going to school? Do you have many days off school? Do you know what the school has done to try to make students want to come to school more often? What kind of things help you to come to school? What kinds of things make it hard for you to come to school? <b>Activity:</b> <i>visual prompts – supports, belonging, identity, friendships</i></p>	<p><b>Liking/disliking school</b></p>
<p>Some awards like the leaving certificate (senior) or the junior certificate school programme (DEIS) are only given if your attendance is good – what do you think about this? Why?</p>	<p><b>Attendance</b> <b>Incentives</b></p>
<p>[Breakfast club] Do you use the breakfast club? How come?</p>	

### Area 5: Wider outcomes

<p>Do you know how the school lets your parents know how you are doing at school? E.g. letters, reports, parents evenings? 171</p>	<p><b>Parents</b></p>
<p>[School context for behaviour e.g. contact books, small group interventions, reward systems, use of other agencies] What do students think of these?</p>	<p><b>Behaviour</b></p>
<p>How are friendships encouraged in school? How do friends support you? What things might stop you from making friends?</p>	<p><b>Friends</b></p>
<p><i>Can you tell me what bullying is? Do you know if there is any bullying going on at your school? Do you know what the school has done to try to stop bullying? Do you think the school has a good way of dealing with bullying?</i></p> <p><b>Activity:</b> <i>Places/times when you don't feel comfortable/happy or where do you prefer to be in school – reasons</i></p>	<p><b>Bullying</b></p>
<p>What happens at break times and lunchtimes? What do you do? Are there any lunchtime clubs? Are there any clubs that you attend before or after school?</p>	<p><b>Free time</b></p>
<p>Is there a school council? Or, are students involved in making decisions about how the school is run? How does this work? How do you manage to have your say about what happens in school?</p>	<p><b>School council</b></p>

## Senior Cycle Focus Group

### Introduction

Thank you for meeting with me today. I am from the University of Manchester and my name is...

### What the research is about

Before we start, I am going to tell you what we are doing and what will happen to what you tell me.

### We want to know what you think

We want to know what students like you think about school. We want to know what you think about how the way that you are taught and supported.

We are meeting as a small group to take part in a discussion with me to find out your views and experiences.

### Confidentiality

I will write down some brief notes about what we say. I will record the session to listen to later. This is to make sure that I am able to get what you say right.

I will want to use some of your words in reports that I write about the project. Only the research team will hear what you say. We will not let anyone in school hear what you say.

When we write the report we will not use your name or the name of the school. To help with this, I am going to call you by a letter instead of using your name.

### Use letters instead of names

You are going to be [give letter name to each]. This may seem a bit funny – would you like to call me by a letter as well or would you like to use my name?

### Child protection

Although I will not tell anyone what you say about your experiences about school, I must tell someone if you tell me that you are being hurt or made to do something that you do not want to do.

Are there any questions that you want to ask me about the project?

### Signed consent

I am going to ask you to write your initials to show that you understand and are willing to take part. If at any time you want to stop or to drop out of the project, that is OK, just let me know – you do not need to tell me why.

[If the child is unable to sign then an adult in school will be asked to witness assent being given]

### Warm up question

So, do you like school? – General feelings – What’s good? What’s not so good? What do you like? What don’t you like?

**Activity:** Put subjects into the **Like** or **Don’t Like** boxes – discuss reasons

Or

**Activity:** Sort subjects into priority order as a group – discuss what might raise a subject higher up the list

## Area 1: Curriculum

[Depending on school context] Did you do the transition year? Why did you choose to do TY? What did you think about this? Did it help you prepare for your courses in senior cycle? Did you get a certificate at the end of the year? Was it very different to junior cycle? Why? Which did you prefer? Was the support/help similar?	Choice of course
[Depending on school context] Are you able to mix Leaving certificate courses with ASDAN or FETAC? If so, how does this work and what do you think about this?	Mixed courses
What do you think about the course that you do? What do you think about the choice of subjects available? How well do they prepare you for work? What do you think about the range of qualifications and the route that you are following?	Subject choice
Do you have any help in exams (e.g. being allowed to take a bit longer than others)? What do think about this?	Help in exams
Do you do Irish as a subject? What do you think about studying (or not studying) Irish?  <i>(link to accessing special classes/unit – exemption from Irish = withdrawal to special class)</i>	Irish
What would you like to do when you finish school? Why?	Transition

## Area 2: Support and identification

What kinds of things help you to learn in different subjects? If you had to make a tool box/resource box and you could put inside all the things that help you to learn, what would you put inside?	<b>Kinds of help</b>
Are there any things that seem to make it harder for you to learn?	<b>Hard to learn</b>
Does everyone in your class have to do the same work? If No – in what ways does it differ? What do you think about this?	<b>Same work or different</b>
Do you think that teachers or anyone else can help you to learn? What kinds of things do they do? Do they do anything that does not help you learn? Does everyone get the same amount of help? Is this good or bad? Why?	<b>Help from teachers/ SNAs</b>
I think that you are all getting some support in school, is that right? Which subjects do you get help in? <b>Activity:</b> use rating scale for how helpful. What about other subjects, how do you cope/manage? Is there anything that you would like more support/help with? What? Why? How?	<b>General support</b>
I wonder if you can tell me how help was arranged. [Probe – who assessed/ arranged support (which professionals)? What do you think about the way in which this was done? What do you think other people think about this (e.g. friends)]	<b>How is help arranged</b>
Do you set targets for your learning? Who helps you decide on these? Do other people set targets for you? In what ways are these targets good or bad targets?	<b>Target setting</b>

## Area 3: Classes

<p>I would like to ask you about the time you spend in a special class. Why do you go there? What subjects do you do there? What do you think about the class? What is good about going there? What is not so good?</p> <p>What happens when you are back in the other classes?</p> <p>Which class do you prefer? Why? Friends?</p>	<b>Special classes</b>
Are there any special classes in your school where students sometimes go for some of their lessons? Why do you think they go there? Do you go to one of these classes [check question]? What do you think about that?	<b>Not in special classes</b>

### Area 4: School generally

<p>Tell me about rewards used in school. What are they for? Do you get any rewards? What do you think about them?</p>	<p><b>Rewards</b></p>
<p>Do you like going to school? What do you like/dislike about going to school? Do you have many days off school? Do you know what the school has done to try to make students want to come to school more often? What kind of things help you to come to school? What kinds of things make it hard for you to come to school? <b>Activity:</b> <i>visual prompts – supports, belonging, identity, friendships</i></p>	<p><b>Liking/ disliking school</b></p>
<p>Some awards like the leaving certificate (senior) or the junior certificate school programme (DEIS) are only given if your attendance is good – what do you think about this? Why?</p>	<p><b>Attendance</b></p>
<p>[Breakfast club] Do you use the breakfast club? How come?</p>	<p><b>Incentives</b></p>

### Area 5: Wider outcomes

<p>Do you know how the school lets your parents know how you are doing at school? E.g. letters, reports, parents evenings?</p>	<p><b>Parents</b></p>
<p>[School context for behaviour e.g. contact books, small group interventions, reward systems, use of other agencies] What do students think of these?</p>	<p><b>Behaviour</b></p>
<p>How are friendships encouraged in school? How do friends support you? What things might stop you from making friends? (<i>Encourage more discussion around friendships as often brings up other issues</i>)</p>	<p><b>Friends</b></p>
<p>Can you tell me what bullying is? Do you know if there is any bullying going on at your school? Do you know what the school has done to try to stop bullying? Do you think the school has a good way of dealing with bullying? <b>Activity:</b> <i>Places/times when you don't feel comfortable/happy or where do you prefer to be in school – reasons</i></p>	<p><b>Bullying</b></p>
<p>What happens at break times and lunchtimes? What do you do? Are there any lunchtime clubs? Are there any clubs that you attend before or after school?</p>	<p><b>Free time</b></p>
<p>Is there a school council? Or, are students involved in making decisions about how the school is run? How does this work? How do you manage to have your say about what happens in school?</p>	<p><b>School council</b></p>

## Appendix 6: Child protection protocol

### Research Team

All members of the research team have been checked to work with vulnerable students through either an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check or the new Disclosure and Barring Service checks. This enables the researchers to work with students and young people in UK schools.

### Irish policy

The policy document that covers the procedures underpinning this protocol was produced by the Department for Children and Youth Affairs in 2011 and called, *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*. We have also been provided with NCSE guidance for procedures with dealing with allegations of child abuse.

### Protocol

#### Arriving at the school

The school visit will be booked in advance and researchers will identify themselves using their University ID card. They will comply with requests to sign school visitor logs on arrival and wait to be met by the project link person.

#### Place to work

It is important that the researcher makes themselves familiar with the schools child protection policy and reporting procedures on arrival to the school and knows who the Designated Liaison Person is within the school.

Researchers should work with students in areas where they can be seen (e.g. through a glass window). If the room is not visible from outside then the door should be left open at all times.

#### Consent and Assent

Parents of participants will have been sent briefing sheets and signed consent for their child to participate. These will be collected by the researcher. Ongoing assent will be sought from students involved in focus groups and individual interviews. A child may leave the focus group or interview at any time without giving a reason.

#### Research briefing to participants

In our student briefing, we have the phrasing to indicate that child protection will not be kept confidential. *"Although I will not tell anyone what you say about your experiences about school, I must tell someone if you tell me that you are being hurt or made to do something that you do not want to do."*

## Disclosure procedure

A list of types of disclosure is outlined in the *Students First* guidance and copied into the appendix for easy reference.

Any allegation whether current or past, should be treated seriously and taken at face value and any information received passed onto the appropriate authorities so that it can be investigated. It is not the role of the researcher to investigate the matter.

At the time of the disclosure:

- Stay calm and try not to convey any extreme reactions. This may require some effort.
- Listen to what the child says and treat what they say seriously. The child has chosen to tell you something important and has taken the risk to do so.
- The child should not be questioned, other than when what they are saying is not clear. Only open ended questions should be used that seek clarity, "Can you explain what you mean by that?" Do not ask probing questions.
- The child should be told what will happen next. This will usually involve notifying the Designated Liaison Person (DLP) within the school.
- Record the disclosure in writing immediately after, Key information should include:
  - Child's name and Dob
  - Gender and age
  - School details
  - Date and Time of disclosure
  - Details of the disclosure – where possible, use the child's own words.
- Sign and date the disclosure. Take a photocopy in case we need to follow-up with HSE. Ask the school secretary who the DLP is in the school (usually the school principal) and see them immediately with the disclosure.
- If the DLP appears not to take the matter seriously or is not available then pass the information onto HSE (LoCall Tel 1850 241850)

Make sure the PI knows that the procedure has been followed, or if you need further guidance then call Garry.









